

The Dinner Party Curriculum Project

Encounter 1: Table Talk

Grade Levels: Elementary, Middle, High School



The Dinner Party is an art installation with an enormous triangular table, 48 feet on each side, set for 39 important women from historical figures to goddesses. The table is a significant metaphor in this iconic work of art. *Table Talk*, an inquiry based learning activity, introduces students to *The Dinner Party* through an analysis of visual metaphor focusing on the symbolic meaning of a table. Students consider the various ways tables function in our lives, examine the language we use when talking about tables, and then apply their insights through a closer look at *The Dinner Party*.

The *Table Talk* activity is one way to introduce *The Dinner Party* and begin an inquiry into its meanings. As students enter into the work of art through its visual metaphors, they subsequently discover its important ideas. For example, when students

reflect on the way dinner parties and table experiences function in their own personal lives and within social contexts, they understand how *The Dinner Party* addresses issues of power, highlighting the exclusion of women's achievements throughout history. By investigating the artwork from their own knowledge bases and through personal connections, students may be motivated and empowered to learn more about *The Dinner Party*. The teacher also benefits by considering the students' cultural experiences and differences in planning further learning activities.

Investigation

The teacher will:

1. Prepare student packets for group work. The packets contain diverse visual representations of tables (i.e. picnic, banquet, cafeteria, kotatsu, TV tray, etc.) and *Table Talk Worksheet*.
2. Have students form small working groups. Groups may wish to assume names based on species of butterflies, since the butterfly is another important metaphor in *The Dinner Party*.
3. Remind students that a metaphor states that one thing is something else. It is a comparison but it does not use "like" to compare one object or idea to another. We use metaphors when we want to communicate a great deal of meaning with just a word or phrase. For example, we might say, "The inside of the car is a refrigerator," suggesting that the inside of the car is very cold—just like a refrigerator. We might say, "Her hair was silk," suggesting that her hair was soft and shiny—just like silk is soft and shiny.
4. Explain that in this activity students will explore ways to compare one object—a table—to other objects and ideas. Tell students they will talk about a work of art in which a table is important.
5. Distribute *Table Talk Worksheet* and facilitate student group work with Parts One, Two, and Three.

6. Assist students in drawing conclusions after Part Three of the *Table Talk Worksheet*. Possible prompts:

- ▶ Describe a table with which you are familiar. What is its shape? How is it used?
- ▶ When and why do you sit at tables?
- ▶ What are some of your personal experiences with being around a table?
- ▶ How do people interact around this table?
- ▶ Who is the head of the table? Why?
- ▶ What is table talk?
- ▶ What does it mean to have “a place at the table”?
- ▶ How have tables functioned in your life? In the lives of people you know?
- ▶ What different shapes might a table take? How might the shape of a table influence what people do and how they interact?
- ▶ Does everyone have the same experience with tables or at tables?
- ▶ How do culture, economic status and gender influence our relationships to various tables?

7. Show students an image of *The Dinner Party*. Talk about the table in light of the students’ metaphor discussions.

Possible prompts:

- ▶ How is *The Dinner Party* similar to or different from tables we talked about?
- ▶ How does the table you chose compare to *The Dinner Party*?
- ▶ Why might *The Dinner Party* be shaped in a triangle?
- ▶ How did the guests arrive at *The Dinner Party* table? (This question could lead students to Encounter 2: *Extending the Invitation*).

The students will:

1. Work in groups with their teacher-prepared packet of table images.

2. Individually choose an image from the table collection and make personal connections with the chosen table image.

3. Introduce themselves to their group through a story that relates to the table image they have selected. As they refer to Part One of the *Table Talk Worksheet*, students may make use of the sentence starters provided: “This table reminds me of; I remember a time; I like to...at the table; Once, at a table like this...”

4. Discuss the ways that the word “table” is used in our ordinary language, such as when we say “come to the table.” Ask the students to list examples of various usages. The students refer to Part Two of the *Table Talk Worksheet*.

5. Discuss how they might think metaphorically about “table.” Students consider how the table has functioned in their own lives and the lives of others; for example, they might see a table as a refuge or meeting place. The students refer to Part Three of the *Table Talk Worksheet*.

6. Have the class as a whole summarize their discoveries and beliefs by discussing the outcomes from their *Table Talk* group work.

7. Apply their ideas about tables in a discussion about the table in *The Dinner Party*.



Continuing Exploration:

1. Students can use a Venn Diagram to compare and contrast *The Dinner Party* with another table. For example, there are thirteen place settings at each side of the triangular table of *The Dinner Party* and at *The Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci. The guests at each of these two tables are being honored. Judy Chicago has said that she wanted to reinterpret *The Last Supper*, "that all-male event, from the point of view of those who had traditionally been expected to prepare the food, then silently disappear from the picture" (1997, p.46).
2. Students can become researchers at the school cafeteria or dinner at home where they document mealtime happenings and people's relationships. In follow-up class discussions they can explore ideas about community, and hierarchical and egalitarian spaces.
3. Students can research and locate other works of art in which a table functions metaphorically.

Classroom Connections:

1. Elementary: Art teachers Dayna McNichol and Stephanie Spencer created an alternative approach to this *Table Talk Encounter* for use with elementary students, or in order to differentiate instruction. Instead of the students generating their own metaphors about tables and dinner parties, the teachers had the students participate in "Matching Metaphors." To match metaphors the teachers not only supplied the students with various table images, as described in the *Table Talk Encounter*, but also supplied them with metaphor word cards. In this approach the teacher should introduce or review the idea of a metaphor with the students before having students work with the word cards. Students' diverse lived experiences may lead to personal metaphor matches—great springboards for discussion.

Materials:

1. *Table Talk Worksheet*
2. Teacher-prepared packet of table images for each group.
3. Image of *The Dinner Party* (projected image or poster, for example).

Resources:

1. Leonardo da Vinci (Italian, 1452–1519). *The Last Supper*, 1495–98. Tempera on plaster. Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan, Italy.
2. Brooklyn Museum of Art website for *The Dinner Party*, http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/dinner_party/
3. Concept to Classroom Workshop: Inquiry-based Learning at <http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/inquiry/>



Resources available from Through the Flower:

1. <http://www.throughtheflower.org/store>

References:

1. Chicago, J. (1997) *Beyond the Flower: The Autobiography of a Feminist Artist*. Penguin Publishers.

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Table Talk

PART ONE

1. Choose an image of a table from the collection.
2. Think about your personal connections to this type of table.
3. Introduce yourself to the others in your group with a story that relates to your chosen table.
4. Consider the following:
 - ▶ This table reminds me of...
 - ▶ I remember a time...
 - ▶ I like to _____ at the table.
 - ▶ Once, at a table like this...

PART TWO

With your group, discuss ways we use the table in our day-to-day talk. An example is, "Come to the table."

- ▶ List your group's examples:

PART THREE

Given your stories and conversation, discuss with your group how we might think of tables metaphorically. An example is, "Table as Refuge."

- ▶ Table as _____.
- ▶ Table as _____.
- ▶ Table as _____.

PART FOUR

Record your favorites on a large paper to share with the whole class.
