

Introduction to Visual Thinking Strategies¹

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) is a visual arts program for elementary school students and teachers, founded on the premise that finding meaning in works of visual art involves a rich range of thinking skills.

VTS encourages

- a personal connection to art from diverse cultures, times, and places, giving confidence in one's ability to construct meaning from it
- active class discussions and group problem solving
- development of thinking and communication skills
- development of writing skills
- transference of these skills to other subject areas

Field tested since 1991 in the United States, Russia, and various sites in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, VTS is specifically designed to address the concerns and abilities of beginner viewers. It is easy for teachers to learn, it is inexpensive, and it efficiently fits into school schedules. VTS creates partnerships between local schools and art museums, integrating museum visits into classroom studies.

Contents

VTS consists of ten lessons taught by classroom teachers (grades K–5) spread over the school year. There are nine lessons in the classroom and, for grades 3 and above, one in a museum.

Each lesson comes with a set of carefully sequenced images (two for K–2, three for 3–5) from many different cultures and times, and in various mediums. In the early grades (K–2), poster-sized reproductions are used; in later grades (3–5), the images are projected from slides to allow for group discussion. An image database accessible through the internet is currently in development and should be ready for classroom use in the near future.

In the initial lessons, students are first asked to look at an image without talking. Then the teacher/facilitator asks specific, open-ended questions (“What’s going on in this picture?” “What more can you find?”) that encourage the students to examine what they see; later, more specific, probing, and directed questions are added. From the beginning, students are also asked to back up interpretations with evidence; whenever they state an opinion, teachers ask them, “What do you see that makes you say that?”

The teacher ensures that every response is heard and acknowledged, by pointing to what is mentioned as a student talks, and then paraphrasing what was said. As the discussion evolves, teachers link various related answers, helping to make students aware of their converging and diverging views, and of their developing skills at constructing shared yet varied meanings.

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When questions occur, students are first asked if they can figure out the answer by looking. If unable, they then are asked where they might look to find the answer; only as a last resort does the teacher give the answer. Discussions of any given image generally last from twelve to twenty minutes—long enough for students to look carefully, develop opinions, express them, consider multiple viewpoints, speculate together, argue, debate and/or build on each other's ideas, and possibly revise their conclusions. VTS continues to build as students' interests and abilities change. In the later grades, they are asked to take part in writing assignments. These assignments are optional in the third grade but integral to fourth and fifth. All along, teachers are facilitators of the students' process, never the experts.

Teacher Training

VTS is designed for use by general classroom teachers and requires no prior art background. A course of peer training over three academic years enables teachers to learn to use it as well as to expand their own experience with art. The training is based on the premises of the curriculum itself: self discovery is a powerful way to learn, and such self-directed learning can be facilitated by discussion among peers. Teachers are guided by a syllabus focused on practice and reflection. This experience is enriched by a combination of expert-led demonstrations, printed guides, videotapes, and access to the program's creators by way of the internet. A network of coordinators across the United States is currently being prepared to lead training. Training regimens are being developed for the internet; these will be especially useful for teachers of younger grades.

Outcomes

Over time, students grow from casual, random, idiosyncratic viewers to thorough, probing, reflective interpreters. They go from finding only personal connections—which is appropriate when they begin—to searching out the intentions of artists and dealing with elements of styles. They are first encouraged to find meaning based on their past experience (legitimizing what they know), and to become grounded storytellers. After a certain amount of experience—at the point that they begin to become dissatisfied with their own limitations—they are asked to develop their own voices through writing about art, either using images provided with the curriculum or via the internet. The process first depends on group interaction and works toward individual problem-solving motivated by personal interests. As students develop their connection to art, they exercise a wide variety of cognitive skills that are useful in many contexts.

Background

VTS is based on the work of cognitive psychologist Abigail Housen and veteran museum educator Philip Yenawine. Housen has been investigating the nature of aesthetic development and its role in education for over twenty years. As part of her doctoral work at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in the late 1970's, she developed a measure and method for assessing aesthetic development. In 1983, she published her doctoral thesis "The Eye of the Beholder: Measuring Aesthetic Development," which includes her well-documented stage theory. Yenawine has directed education programs at many museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. Beginning their work together in 1988, they have focused on ways of studying the effect of specific treatments (such as VTS) on aesthetic development, and the relation of aesthetic thinking to cognition in general. Also influential in the development of VTS is the work of other psychologists and educational theorists such as Jerome Bruner and Rudolf Arnheim, and especially the work of Lev Vygotsky concerning the relationship of language to thought, and his findings concerning growth that occurs from interaction with others.