

PERSPECTIVE ON TEACHING

What's going on in this picture? Visual thinking strategies and adult learning

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Abstract

The Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) curriculum and teaching method uses art to help students think critically, listen attentively, communicate, and collaborate. VTS has been proven to enhance reading, writing, comprehension, and creative and analytical skills among students of all ages. The origins and procedures of the VTS curriculum are described, and the applicability of the VTS curriculum for adult learners is explored.

Educators of students of all ages struggle dealing with poor literacy rates, an increased lack of student motivation, and great pressure to prepare students for a world in which critical thinking and communication skills are essential keys to professional success. Many schools have turned to creative sources of expression and communication in an attempt to ignite student interest and understanding. Innovative visual literacy programs seek to provide students with an opportunity to deepen their understanding of targeted curriculum areas through art-based explorations. John Debes (1969, 1972) crystallized the concept of visual literacy by giving the theory its first and longest lasting definition. He explained visual literacy as the ability to understand and use images, including the ability to think, learn, and express oneself in terms of images (Debes, 1972). Proponents of visual literacy maintain that students of all ages who engage in these sustained, art process oriented experiences cultivate creativity and risk-taking while reinforcing critical thinking and communication skills.

In the late 1980s, cognitive psychologist Abigail Housen and veteran museum educator Philip Yenawine developed Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) as an elementary school curriculum. As a visual arts program, VTS:

- Uses a student-centered method to examine and find meaning in visual art
- Uses art to teach thinking, communication skills, and visual literacy
- Uses facilitated discussion to practice respectful, democratic collaborative problem solving among students that transfers to other classroom interactions, and beyond
- Uses eager, thoughtful participation to nurture verbal language skills, and writing assignments to assist transfer from oral to written ability
- Uses the Web to develop independence and computer skills as well as to assist teacher preparation

- Encourages art museum visits to underscore connections to art and to integrate a community resource into students' lives
- Produces growth, including visual literacy and greatly enhanced verbal and thinking skills, in all students, from challenged and non-English language learners to high achievers
- Measurably increases observation skills, evidential reasoning, and speculative abilities, and the ability to find multiple solutions to complex problems
- Meets state standards in art, language and social studies and improves test scores in reading and writing (*Visual Understanding in Education*, 2001).

VTS relies specifically on art images because they provide a clear window for reflection, a powerful tool with which to engage students, and are open to a multiplicity of interpretations. As Yenawine (1999) says, art can “make us think and feel, and (to) engage with and reflect on ideas and phenomena that take us beyond the ordinary” (p. 2). In the VTS curriculum, students examine carefully selected art images as teachers conduct open-ended discussions about sequenced works of art using developmentally based questions. Teachers begin by presenting images with a slide projector and asking the following open-ended questions: “What’s going on in this picture?” “What do you see that makes you say that?” and “What more can we find in the picture?” Students verbalize their responses, opinions, ideas, and interpretations, while teachers act as facilitators, paraphrasing each student’s comments and linking observations when appropriate. Students are also encouraged to support opinions with evidence, to listen and share information and ideas, and to construct meanings together (see Appendix). Growth is stimulated by looking at art of increasing complexity, responding to developmentally-based questions, and participating in group discussions that are carefully facilitated by teachers.

Ultimately designed as a visual literacy curriculum for young people, VTS originally stemmed from Yenawine’s (1999) frustration at what he felt was a disconnect from works of art on the part of *educated adults*. As an art educator at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York, one of Yenawine’s responsibilities was to give tours of the MOMA collection. In *Theory into Practice*, Yenawine (1999) recalls becoming increasingly aware that instead of helping viewers make their own lasting and meaningful connections with art, he was sharing his own insights and meaning with his viewing audience. Through Howard Gardner, the author of the theory of multiple intelligences, Yenawine was introduced to Abigail Housen, who was doing research on thinking strategies people use to find meaning in works of art. Housen’s theory was that people’s thinking about art evolves in stages as a result of their interaction with art over time. Housen’s method was to conduct non-directive interviews with people of all ages while they were looking at different kinds of art.

In her research, Housen found that there are five stages of aesthetic viewing, and that these stages do not depend on the age of the viewer. Briefly, in stage I, viewers are storytellers. They make concrete observations about the work of art which they often weave into narratives. In stage II, viewers try to construct a framework for looking at the work of art, using their own perceptions, values, and knowledge of the natural world. In stage III, viewers classify the work of art by using the analytical tools of an art historian. In stage IV, viewers interpret the work of art, noting the subtleties of line, shape, and color. In stage V, viewers combine their knowledge of the work of art with their knowledge of how the particular piece fits into ideas of universal

concern. Yenawine and Housen combined their experience and expertise and developed a curriculum for teaching art in which the goal was to help viewers make their own meaning of what they observed in order to make their own connection with art.

With research they have conducted over the past 20 years throughout the United States and Eastern Europe, Abigail Housen and her colleague Karin DeSantis (2001) have affirmed the efficacy of using the VTS curriculum. Teachers report that the majority of students who participate in the VTS curriculum learn to read more quickly, have greater comprehension skills, and are more capable of expressing whole concepts and completing whole thoughts in a sentence (Curva & Associates, 2004; Longhenry, 2005). After completing the ten-week VTS curriculum, students' writing improves as well. Students are more likely to write in complete sentences, which include more observations, to supply reasons to back up opinions, and to speculate among possible conclusions. Consequently, the VTS curriculum is a valuable resource in aiding students to improve their reading, writing, and communication skills (*Visual Thinking Strategies*, n.d.).

In addition to being used with elementary school students, the VTS curriculum has been successfully used with secondary students, adult and senior museum-goers, and recently, with medical students and interns. Convinced of the vital connection between the humanities and medical education, and intrigued by the notion that facilitated discussion of art images could help people develop critical thinking and communication skills, Dr. Jo Marie Reilly, Dr. Jeffrey Ring, and Linda Duke (2005) attended a medical retreat at an art museum. The retreat featured art viewing sessions led by a trained VTS instructor. During these sessions, Dr. Reilly, Dr. Ring, and Ms. Duke discovered the power of VTS. Through the focused observations of artwork (pointing to the area of artwork elicited by each person's response to the first question, "What's going on in this picture?"), the neutral probing for evidence (paraphrasing each person's response and asking "What do you see that makes you say that?"), and the acknowledgement of multiple points of view, Reilly, Ring, and Duke experienced how, in their own words, "participants moved out of the realm of right answers and into the process of weighing and considering 'evidence' that is required by both art and science" (p. 251). They proceeded to become VTS facilitators by attending an intensive one-week VTS training workshop. They then adapted the VTS curriculum for use with their medical interns and residents by carefully selecting images that lend themselves to multiple interpretations and that can be viewed and understood without specialized art knowledge. Now, VTS has become an integral part of the annual intern orientation day activities at Drs. Reilly, Ring, and Duke's teaching hospital and is used to train family medicine residents and faculty.

Similar to its success as a training tool for medical students, VTS strategies are just as applicable in other adult learning environments (see Appendix). Learning how to think critically and analytically, learn cooperatively, entertain more than one point of view, and synthesize information are essential skills in almost every profession in the twenty-first century. From preservice teaching, to nursing, to mechanics, to information technology, to the service industries, VTS offers students a creative model to make learning enjoyable and meaningful and helps students become self-sufficient and life-long learners.

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Appendix

VTS Basics

Ask the following three VTS Questions exactly as written:

a. *What is going on in this picture?*

This question opens up the discussion. Note that the verb used is active and thus encourages an active response. Avoid beginning with “What do you see?” as this question tends to elicit a list of objects rather than engagement with the art.

b. *What do you see that makes you say that?*

This question asks students to provide evidence for their observations. Evidence in the form of visual imagery is relatively easy to give, and the skill learned is enormously useful in writing.

c. *What more can you find?*

This question gives students the opportunity to look further and stretch their visual and critical thinking abilities.

Paraphrase each student’s response

The process of rephrasing every response serves many purposes. It shows that you are listening to each student, gives everyone in the group a chance to hear the response if they missed it the first time, helps build students’ self-esteem through positive attention, and is an opportunity to enrich students’ vocabulary. It also helps establish a connection between you and the students.

Link one student's response to another when possible

When you express connections between students' thoughts, you encourage students to stretch their own thinking and to make their own connections. Linking students' responses is a difficult task as it requires listening to and rephrasing details, as well as the ability to keep a grasp on the larger points of the discussion. However, linking responses is essential to nurturing students' growth.

Point to all that the student mentions in the image

As the student talks, point to each particular part of the art image mentioned. This allows everyone in the room to "see" what the respondent is seeing and encourages students to keep looking.

Remain neutral

Just as it is important to recognize each student's response by paraphrasing, it is as important not to privilege one response over another. The simplest way to do this is to nod your head after each response.

Take up to fifteen minutes to discuss each image

There is no prescribed amount of time for discussion of each image, but 15 minutes is a good rule of thumb. The goal is to allow students to engage with the image and with each other.

Dr. Hilary Landorf is Assistant Professor and Program Director of Social Studies/Global Education at Florida International University. She is also the Assistant Director of the Global Awareness Program. Dr. Landorf holds a Ph.D. in International Education from New York University, an M.A. in English Literature from the University of Virginia, and a B.A. in English from Stanford University. Prior to coming to Florida International University, Dr. Landorf was a visiting Asst. Professor in the Dept. of the Humanities and the Social Sciences at New York University. Dr. Landorf has extensive teaching experience teaching History, ESL, and English, on all levels of schooling, in a variety of settings. She has taught elementary school Language Arts at an American International School in Nouakchott, Mauritania, middle school ESL at a public school in Yonkers, New York, International Baccalaureat level World History at the Lycée Français in San Francisco, California, and English Literature at Westchester Community College in White Plains, New York. Dr. Landorf's current research interests include enhancing universal values in global education, using children's literature to examine multiple perspectives in social studies education, and exploring the use of metaphor as a strategy in visual literacy.