

Translating Ideas between Different Materials

Use this tool to deepen children's understanding of ideas by exploring their thinking through different materials.

SESSION 1

Step 1

Identify an idea, question, or experience that you would like children to think about more deeply (see [Asking Big Questions](#), [Asking Unanswerable Questions](#), [Doing Serendipity](#), [Inspiring Inventiveness with Literature](#), or [Letters of Intent](#)).

Step 2

Choose a material for children to use to explore the topic, keeping the following considerations in mind:

- children's prior experience with the materials
- variation in qualities of the materials, e.g, pencils are easier to control than charcoal, 2D vs. 3D, etc.
- amount of set-up and clean-up required
- role of the adult and degree of support children might need
- children's degree of choice in selecting materials

Step 3

Post the following question where children can see it.

How can you use _____ to _____ _____ ?
(material) (explore, capture, imagine) (idea, question, experience)

For example:

- *How can you use charcoal to explore the line between your comfort zone and your danger zone?*
- *How can you use clay to capture your reflections on today's discussion?*
- *How can you use watercolor to imagine where stories come from?*

Step 4

Discuss the idea, question, or experience with children to provoke their thinking and activate their prior knowledge. Ask children if they have any questions. Only respond to clarifying questions — simple questions of fact that provide essential information and set the stage for more probing questions. Record all questions that are not clarifying questions. They may be returned to after the children themselves have had a chance to explore the materials.

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Step 5

Introduce the material for exploration, including the time frame and how to use and care for the material. Invite children to share tips with the group about how the material works.

Step 6

Ask children to explore the material individually or in small groups. You might play music, ask for silence, or invite children to use “studio talk” (i.e., limiting talk to a focus on the work at hand).

Step 7

Ask children to reflect on their experience. This can take the form of a discussion, a [Gallery Walk](#), [Artist Statements](#), or a turn-and-talk.

SESSION 2

Step 8

Invite children to explore the same idea, question, or experience with a *different* material.

Step 9

Ask children to reflect on their experience working with the materials. For example,

- *What did you notice? What did you wonder?*
- *What did you learn about the original question?*
- *How did using different materials help to deepen or extend your thinking?*
- *Compare the qualities of the materials you used. What are their gifts? Their limitations?*
- *Share overheard comments or questions that might inspire or provoke the thinking of the group.*

For video examples and reflections on practices that inspire inventiveness, become an Opal School Online Sustaining Member at learning.opalschool.org.



Children deserve opportunities to explore the power of their ideas.

Children are capable of generating complex, meaningful ideas of their own design. Ideas have more meaning when they engage our minds and our bodies. Associating ideas with images and actions converts the abstract into the tangible. Materials help us think and understand in new ways. Although pen, paper, and computer are important tools for thinking, the meaning of the words we write is enhanced when actions or images “live within” those words. Working on the same idea with different materials promotes meaning and understanding by giving children a sense of what the words feel like; it enables them to understand those words in a different and deeper way.



Suggested Time Frame

At least two sessions of work time, plus time to introduce the materials, reflect, and clean up (a total of an hour or more)

When and How

Use this tool to support children’s and your own understanding of complex ideas. This tool allows children the opportunity to experience the power of their own ideas, and to contribute to the understanding of the group.

Tips and Variations

- In [Step 8](#) above, consider offering the same material again with the same question, or with a related question raised during the first experience.
- Post a materials request list in your classroom so children can nominate materials to include in the future.
- Offer individual children opportunities to translate their ideas with materials whenever you think it would support their thinking. The experience does not need to involve the whole group; indeed, children can learn to use this tool on their own whenever they feel a need to strengthen their understanding or grow an idea.

