The "Trickster" and The Questionability of Questions

BY CONNIE STEWART

For the past 27 years my family and I have "vacationed" by undertaking an 18-mile backpacking trip in the high mountains of Colorado. This year, on the way to the trailhead, I spotted both a coyote and several ravens. I smiled because stories of the Tricksters Coyote and Raven are some of my favorites and I wondered what lay ahead of us on this trip. Later, I acknowledged the Trickster when a flat tire forced us to ignore the wise convention of an early start; when unexpected snow banks forced us off the known trail and on to other paths; when a presumed easy fording of a small stream instead required the creative response of an improvised bridge and human chain. In the past, my husband and I set the protocols for safe and environmentally responsible camping for the rest of the family. This year, I especially acknowledged the Trickster when I realized that it was now our adult children who made those decisions for me.

Stories of clever cultural heroes are told throughout the world illustrating life's multiplicities and paradoxes. In these stories, Coyote, Raven, Eshu, and Hermes force others to examine established conventions, find alternate paths, and reevaluate presuppositions. Most importantly, the Tricksters take (or steal) privileges and possessions that belong to authority figures in order to empower others (Hyde 1998).

Tricksters represent creativity and ingenuity in ways that are also integral to arts education. Like the tricksters, strong arts programs teach that a question can have many answers and there are multiple ways to interpret what is seen (Eisner, 2002). In this article, I will discuss how I apply lessons learned from the Trickster stories to my role as an arts educator. As a Coyote, Raven, Hermes or Eshu in the classroom, I teach by asking questions. The goal of my instruction is for my students to learn by considering multiple answers and by asking questions themselves. My questions are constructed so there is not a sole "right" answer, but even opposing answers can be correct. A Trickster story from West Africa illustrates how questions can have opposing but equally true answers.

Eshu the Trickster

There is a story about Eshu, a trickster from the Yoruba people. In the story Eshu tests two friends by making a cloth cap. The right side was black. The left side was white. Eshu, wearing the cap, rode a fine horse between the fields where the two friends were working. One friend was working on the right side saw the black cap, the friend on the left saw the white. At lunch one friend commented on the pleasant man on the fine horse with a white cap. The other friend agreed that he saw a charming man but the cap was black. A fight ensued. The fighting was so intense that the neighbors could not stop it. Finally Eshu returned, stopped the fight, and showed the men the cap. Of course, the question of the color of the cap had two opposing but equally correct answers.

I think about the Eshu story as I lead class discussions about historical and contemporary art. I currently teach university-level art history survey, contemporary art, and art education classes. I also lead discussions about art in K-12 and community settings whenever possible. My teaching style is to facilitate guided discussions about the art we are studying. I began leading class discussions by practicing successful questioning formats developed by other art educators, including Feldman (1970), Johansen (1982), Anderson (1988, 1993), Barrett (1994, 2000), Hamblin (1991), and Housen and Yenawine (2001). As I reflected on these discussions, my most rewarding conversations about art were part of my work during community workshops, in long-term care facilities, and with senior community centers. In community rather than academic settings, the discussions were less focused on specific facts about the image. Instead, the discussions were about personal stories and applications to contemporary life. Participants were willing to explore their own relationship to the artwork. The goal of my questioning changed from discussing the same ideas and interpretations in every class to finding new meanings with each new group.

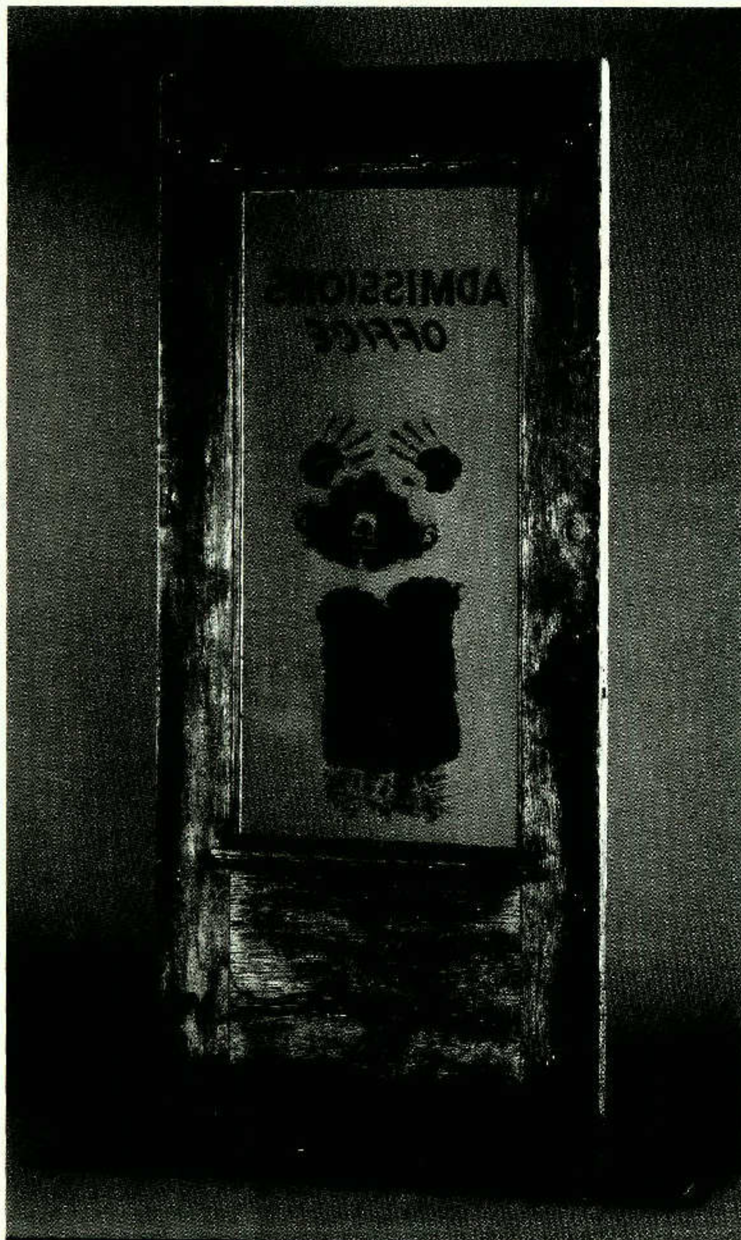

Figure 1. *The Door (Admissions Office)*, 1969, David Hammons (b. 1943). Wood, acrylic sheet, and pigment construction, 79" H x 48" W x 15" D. Collection of California African American Foundation. Courtesy of California African American Museum.

An artwork can have different meanings when approached by viewers with different presuppositions. **My questions can guide viewers into comprehension of facts about the image or into a less structured process of self-understanding and awareness.** Traditionally, the role of the teacher in discussions about art is one of structure, predictability, and control (Zander, 2003). However, Langer (1957) sees in both art and life a dialectic between permanence and change, inviolability and fragility. Art can convey meanings that last through time or present new meanings to each viewer. I want my students not only to learn a pre-established order but also to enter into a dialogue between order and ecstasy, permanence and change. With this goal in mind, I see my role as Eshu, Coyote, Raven or Hermes. Tricksters live in ambiguity and are found on the edges, at the boundaries, in the narrow spaces between things.

As I lead class discussions, I am aware of content required by a curriculum, but I also try to remember that some things, like Eshu's cap, can be black on one side and equally white on the other. I try to examine my own presuppositions and am prepared to have them challenged. I try to formulate questions that acknowledge multiple perspectives and conflicting opinions. I ask questions that run from one idea or opinion to another but belong to neither.

I frequently lead discussions about David Hammons' 1969 mixed-media sculpture, *The Door* (see Figure 1). Hammons made the art by using his body to print on a found door with the words "Admissions Office" seen from behind. I begin by asking questions about media and process. I generally know the answers to these questions and want my students to have the same information. With secondary-age students or with adults, I continue with the more critical discussion of race and exclusion, embracing the ambiguity of no clear answers. I might ask, "Is this artwork important because of its historical significance or as a comment on still continuing exclusions?" or ask simpler questions: "Has our society become more inclusive in the past 40 years?" "Does the past presidential election show that racial boundaries are no longer significant?" Multiple answers could be true. Some students may see experiences of the past as a reminder to continue to work toward inclusion. Others may have recent stories of race and exclusion. In some situations, I ask, "Do continued discussions on race, using experiences from the past, actually hinder current acceptance and understanding?" In class-rooms where participants come from many different backgrounds, this question results in statements of strong opinions on both sides. As I allow the discussion to run from one idea to another I not only see myself as Eshu but also as the Greek messenger and trickster, Hermes.

Mythologist Hyde (1998) describes Hermes as "the spirit of the doorway leading out, and of the crossroad at the edge of town... . He is the spirit of the road at dusk, the one that runs from one town to another and belongs to neither" (p. 6). I allow valuable class time to be spent in running from one idea to another. I privilege my students' "new" ideas, along with the ideas of professional art historians and critics. My goal is to facilitate understanding by helping students hear other students' viewpoints, reevaluate their own assumed positions, and examine cultural boundaries.

If trickster stirs to life on the open road, if he embodies ambiguity, if he "steals fire" to invent new technologies, if he plays with all the boundaries both inner and outer, and so on–then he must still be among us. (Hyde, p. 11)

Hermes and Hermeneutics

The word *hermeneutics (*the art of interpretation) is linguistically derived from the name of Hermes. Typical hermeneutical processes involve set procedures of description and stylistic analysis, and later evaluation. K-12 classroom teachers are encouraged to follow similar formats (Feldman, 1972). However, in the Greek stories, Hermes does not follow a set procedure. He delivers experiential communications between individuals and between worlds, heaven and earth, death and life. I want my students to not only learn about an image but to have an *experience* with it, finding personal meaning and applications. I hope they can break through the boundaries of their own experiences to understand the experiences of others.

Dewey (1934/1958) defines the work of art as not the art object itself but as the experiences of the viewer. Gadamer (1999) states, "We cannot have experiences without asking questions" (p. 362). Knowledge in art depends upon processes of questions and answers. According to Gadamer, questions are the priority because, "the important thing is the knowledge that one does not know" (p. 365). According to Maxine Greene (2002),

In earlier times, an aesthetic encounter was expected to culminate in a feeling of coherence, harmony, finitude. Today, seldom looking for solutions or resolutions, we seek a sense of alive-ness, of wide-awakeness. We relish incompleteness, because that signifies that something still lies ahead. (p. 22)

At times, a successful learning outcome is when students are *less* sure about the class content at the end of the discussion but have more questions.

Questionability of Questions

No method of questioning will succeed without an atmosphere that safely ensures the questionability of the questions. At first, my students do not see a question as an opportunity to explore multiple answers but as a challenge to guess the answer that the instructor already knows. My conversations with students confirm the findings of Cazden (1988) that a typical classroom discussion consists of (a) teacher initiation, (b) student response, and (c) teacher evaluation. One of the first things I do as a teacher or facilitator is to tell the participants that I ask only a few questions where I know the answer. I base my questions to them on questions that are unanswered in my own mind. I want the stories, ideas, and opinions of the group to complete my own understanding of the art we are discussing. I also limit my evaluative responses such as "Good answer," "No, not quite," etc. Instead, I relate the student response to a different comment made by another participant or ask another question. The assurance that questions will not have a "right" answer encourages discussion.

Another more difficult classroom dynamic occurs when participants hold strong opinions. Sometimes an opinion is expressed so vehemently that others are afraid to discuss it. It is important to not let statements of strong opinion suppress further questions. It is also the role of the facilitator to support opinions that are just as valid but may be less strongly expressed. At first, I tell the group that the purpose of the discussion is not to find the errors in an argument but to discover its strengths. I encourage responses that begin with, "I disagree because…" as well as, "I agree for this reason…" I also encourage responses that say, "I don't agree but I see the validity of…" Within a respectful atmosphere, ideas can be discussed and new questions discovered.

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The Trickster and Class Discussions at an Elementary Setting

In 2001 I taught a bi-weekly art class to 4th- and 5th-grade students at a local Arts and Literacy Magnet School. Soon after the World Trade Center attacks, I showed Jasper Johns' (1959) *Three Flags*, three encaustic paintings of an American flag, decreasing in size and placed on top of each other, to the 5th graders. At that time, elementary teachers helped students emotionally through the national crisis by making and displaying American flags in a variety of ways. Classes discussed the importance of the flag to America's sense of national unity. I had the following discussion with 5th- grade students:

My question: "We have been making many flags recently. Should we put a flag on top of another flag?"

Student: "No. It is disrespectful."

Student: "I disagree. I don't think it is disrespectful because it is not a real flag."

My response: "It is a picture of a flag. Does that make a difference?"

Student: "Somebody painted a flag on the road in front of his house. Is that disrespectful?"

Student: "No, it was because he loved his country."

Student: "It is disrespectful because cars drive over it."

My Response: "Do you think Jasper Johns loves his country?"

Student: "Yes, because he wanted us to notice the flag."

Student: "No, because he did not paint the flag the right way."

The conversation continued with both viewpoints being expressed.

My goal with the children was not to stir up controversy in an already highly charged atmosphere but to guide my students into seeing two sides of an issue. Even young children have opinions about right and wrong. Discussions like these help children to see complex questions may have more than one answer (Eisner, 2002).

Open discussions also help children to relate their experiences to the experiences of others in very different circumstances. First graders and I discussed David Hammons' image, *The Door*. The conversation was different than ones with older children or adults. At first, I hesitated to use the image with 6-year-olds who had little understanding of the challenges of the Civil Rights Movement. But the teacher candidates I worked with and I decided that the children were capable of understanding societal boundaries and barriers. The discussion did not involve race, but stories about closed doors. The

children talked about their parents discussing important things behind closed doors and their feelings of concern or exclusion. They talked about siblings slamming doors in their faces or not being allowed in an older sibling's room. From their own experiences, they could understand other's experiences of exclusion. My teacher candidates then related stories where members of their families had been "shut out" because of race or income.

> Every group has its edge, its sense of in and out, and trickster is always there, at the gates of the city and the gates of life, making sure there is commerce ... in every case trickster will cross the line and confuse the distinction. (Hyde, 1998, p. 7)

Writing Questions for Discussion

I prepare for a discussion by writing questions, although I will use only a few of the questions I write. The questions need to be connected to the context of the discussion, carefully crafted and direct. The best questions are ones with which I, too, have wondered about or struggled with in some way. Tricksters are found at the crossroads (Hyde, 1998). When I write questions, I think of myself as the trickster standing at the point where different ideas intersect. I realize that I can never be impartial but can endeavor to define for the participants their alternatives. A dichotomous (two-way) format seems to work for initial questions and then the participants can provide a synthesis or other alternatives. Even statements asking for judgments or opinions are stated with an implied "or not?"

I prepared the following questions for a discussion about the sculpture titled *Lick and Lather* by Janine Antoni. The work of Janine Antoni connects artmaking with physical acts of hunger and desire. *Lick and Lather* is a series of self-portrait busts made from chocolate and soap. She licked the chocolate and washed herself with the soap (Sollins, 2003). When I discuss *Lick and Lather* with teenagers, I begin by asking, "Is she crazy or not?" Answers have been "Yes, definitely," and "No, her work is creative and beautiful." I can then choose from the questions I have prepared. These questions state alternatives for the participants and seem to be initially easier to answer. "Is the image self-expression or is it a stunt meant to be innovative?" "Does the image show strong or poor self-esteem?" "Is the message one of self-caring or self-loathing?" "Was the decision to stop licking or cleaning a conscious formal choice or an intuitive one with no particular meaning?" Other questions imply, rather than state, possible multiple answers. "Is the classical pedestal an important part of the image?" "Should Antoni take herself off the pedestal?" "Would you be interested in the image if the model were older or younger?" "Do you need to know that she was feeding herself or cleaning herself to appreciate the image?" "Does the image show a love/hate relationship to the body as the artist suggests?" The experiences of each group are different and I expect each discussion to be unique. I use the questions that seem appropriate for the group and ask new questions inspired by the conversation. Because this conversation involves body image, some responses may be too personal to be voiced. I allow silence. Silence is also an important part of teaching by questioning.

Teaching is not only transmitting information and concepts from an instructor to learner. Art education is empowering students to own their own ideas, develop their own voices and to listen to the ideas of others.

Remembering Eshu

When first observing my classroom discussions, I found that my questions were about form, style, and technique. Now, I want to show alternative paths, challenge conventions and presuppositions. When standing before a class to lead a discussion about art, I take on the role of a trickster, although hopefully a gentle and humble one. Remembering the Eshu story, I look for the aspects of the upcoming discussion that could be white on one side and black on the other. I look for those interstices between what I see and what someone else might see. I experience the art for myself, examining the boundaries within which I construct my own thinking. I endeavor to look at my own preconceptions. I prepare myself to allow the conversation to take paths that may not follow an established format. Then facilitating dialogue, I can act as Eshu, pointing out that understanding can consist of opposing ideas.

My intention is not to be always right but always honest. My purpose, like Hermes, Eshu, Coyote, or Raven is to "steal what belongs to the gods"—in this case, the interpretive privileges of adult teachers—and give those privileges to the learners. Teaching is not only transmitting information and concepts from an instructor to learner. Art education is empowering students to own their own ideas, develop their own voices and to listen to the ideas of others. Quality art education experiences teach that there are many ways to see and interpret the world and that a question can have multiple equally valid answers (Eisner, 2002).

Connie Stewart is Assistant Professor of Art Education at the University of Northern Colorado, Greeley. E-mail: Connie.Stewart@unco.edu

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ENDNOTE

[1]In one story from the Alaskan Tlingit people, Raven steals the sun and moon from the domain of the gods and sets them in the sky to light the earth. In another story from the Klamath people in Oregon, Coyote steals fire from Thunder and gives it to every tribe on earth (Erdoes 1998).

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