

## Qualitative Research Activity: Categorizing Student Responses

### Part 1

Listed below are the initial responses to the question "What is art?" generated by 25 third graders in individual interviews. These interviews were conducted prior to students attending weekly third-grade art classes early in fall semester. Thus, how students responded to this question is based, in part, on their previous experiences in second-grade art class, in regular classroom art activities, or elsewhere. The responses below do not reflect any of the follow-up, probing questions that were asked and students' elaborations on their initial responses.

The question was posed to students in the following way:

*Pretend there is a creature named Zork from another planet. He has been living with you and has become your friend. He is very interested in everything you do here on Earth. He is going to school with you next week for the first time. He has never been to school. He has never been to an art class. In fact, he has never heard of the word "art," and doesn't even know what art is or means. When you tell him that he will be going to art class with you next week, he asks, "What is art?" How would you answer him?*

Here's what the kids said:

1. Art is when you make and see beautiful pictures.
2. Art is something you can do, like painting.
3. Something that you make and have fun with. It is something that you draw.
4. Art is something you learn.
5. Art is some pieces of things put together.
6. Art is drawing beautiful. Nice designs, also. Art is flowing.
7. Art is painting, coloring, and working with clay.
8. Art is fun and easy. Sometimes you may get started up.
9. It is something you do and use, and make things.
10. Art is when you draw a picture.
11. Art is very good.
12. I would explain it to him. I'd talk like him.
13. It is something you do for fun.
14. It's a picture of things. It is art.
15. It is a form of work.
16. Art is something that people make, like pictures or sculptures.
17. It's something you make.
18. It's something fun to make.
19. It is a picture.
20. It's when you draw.
21. Art is a picture.
22. Art is wonderful. You color and do fun things.
23. Art is making things.
24. Art is painting and drawing.
25. Art is when you draw and do fun things.

As a qualitative researcher, your task is to draw some conclusions about what art is to these third graders. What themes or patterns can you see in their responses? How could you categorize them? Working with a small group of others, code the responses according to the patterns, categories, or themes that you see. Be prepared to explain how you define each category and provide sample responses that, in your opinion, fit each of your groupings. Are there any responses that seem to fall outside of a logical system of categorization because they are so unlike the others? How should you deal with these?

After you're done, which of the students' responses seem to beg for further elaboration or require follow-up or "probing" questions to understand what the students mean? Why would you choose these particular responses for further elaboration rather than some others? What is different or unique about them? Select 2 or 3 of the students' responses and generate probing questions that you might ask. What, specifically, would you ask and hope to learn or clarify with your questions?

## Part 2

Below is the same question ("What is art?" without the Zork context) asked of the same group of third graders after they have had a semester of art classes. Again, these are initial responses without follow-up questions or elaborations. First, what patterns and themes do you see in this set of responses? Next, how do these responses care to the previous group's responses? Pay close attention to the students' language. Again, are there any responses that seem to fall outside of a logical system of categorization because they are so unlike the others? How should you deal with these?

1. You learn about realistic art and abstract art.
2. You learn how to make things.
3. You learn how to draw and you make something.
4. Learn how to do fun stuff.
5. You learn some nice shapes.
6. I learn it doesn't have to be perfect. I learn that I make great things.
7. You learn terrific things.
8. You learn how to do different thing about art.
9. Designs, like flowers.
10. You learn to make different things.
11. You can learn how to draw.
12. Lots of things.
13. We learn to make bottles and baskets.
14. To overlap and crochet.
15. I learn a lot of things in art.
16. You learn to make things.
17. You learn how to do better, about nature.
18. You learn how to make paper designs.
19. You learn very good about things when you learn how to make art.
20. When it's up on paper and it looks far away.
21. To make stuff.
22. How to be patient.
23. How to color.
24. You learn to be patient.
25. You learn to make neat things.

*Yes, Kid #1 is the same as Kid #1  
on the previous page - and so on...*

What can you say about the effect of instruction on students' responses to this question? Is this a change of attitude? Experience? Skill? What else might have played a factor here - or what are the threats to trustworthiness in this research? What else do you want to do, see, know... what other data do you want to bolster the trustworthiness? How could you have investigated this same question using quantitative methods? Might you ever do something like this as a teacher? Give an example.