Thinking Through Art: An Introduction to Visual Thinking Strategies

NEMA 2014 Annual Conference
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Visual Thinking Strategies

- Carefully facilitated group discussions that invite participants to share their personal responses to works of art while listening to others’ points of view
  - Paraphrases and links comments

- Close looking and listening
  - What’s going on in this picture?
  - What do you see that makes you say that?
  - What more can we find?
Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS)

Pedagogy

- Co-created by an art museum educator Philip Yenawine and cognitive psychologist Abigail Housen
- Open-ended group discussions about works of art
- Asks students to focus, become reflective, and to question
Visual Thinking Strategies

Curriculum

- Encourages gradual, incremental growth
- Students see diverse ways artists express themselves and tell stories
- Students bring their interests, strengths, previous experiences
- Promotes understanding that art is open to multiple interpretations
Visual Thinking Strategies

Assessment

- Built on extensive research of how people learn to look at works of art and make meaning (Abigail Housen’s stage theory)
- Gardner Museum continually researching program impact
Why & How We Use VTS @ ISGM
Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum
School Partnership Program

- Multiple-year program
- Classroom and Museum experiences
- 10 classroom VTS lessons annually
- 2-4 museum visits annually
- Intensive teacher training
- Free family admission and events
- Active research and program assessment
School Partnership Program Audience

- 5 local schools
- Grades Pre-K through 12
- 46 teachers
- 1290 students
- Many English Language Learners
- Little art viewing or making experience
School Partnership Program
Goals

For Students
- Learn to Look / Visual Literacy
- Become comfortable in the Museum environment
- Enhance communication skills
- Build critical thinking skills that may transfer across curriculum

For Teachers
- Learn to facilitate VTS discussions
- Develop strategies to use works of art as resources in the classroom
- Broaden assessment of students’ behavior and thinking skills
- Enhance open-ended and student-centered teaching practice in subject area
Common Core State Standards + Museum Education

- Changing the language, not the programs
- Emphasis on Skills
  - Close Reading / Close Looking
  - Reasoning with evidence
  - Using art and artifacts as primary sources
  - Student-led exploration of materials
After mastering the basics, how do teachers use VTS?
MICHAEL BAULIER
9TH GRADE ELA TEACHER
VTS YEAR 3
**Grade 9 VTS Extension Lesson: Of Mice and Men**

- In small groups (3-4 students), examine and discuss your image. After discussing, answer questions 1 and 2 on the handout. Be prepared to share your ideas with the class.
- Each group will stand and present its image, explaining the 3 claims and supporting evidence. The teacher will then continue the discussion with the whole class.
- After each 5-minute discussion, take 2 minutes to write down the main points you heard during the discussion.
- After examining all four images, write a response to the journal prompt independently.
1. What **claims** can you make to explain what is going on in this image? Make at least 3 claims about the image.

2. What **evidence** do you see in the image to support your claims? Use specific details from the image.

Summary – Write down the main points from our whole-class discussion on this image.
Directions: Answer the following journal prompt. Your response must be at least 150 words. Include a title for your journal entry.

Journal Prompt: How do you think the people in these four images feel? Why? What do you think the artists are trying to tell us by capturing these images? Based on these images, what predictions can you make about the book, *Of Mice and Men*?
BRIAN FIZER
3RD GRADE ELL TEACHER
VTS YEAR 6
Grade 3 VTS Extension Lesson: Writing Pilot Project

- With a move to the CCSS and a new Expeditionary Learning curriculum we wanted to look at writing and critical thinking
- Pre- and Post- Writing with each text using a carefully selected image from the text
- Close Reading of the text 4-6 times in between the two writings, as well as a whole group discussion before the post-writing
- We have noticed several trends and immense enthusiasm! This is one of their favorite things to do!
Some Exciting Things Have Happened!

- Increased stamina and increased volume of writing!
- Students who are not typically engaged in writing exercises have been very engaged and interested in the work!
- Students are using critical thinking skills (particularly evidence) across the curriculum more regularly, especially with Text Dependent Questions (TDQ’s) which is a big demand from the CCSS as connected to Close Reading
Pre-Writing

- We have seen an increase in the increase of multiple possibilities from Pre-Writing 1 to Pre-Writing 5
- We have seen an increase of evidence being used as well as elaborations
- There has also been an increase in the number of words being used as well as the amount of supported observations
Post-Writing

- Definitely have seen students focused on the gist of the story connected to the text and increase in their ability to summarize important information from the text
- Use of new vocabulary has increased drastically in the post-writings
- Students are basing their claims in the image but also in the text that accompanied the image
Student Example 1 – One of the Lowest Performing Students with a Disability

Pre Writing
“I think that this is a house and people is building it.”

Post Writing
“They are building a school with mud and oak. They have started to gather. They are now building the roof and all the kids are helping each other and kids are on a ladder too. All the kids have been rounded up.”
Pre Writing

I think this is a guy with a gun and I also see slaves. I think they have to read a lot or if not the guys will hurt them. I see that he also has an assistant. I think maybe they are in the library and the guy maybe could even be a cop or guard in the library. The woman could be a librarian or a customer. Or this could be the man’s house and these are his daughters.

Post Writing

In the image a guy with a gun that is a Taliban soldier came to the village. He found the girls reading a book and the women is pleading with the man but he ignores her…

And I agree with Daviel that this is just a soldier and not the captain of the soldiers at all. I also agree that this is in a school as someone said earlier because the setting looks like a school.
Impact of SPP on Student Learning: Critical Thinking Skills (CTS)

- **Supported Observations (SO)** – “I think they’re in the same room because they have the squares on the back”

- **Speculations (S)** – “And they might seem like that even though they’re different colors, they could be together”

- **Revisions (R)** – “The woman has, well, it looks like it has on a strange outfit. Well, not strange, but uncommon for this day and age.”

- **Questions (Q)** – “What’s that called?”

- **Multiple Possibilities (MP)** – “And then I see, if these are bowls, or some type of circles.”
Data Tools

- **Aesthetic Development Interview (ADI):** Think aloud about a reproduction of a work of art that is not in the VTS curriculum. Measures individuals’ meaning making strategies with art.

- **Material Object Interview (MOI):** Think aloud about a non-art object. Measures content transfer of critical thinking skills.

- **Writing Sample:** Write for 15 minutes about a projected work of art that is not in the VTS curriculum, responding to “What’s going on in this picture?” Measures context transfer, from group discussions to individual writing.
Additional Resources

- Sara Egan email
  - segan@isgm.org
- Michelle Grohe email
  - mgrohe@isgm.org
- Research
  - www.gardnermuseum.org/education/research
- Videos of VTS in action
  - www.gardnermuseum.org/education/school_partnerships
  - www.gardnermuseum.org/multimedia/work-in-progress
  - http://vimeo.com/14368624
    (Thinking Through Art)