



CHAPTER TWO

Perceptual Awareness and Discrimination

I find myself on a people-mover in a major airport between terminals, taking in the sights and sounds that surround me. Fellow travelers are intently eyeing their cell phones or are focused straight ahead toward their destination. I am gathering in the colors and sounds of the artwork overhead—a set of colored circles that seem to light up and go off randomly with accompanying simple melodic tones. As I look more closely, I realize that the lights are not random but occur when someone is on the people-mover directly below them. How inventive and fascinating! As I step off, I linger to enjoy this mesh of sounds, lights, and artistic interaction a few more minutes. I seem to be alone in savoring the experience. Just before leaving, I smile as I spy a young boy stepping onto the people-mover holding his mother’s hand, eyes riveted to the lights above.

Artistic knowing begins with fine-tuned sensory awareness. The artist pays attention to what surrounds him or her and enjoys delineating intriguing details. The value of bringing this type of focused awareness to our students is exemplified in the vignette above. The child is about to experience the art piece, his curiosity sparked by his senses. He pays attention to the lights and sounds amidst the adult disinterest around him. He is perceptually aware of the artistic experience.

In a world filled with bombarding stimuli, one is almost forced to tune out rather than tune in to the sounds and sights that grab our attention. Television streams words across the bottom of the screen while news reporters pepper details of the day’s events, with multiple screens vying for our attention. Children and adults alike grab at different mobile device apps to try their hands at quick-moving games. In this fast-moving world, taking time to pay close attention to details through the arts provides a way of nurturing the focus and depth of awareness that may be missing from a child’s everyday environment.

We learned in Chapter One that Elliot Eisner, a pre-eminent arts scholar, describes perceptual awareness and discrimination as “qualitative awareness,” with its highest point noted as “connoisseurship.”

There is quite a difference between listening and hearing, between touching and feeling. What we should want to do over the course of our lifetime is to increasingly refine each of these abilities to whatever degree we and our culture can make possible. We need to develop critical abilities to differ the many qualities that constitute our world.¹

Eisner describes examples of connoisseurship as a mother who can read the tone of her child’s voice, and a teacher who can recognize the difference in the sound of productive work versus that of confusion in a classroom. One vivid example is that of a tailor who can pick up a piece of cloth and tell by running his hands over the fabric that the feel of the

cloth is 86% silk, 1% wool, and a balance of cotton or rayon fiber.² Perceptual awareness and discrimination lie at the heart of the initial stage of learning in every arts discipline.

Visual Arts

Visual artists perceive the world with acuity, aware of dimensions of space, color, and texture that go unnoticed by most others. As youngsters, they may be the scribblers who add artwork to the margins of math papers as their minds seek creative balance to the convergent tasks asked of them. Or they may be the students who seem to be daydreaming in class as they focus their attention on details in a painting on the wall of the classroom.

I often begin my workshops on Artistic Ways of Knowing by greeting participants at the door and then traveling around the room chatting with them before the formal opening of the session. In the first few minutes of the session, I weave close to the audience as I talk. When I get to the topic of perceptual awareness and discrimination, I stop and put my hands over my earrings and ask if anyone can describe them. I usually wear gold earrings that have a tiny piano, cello, and eighth notes dangling along with a few silver stars. They are intricate and need focus to capture all the details. In my first request, there may be one or two individuals who mention gold earrings, but that is usually all. I then remove my hands from my ears and continue walking slowly to allow the participants to focus on the details. It takes a few tries for them to realize that the cello has an endpin, which differentiates it from other string instruments. After several minutes of focused attention, they have experienced visual perceptual awareness. This is an easy, immediate way to demonstrate what visual focus is all about, and it can be done in a matter of minutes in any classroom.

*Seeing
is an
achievement,
not merely a
task.
—Gilbert Ryle,
art scholar³*

In *The Intelligent Eye: Learning to Think by Looking at Art*, Perkins explains that “looking at art invites, rewards, and encourages a thoughtful disposition, because works of art demand thoughtful attention to discover what they have to show and say.”⁴ A student pondering a painting on the classroom wall may be connecting to the details of line, color, balance, or mood. Perkins cautions against the “look and see” mindset of arts encounters, instead encouraging individuals to take time to savor and analyze details with an intelligent eye. What do you see when looking at an artwork in the first minute? Now add two minutes more, then four minutes, gathering depth and breadth in the perceptive experience.

Several months ago I found myself at the Chicago Institute of Art standing in the room that is dedicated to George Seurat’s painting *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of Grande*

Jatte. I was alone in the room, the painting enticing me with every detail and subtle coloration. Where to begin with this mammoth canvas—it is nearly seven feet high and ten feet wide—with its tiny details of pointillistic texture? I thought of Ryle’s quote (previous page) as I spent a full half-hour absorbing the magnificent details of the painting.

Each extra minute of studying a work of art brings concentrated focus to the basic elements of the artwork. How are colors used—blended or blocked, bold or muted? Are lines straight, curved, horizontal, or vertical? How does the artist make use of texture? How is the overall space used—shapes, dimensions, and depth?

The Sparkler Experience on the following page pushes students to take the time to truly *see* the details in a work of art and brings perceptual awareness and discrimination to the forefront of the task.



Figure 2.2. George Seurat, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of Grande Jatte*, 1884, Art Institute of Chicago



Figure 2.3. George Seurat, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of Grande Jatte* (detail of the butterfly near the girl in white), 1884, Art Institute of Chicago



Visual Arts

Sparkler Experience



Perceptual Awareness and Discrimination

What Do You See? Students examine details in the painting *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of the Grande Jatte* by George Seurat for focused visual perception of details.⁵

Preparation: Project the artwork onto a projection screen or a blank wall, or use a large computer screen, keeping clarity of color but providing a larger image than the one that is in this book.

1. Students look carefully at the overall picture and jot down descriptive words about it, taking two full minutes for this initial viewing. They then share and compare their observations. Vivid descriptive words should be written on the board to nurture critiquing and analytic vocabulary.
2. Then ask the students to look for details in the people in the painting—faces, clothing, possible connections, relationships by placement. Provide at least three minutes for these discoveries. Have students share ideas for a possible storyline that can describe what is happening in the picture.
3. Next, have students note the use of color and the perspective of distance in the painting—light, shadow, and textural blending of different colors—for another three minutes. Discuss how Seurat created the artistic technique of *pointillism*—dots of pure color on the canvas that, from a distance, create a haze of light and color. Can they see evidence of this in any part of the reproduction of the painting, even though they cannot see the true texture of the paint on canvas?
4. Students should choose a single figure from the painting to examine carefully in order to create their own picture, using textural effects to mimic pointillism.

EXTEND: Using their drawing as a basis, students can create a character sketch (telling who the person is, why he or she is in the park, etc.) or a monologue that the person might say if we could hear him or her. Students may also choose to create a poem about the person.

ARTS INTEGRATION: Students can view the opening of *A Sunday in the Park with George* by Stephen Sondheim to see how the painting was used as the basis of the musical's storyline. For further connections, examine Seurat's life in Paris in the late 1800s and the Impressionist movement.

TALENT SPARK: Note students who discover minute details in their observations and can transfer those details to their own drawings. Also take notice of those who make creative connections with the painting's details.

Music

*Listening is its own reward;
there are no prizes to be won,
no contests of creative listening,
But I hold that person fortunate who has the gift,
for there are few pleasures in art greater than the secure sense that one
can recognize beauty when one comes upon it.
—Aaron Copland, composer⁶*

Music is all around us, bombarding us in stores, restaurants, and elevators. In the bustling sounds of daily life, we often ignore it. However, in order to listen to music with discrimination, we need to listen with focused attention rather than letting sounds simply wash over us peripherally. Luckily, technology such as iPods and earbuds provide us with the means to do that.

Fine-tuned listening is the starting point of any musical experience, whether resulting in practice toward performance or critiquing and analysis. In practice, music students find a small portion of a piece to work on, paying close attention to the details of correct rhythms, notes, dynamic color, and phrase shapes. Repeated practice requires focusing on and internalizing sounds as the students improve their performance.

Similarly, individuals who listen to music may be able to point out fine differences in comparative performances, noting, for example, different instrumental backup configurations and arrangements. Encouraging this type of detailed listening nurtures perceptual discrimination.

Music psychologists have long been fascinated with measuring this kind of focused listening using music aptitude tests, which can be given to individuals from kindergarten age to adulthood.⁷ These tests may be used as one of the measures of potential musical talent because they objectively measure listening and aural discrimination. However, potential musical talent identification includes other characteristics, such as creative interpretation, performance elements, and critiquing skills.

You can experience audiation—the internalization of sound—through a simple task. Sing “Mary Had a Little Lamb” in your head, focusing on how the notes move up and down in the simple melody (don’t sing out loud). Is the last note higher, lower, or the same as the first note? This inner realization is an excellent example of audiation. To test yourself at a level higher, try the same task singing “Happy Birthday” to yourself (again, not aloud). Is the last note higher, lower, or the same? You may have to try several times to get it correct.⁸

In *What to Listen For in Music*, Aaron Copland describes three planes of listening: *sensuous*, *expressive*, and *sheerly musical*. The sensuous plane is listening “for the sheer pleasure of the musical sound itself.”⁹ We listen without thinking about what we hear—the background music that surrounds us each day. The expressive plane is listening for the meaning or expressive intent of the music. We listen for the feeling we enjoy from the

music. The sheerly musical plane is “listening to the musical material and what happens to it.”¹⁰ This active listening experience includes a conscious awareness of the intricacies of the music. We can pinpoint where melodies are repeated, as well as differences in instrumentation. Students who are adept at this type of discriminative listening often struggle if background music is playing while they read or do math problems because they are listening to the music for details rather than experiencing it as a sensuous background.

*Music,
of all arts,
stands in a special region,
unlit by any star but its own,
and utterly without meaning...
except its own.*

—Leonard Bernstein, composer¹¹

The following Sparkler Experience brings into focus the elements of what to listen for in music. By closing their eyes, students can more readily connect with the expressiveness they feel when they are listening to music without visual distractions. This is especially helpful because we have become accustomed to music videos as the norm in the listening experience, distracting our listening focus. Because they are asked to focus on individual elements of the music in this exercise, the students will realize the different levels of listening.



Figure 2.4. Rehearsal of the National Symphony Orchestra, Kennedy Center, Washington, DC, 1993



Music Sparkler Experience

Perceptual Awareness and Discrimination



Musical Microscope.¹² Students listen to a musical excerpt repeatedly, each time paying attention to different musical elements, including listening for a natural pulse (leading to the musical concept of meter) and recognizing different instruments, melodic pitch, and dynamics.

Preparation: Record an excerpt of music that is no longer than 30 to 45 seconds in length. Music with a variety of instrumental sounds is best, but a popular song that has backup instrumentation or vocals will work as well. Students need a pencil and paper to jot down answers and ideas. *Each numbered item below represents another listening to the excerpt.*

1. Students close their eyes, relax, and listen to the music. Afterward, they jot down any words that describe the mood of the music (the expressive plane of listening). They share these ideas with one another.
2. *Meter*: Students feel the beat as they listen to the music a second time, quietly tapping their fingers on their legs or desk in time to the beat. Are the beats in a feel of 4, 3, or 2?

Note: Prior to this round of listening, it may be helpful to guide students by tapping out these sets of beats:

STRONG weak weak weak (4)

STRONG weak weak (3)

3. *Instruments*: Students identify individual instruments they hear playing in the music. Which instrument is playing the melody? Which are playing the accompaniment or background?
4. *Pitch*: Students listen to the opening notes of the melody (five or six notes) to see if the melody is moving up, down, up and down, or repeating notes.
5. *Dynamics*: Students show how the music plays soft to loud with hand movements, discovering the loudest point in the music with hands raised high.

EXTEND: Students can discover meter through the experience of conducting in 2/4, 3/4, and 4/4 to various musical selections, researching online resources for the correct movements used in conducting.

ARTS INTEGRATION: Metric exploration can link how many notes may be playing within a single beat or over several beats, bringing in fractions and number sets that equal four beats or three beats. This requires careful listening, perhaps clapping, and simple notation of notes using dashes or slashes, short, long, etc.

TALENT SPARK: Note students who are adept at realizing metric and instrument details and who may sing back the melody to determine pitch direction.

Dance

In dance, perceptual awareness is immediate through movement. The young dancer at the beginning of Chapter One paid attention to how she was moving different parts of her body—her fingers, her hands, her arms, and her torso—to portray her search for a star. Movement through dance involves communicative intent, which is different from the kinesthetic movement normally used in athletics. The dancer was aware of the space surrounding her, realizing how to extend her arms to stretch above, or sway her torso to move across the floor, or gently envelope her body with her folded arms to end her dance.

Movement

is the most powerful

and dangerous art medium known.

This is because it is the speech of the basic instrument, the body, which is an instinctive, intuitive, inevitable mirror revealing man as he is.

—Martha Graham, choreographer¹³

An analysis of talent identification forms used for dance from around the country at the National Research Center for Gifted/Talented at the University of Virginia provides a view of children who, when given the option, will choose to use movement rather than to verbalize.¹⁴ This movement shows flexibility, coordination, and the ability to isolate specific body parts, and it may manifest in the child who weaves down the hallway rather than simply walking straight or who shows greater flexibility and expanse when moving with peers. This student stands out—idiosyncratically—as an individual who uniquely communicates through movement.

An easy way to realize the awareness of your body is to isolate movement that focuses your attention to how your body can move. In dance class, isolation warm-ups may start with dropping the head forward, to the side, and back, then rolling the shoulders high up and around, forward and backward—right shoulder, left shoulder, and both. Try isolating your upper torso, moving it forward with hands on your hips. Then pivot the pelvis backward and forward. This warm-up not only loosens muscles but makes dancers focus on movement in every part of their body.

In *First Steps in Teaching Creative Dance to Children*, Mary Joyce leads young children in movements that emphasize perceptual awareness and discrimination of different parts of their bodies:

Show me walking in many directions with body shapes. Go. Shape. In order to make good shapes while doing steps, your spine has to move. Show me how you can move your back. Arch it. Round it. Twist it. Lean to the side. This time, I want you to run, not only changing directions but also trying to make shapes with your back. Go. And shape.¹⁵

Were you able to vicariously share the movement of the children as they wove around the room, perhaps twisting a bit and inwardly realizing the different shapes that may result

from this movement activity, which utilizes perceptual awareness and discrimination to form shapes with one's body? The Sparkler Experience on the following page uses the basic concepts of isolation of body parts and moving the full range of levels, from low to high, adding more intricacy with each repeat of the sequence so as to realize how to move through space as a dancer.





Dance Sparkler Experience

Perceptual Awareness and Discrimination



Moving through Space. Students become aware of the surrounding space through gestures, movement, levels, and direction.

1. Have the students warm up with movement exercises that show levels high to low, use of the whole body, and isolation ideas for arms, fingers, legs, and feet.

Note: For the following steps in the experience, use a drum or count out loud to direct each movement and gesture in this activity, always in a set of eight with a stop to “freeze” the final gesture.

2. Keeping their feet in place, students move from very low, bodies bent down, to very high, with arms overhead, to a count of eight. Their movements culminate in a pose that shows free use of their bodies. FREEZE on eight!
3. Students take large steps across the room, again showing movement low to high, pause on eight, then continue from high to low in the next eight. FREEZE on eight!
4. Students use small steps and arm and body movements that are between waist and shoulder height, showing more intricate detail of hands, arms, and fingers. FREEZE on eight!
5. Students combine all three sets of eight to show the full range of movement—from very low to very high—with pauses at the end of each set of eight.

EXTEND: Students do step number 4 above with no rhythmic drum, instead feeling the beat inside as they move, pause, and freeze. Each student can also connect to another student in ending gestures to show dance ensemble ideas. This can be done in a “chain effect” from one student to the next, with other students observing how movements vary as they expand movement ideas and levels of space.

ARTS INTEGRATION: Ask the students: How much space is used for the large step movements? Small step movements? How could string, crepe paper ribbons, or bungee chords be used in this exercise to show length, height, and area used in the dance?

TALENT SPARK: Note students whose movements are fluid and balanced when freezing into a pose.

Theater/Drama

Perceptual awareness in drama emanates from the keen observance of one's surroundings and the behaviors of others, noticing details of gestures, facial expressions, and vocal qualities. Taking on these behaviors through mimicry and pretending to be someone or something else is enticing to young students in creative drama activities. These may be the students who are sensitive to the feelings and expressions of their peers, sympathizing with their emotions.

*One
cannot
educate
vision.*

*One can only make sure there are plenty of good glasses with which to see things.
—Jane Alexander, actress¹⁶*

Creative drama provides children with experiences of pretending to be, for example, animals or flowers growing from seeds. Children use bodily awareness as well as expressive gestures in this pretending. These activities provide ways to observe perceptual discrimination in students through movement and dramatic abilities.

Drama is a natural arts area to immerse into the classroom and mesh with the academic subject areas of English, history, and reading. Teachers are usually comfortable bringing creative activities through drama into the classroom, as described by Schwartz and Aldrich in *Give Them Roots...and Wings!*

Creative drama is a catalyst for the classroom. Students who respond listlessly to discussions of stories, current events, history, community and school concerns usually come to life when the same subject matter is dealt with in creative drama.¹⁷

I once observed middle school students in a drama classroom participating in a common theater game that emphasizes observation skills, which are the basic perceptual discrimination traits of drama. Two students stood facing each other in front of the class. They were asked to look carefully at what the other was wearing, taking a full minute or more to fully observe the details. Then they turned their backs to each other and relayed what they saw. There was an astonishing lack of detail in their observations. One student had a sweatshirt emblazoned with a team logo and had untied sneakers. The other student never mentioned either of those things, which were so apparent to the rest of the class. The other student fared a bit better but did not mention that his partner wore glasses. This experience demonstrates the value of including fine-tuned perceptual discrimination of others into every classroom to qualitatively expand what the students are able to see.

The Sparkler Experience on the next page extends the activity just described. Begin with a single pair of students so the class can observe the detail needed for fine-tuned observation skills. In this way, the changes made in the theater game become more challenging and encourage more focus in discrimination skills.



Theater/Drama Sparkler Experience



Perceptual Awareness and Discrimination

Keen Observer. Students observe each other's clothes and features in detail, with added changes challenging their observation skills.

1. Students work in pairs, standing about an arm's length apart facing each other.
2. They observe each other carefully, taking at least one full minute to remember details about their partner, such as clothing, accessories, hairstyle, eye color, etc.
3. Then they turn their backs to each other and describe their partner in fine detail. Peers note the accuracy of each observation.
4. *Three Changes:* Viola Spolin¹⁸ has created a theater game similar to this one that continues by having students turn their backs on each other again and make three changes—untying shoelaces, removing glasses, etc. They then turn to face each other and try to identify the changes. Spolin suggests changing partners and making multiple changes to add to the fun and complexity of the exercise.

EXTEND: Record a five- to ten-second video from YouTube or another source that shows one person in full view moving in some way. Show the class the video, making sure to go to black at the end. Have students jot down what they saw with as many details about the person as they can remember. Then have them share their details. Repeat the video one or more times to allow them to find more details in their focused observation.

ARTS INTEGRATION: When using role play of a famous person in history, try to find several videos of that person, using the same approach of focused discrimination of details of behavior and facial gestures to guide interpretive work on the character.

TALENT SPARK: Note students who are adept at catching small or unusual details in this observation activity.

The Starting Point

Perceptual awareness and discrimination are the starting points of the artistic process, which makes them essential to include in our daily lives. Children are often our keenest observers—eyeing tiny bugs in the grass, following drops of water on the windowpane with their fingers, catching snowflakes on their tongues. Bringing the joy of this type of awareness and discrimination into classrooms will provide artistic learning for every student. From this starting point, students are ready to internalize what they see, hear, and feel metaperceptively and mold it into a unique creative interpretation.

Ideas to Ponder and Discuss

1. Think of an example that you have encountered personally of someone displaying *connoisseurship* through his or her perceptual awareness. How might you be a connoisseur in a specialized interest area?
2. Take a walk around the block or to work, specifically focusing on your environment with perceptual awareness and discrimination (no iPod or cell phone). Jot down the emotions or ideas that come to mind *after* the walk, reflecting on the encounter.
3. Listen to one of your favorite songs or musical compositions, keeping in mind the three levels of listening—sensuous, expressive, and sheerly musical planes. How did your awareness of sound change through this experience?
4. Walk across the room using eight steps, moving your arms and upper body from low to high. Return using four steps for the same amount of space, going from high to low. What do you realize about your movements when you think like a dancer in this way?
5. Observe people in conversation from afar for several minutes, paying attention to their use of eye contact and body language. Jot down emotions you noticed and details you observed.

¹ Eisner, in Buescher, 1986, p. 8

² Eisner, in Buescher, 1986, p. 9

³ Ryle, 1949

⁴ Perkins, 1994, p. 4

⁵ S. McArthur offers similar intriguing experiences with artwork from The Art Institute of Chicago, complete with transparencies, in *Journey Into Art: Going Beyond First Glance*.

⁶ Copland, 1952, p. 8

⁷ Gordon, 1965, 1979, 1982, 1989

⁸ Answers: The last note of “Mary Had a Little Lamb” is lower than the starting note. The last note of “Happy Birthday” is higher than the first note.

⁹ Copland, 1957, p. 10

¹⁰ Copland, 1957, p. 17

¹¹ From *The Joy of Music*, retrieved from www.goodreads.com

¹² The Musical Microscope activity is a simplified version of the Listening Microscope found in the Book 3 Teacher’s Guide of *Explorations in Music* (1993) by Joanne Haroutounian. The seven-level series is a differentiated curriculum that includes theory, ear training, analysis, and composition.

¹³ Graham, in Booth & Hachiya, 2004, p. 85

¹⁴ Haroutounian, 1993b

¹⁵ Joyce, 1994, p. 85

¹⁶ Alexander, in Booth & Hachiya, 2004, p. 81

¹⁷ Schwartz & Aldrich, 1985, pp. 6-7

¹⁸ Spolin, 1985