

Beyond the Studio: Applying Visual Thinking Strategies to Critical Thinking and
Literacy Instruction

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by

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Abstract

Philip Yenawine first introduced the use of Visual Thinking Strategies for use in art museums. It involves the use of three key questions: 1. What's going on in this picture? 2. What do you see that makes you say that? 3. What more can you find? The basis behind my research was to find out if utilizing this strategy with my class of second-grade students would increase their ability to think critically, make real-world connections, and support their conclusions with evidence and then link those ideas to literacy.

Over the course of the school year, we did six sessions of VTS using artwork and the three questions. During the sessions, I found that the students were able to link much of their thinking to their own lives and experiences. They were able to relate and connect their own thoughts with ideas from their classmates. As the sessions went on, more students participated in the discussions because they knew it was a safe place to think and share ideas.

The transfer of this thinking to reading was partially successful. I asked students "what did you read that made you say that?" On one occasion, students cited from the text to support their answer, but other occasions were not as successful. Still, I think that VTS is a great strategy to help build a solid foundation for critical thinking, support students thoughts and ideas, and engage them in rich discussions.

Introduction

In my six years of teaching, I have seen a shift in the expectations that we are placing on today's students. Children are being asked to do more at a younger age, including being able to read and interpret text before they are cognitively ready to do so. In the past, Kindergarten was the place where children started to develop an understanding of the alphabet and reading. They began to make connections between “squiggly lines” and the fact that those were actually letters. Kindergarten was a place to play and develop their social and cognitive skills and it wasn't until first grade that kids were asked to start making sense of letters and words and putting them together to form sentences.

These days, it is not uncommon for our students to receive weak and improper foundations that are driven primarily by state testing demands. Teachers are so focused on getting them to the reading level at which they will be tested, that we don't take the time to adequately develop some very important foundational skills. Children are now considered behind if they don't come into Kindergarten already reading and well below grade level if, heaven forbid, they have no concept of the alphabet. Now in third grade, students are being asked to not only read and understand a simple text, but to answer questions on a complex text and cite their text evidence to support their answer. And to add to these demands, students are now being asked to do all of this on a computer, so teachers have to factor keyboarding skills into the expectations that are being demanded of our students.

It is well known that a child's learning should be based on building a solid foundation: A solid foundation that includes intensive phonics and phonemic awareness instruction and develops skills that will help them when they begin to read, yet this is something I've found to be lacking in much of the instruction in the early grades. Judith Birsch (2011) says that “it is clear

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that systematic phonics has its greatest effect in the early grades; that is, in kindergarten and first grade for all beginning readers.” However, because of state testing demands, society is pressing our children to develop skills that they are not cognitively ready for; and, as the demands on students continue to increase, they need to be taught to think on their own. Children are often required to explain their thinking, but they are never directly taught how to do that. Students who are prepared for college, careers, and life in the 21st century are responsive communicators who adapt their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language to the communicative requirements of the situation at hand (Franco & Unrath, 2014). So how can teachers help students balance and meet these new and unique demands?

This is where I found my thinking behind using Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) with my second-grade students. Before we can ask students to cite their text evidence, we have to teach them to think and feel safe knowing that if they can support their answer with details from the artwork or text, then there is no way they can be wrong. I suggest that VTS creates a safety net for students and that saying what they can see, supporting their words with evidence, and making real world connections is a way to empower them and reduce anxiety when it comes to test taking. Teaching them how to think and analyze is a foundational comprehension skill that is as equally important as phonics is in literacy.

What is VTS?

Visual Thinking Strategies incorporates the use of artwork and was first introduced by Philip Yenawine (2013), in the book titled Visual Thinking Strategies: Using Art to Deepen Learning Across School Disciplines. VTS is centered around three essential questions to expand students' thinking: (1) What's going on in this picture? (2) What do you see that makes you say that? (3) What more can you find? Yenawine's book discusses how VTS was developed and

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shows how teachers are using art and literature to increase writing, listening, and speaking skills, across a range of subjects. The idea is to create a learner-centered environment where students become involved in rich, absorbing discussions (Yenawine, 2013).

Today's world is far more visual in nature than what was typical even just a decade ago. Children are bombarded with visual images every day. VTS appears to be a way to take that bombardment and turn it into a positive learning experience. Capello and Walker (2016) define VTS as a student-centered, interactive, interpretive method that requires active participation. Learners create knowledge as they build from and on their personal and social backgrounds. They also state that the strategies are useful across disciplines because "VTS does not teach what to think, but rather supports the discoveries students make when they are given opportunities to think in various ways" (2016). They concluded that visual-based lessons afforded students support for vocabulary development and accountable talk while creating a safe educational setting ripe for risk taking and that their findings really benefited English learners. Why not take something that has already become a huge part of society (screen time and visuals) and turn it into something to strengthen our student's learning experiences?

The basis behind my research is the idea of teaching students to think critically and apply that knowledge to all areas of the curriculum, but especially to literacy. Hailey, Miller, and Yenawine (2015) found that as students develop visual literacy, they learn how knowledge is created, their role in creating it, the time it takes to acquire it, the role of biases in shaping it, and the sense that it is rarely fixed but instead constantly evolving. They also state that while most schooling prepares students to expect problems to be resolved fully and speedily, the process of becoming visually literate fosters the disposition to accept ambiguity as fundamental and the capacity to address it as a basic element of inquiry – one that requires time, a commitment to

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questioning any material confronted, and the awareness that understanding is enriched by the perspectives of others. VTS is teaching students skills that will undoubtedly help form them into highly functioning and critically thinking adults and creates life-long, usable skills.

VTS In My Classroom

I began using Visual Thinking Strategies with my class of twenty-five second graders on September 7, 2018. Of those twenty-five students, fourteen were boys and eleven were girls. Seven of those students had a DIBELS overall composite score of intensive (red), three were strategic (yellow), six were on grade level (green), and nine were above grade level (blue). Our first session of VTS lasted for 37 ½ minutes, but easily could have gone on longer. The students were engaged and excited to participate in the discussion about the artwork. At first they were a bit reserved and cautious with their answers, but then as they realized that there was no right or wrong answer, they became more confident and excited to share their ideas. The students were able to back up every idea they had about the artwork with thoughts and ideas from things they had seen or experienced in their own lives.

The first image we used (Figure 1) centered around a woman lying in bed, seemingly fallen ill. There is another woman standing over her bed and a young boy at the foot of the bed. There are many items around the room, including religious symbols and medicinal items. Many of the children were able to make the connection that the woman in bed was ill and they supported it with the medicine bottles on the table. A few of them even made the connection that the bottles looked like something their mom gave them when they weren't feeling well. There is an item on the floor in the picture that the students could never agree on what it was. Some said that it had to do with sewing or music, while others said that it was "something their mom put in their room when they were sick, that helped put water in the air." Even though the students

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couldn't name the particular item, they were able to make *real world connections*. They also had an interesting discussion about a pair of shoes on the near side of the bed. There were several students that thought they were actually the feet of the woman on the far side of the bed. I found it interesting to see that they really do not have much concept of depth perception. Overall, they did an amazing job of making real world connections between their lives and their experiences and the painting that they were looking at.

We did three more VTS sessions on a bi-weekly basis up to October; and did our 5th session of VTS on December 14, 2018, followed by a 6th and final session on February 14. On two occasions, I had two classes of second-grade students in the room, for a total of 56 students engaging in the discussion. Even with 56 students in the room, the discussions went very well. Students listened to their classmates and would often refer back to what someone else said and either disagree with them or link their own thought to that of their classmate. They were respectful of others thoughts and ideas.

Our second session (Image 2) focused on a family sitting on the front porch and eating watermelon, during what appears to be a warm summer evening. There is a boy sitting on the front stairs with a baseball bat, glove, and ball sitting on the ground next to him and much of the conversation centered around him. Several students commented that the family must have just come from his baseball game. They thought that perhaps he had won and so the family was celebrating together by eating watermelon on the porch. They also talked about how they knew it was a warm summer evening because of the way the people were dressed, the flowers that were in bloom, and the moon and stars in the sky. There was also a lot of conversation about the grandmother sitting in the porch swing with her shoes on the ground beneath her. The students talked about how the little girl was bringing the grandmother watermelon and discussed the fact

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that perhaps she was older and tired and that's why she didn't get up to get her own piece of watermelon. The students seemed to like this painting and could relate a lot of what they saw to experiences from their own lives and students were clearly *supporting what they saw with evidence*.

The third image (Image 3) we used turned out to be a bit harder for the students than I thought it would be. Students struggled with the image because they were unable to make real world connections. The image portrays slaves working in the tobacco fields in the south. For me, that seemed to be easy to see because of my knowledge of history, but through the eyes of a second grader, I now see how it is a harder image for them to relate to. The students were able to talk about the dog, the horse, and the people in the image because they were familiar characters, but students were never really able to figure out the context of what the people were doing. Students were able to recognize objects and point them out in the image, yet their answers were very simplistic and shallow, like "I see a fence and a gate and something on the roof." Students were unable to make the real world connections because the content was inaccessible to them.

During our fourth session (Image 4), we looked at an image that is in contrast to the student's perception of a diner. The image takes place in a 1950s diner and is centered around a police officer and a young boy sitting on stools. Many students were able to realize that this painting was not set in recent times. They pointed to the clothes the boy was wearing, the bundle on the ground, the clothes of the worker, and the old-time radio on the shelf to support that idea. Students also commented that they thought the little boy had run away and that the police officer found him and brought him to the diner to have pie. They were also able to give many supporting details about why the setting was a diner, including the pie rack, the chalkboard menu, and the man behind the counter that was clearly a worker. The students related what they

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saw to scenes they had seen on television and in the movies, and contrasted it to the types of restaurants that they go to today.

Our fifth session (Image 5) focused on a winter scene with children building a snowman, a horse drawn sleigh, and a couple of houses and a church. The children were able to make several connections to the children playing in the snow and related it to their own experiences of playing in the snow with their friends. They presented many different ideas about the sleigh and the people in it and where they were going. They also had a very good debate about whether the house was on fire or there was just a fire inside the house where someone was making dinner for the family. One student connected the dinner idea to the sleigh, stating that the people in the sleigh were coming over for dinner and the children in the front yard were welcoming them. During this session, I noticed that the children disagreed with each other more often, but did it in a very kind and safe way. They stated what they disagreed with and why, without trying to hurt anyone's feelings or being argumentative and no one got defensive about any of it. At this point, I began to realize that students were becoming more empowered to disagree.

Our last session (Image 6) featured a brightly colored painting and several people dancing on what appears to be a boat near a city. The children were able to identify the water and trees on the shoreline. They commented on the shapes of the bodies and the way the dresses appeared to be flowing to support their conclusion that the people in the painting were dancing and having a party. They identified a person that appeared to be a DJ playing music and connected it to things they had seen. They questioned whether or not they were actually on a boat, or if, simply, they were just on the land on the other side of the water. They seemed to like this painting because of the bright colors and the action that was going on. They connected it to their real world experiences of having fun at a party.

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During each of the six sessions, the majority of the children were engaged in our discussions and participated in the conversations. I noticed that different, and more, children started to participate during each session. I think that the use of the VTS questions and strategies created an environment where the students felt safe. They knew that whatever answer they gave, they wouldn't be told that they were right or wrong. I believe that it gave them more confidence in themselves and their own thinking. Yenawine stated that "it's hard to teach many facts and ideas in ways that stick and are remembered and internalized, especially when the audience has little preparation and no choice about what it's supposed to learn, and the desired learning is at the far reaches of what is possible developmentally" (Yenawine, 2013). That's what makes VTS so great: the students have voice in their learning. They get to create the story behind the painting.

VTS and Literacy

The question behind my research is, can the students transfer their VTS skills to text? I wanted to bring the VTS skills into literacy. If we listened to a story, I would need to ask, "What did you hear that made you say that?" and for reading, I would need to ask, "What did you read that made you say that?" I was under the impression that it would be an easy transition for the students to turn the same type of thinking they used with the artwork, to text. Yenawine found that "students developed the habit of supplying evidence during image discussions, and the skill carried over to test questions that required them to supply evidence" (Yenawine, 2013). In my second grade classroom, this transference proved that it wasn't quite as simple as Yenawine implied.

In January, during a classroom discussion about our text for the week, I asked the class about a character's feelings from the story we had just read. One child raised his hand and told

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me that the character felt happy. I followed up his response with the question “what did you read that made you say that?” I was overly impressed and excited when the student told me “because the story said,” and then he proceeded to read straight from the text the part that talked about how the character felt and why. This was one shining moment where I saw the connection and it actually worked!

Following our VTS session on February 14, I projected a reading passage about Valentine’s Day and had the class read it aloud with me. I then followed that up with simple questions about the text and when the students answered, I asked the follow up question of “what did you read that made you say that?” This time, the results were not what I was hoping for and it took more questioning on my part to make the students go back to the text to support their answer. One very bright student just told me “the text said it,” but didn’t attempt to actually find and cite it from the text.

“As more curricula asks kids not simply to arrive at the right answer but to show how they did it, the habit of talking things through, coming to understand them by way of explaining themselves, comes in handy. Whenever there is more than one way to express a problem, or more than one way to solve it, the multilayered thinking nurtured by VTS helps students noodle through the possibilities. This ability becomes more and more important in the era of the Common Core standards” (Yenawine, 2013). My goal was to support my students and give them one more tool in their toolbox by teaching them **how** to think and building up that foundational skill.

Moving Beyond Literacy

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During a staff meeting in January, we had a presentation from the math facilitator for District 11. He came to talk with us about the idea of using Math Talk in our classroom. While presenting to us on this topic, it occurred to me that this idea is closely linked to VTS ideas and strategies. The concept is to put a math problem on the board and give students time to think. When they have one way to solve the problem, they put a thumbs up. If they come up with another way, then they put up more fingers. Then the teacher just asks students to share their ideas of how they solved it, while writing their ideas on the board. The teacher only asks for clarification on student thinking to ensure that they are writing down the students' thinking clearly. The teacher does not elaborate or use phrases like "right" or "good job." To me, this followed the ideas behind VTS and I was excited to try it in my classroom. I was also taken back to Yenawine's chapter on applying VTS to other subjects and how he said that with math, the intention is "for students to be clear that they could figure out what the problem was asking and come up with a way - ideally, more than one - of solving it" (Yenawine, 2013).

The first time I tried using Math Talk with my class, it was not very successful. We were just beginning to learn about double-digit subtraction and the teacher's manual had me do a two-digit subtraction problem for the Math Talk. The students had a hard time clearly explaining their thinking to me, which made it hard for me to write and show it on the board. I suspect that if I had started with a more simplistic problem to get the students used to the ideas behind using Math Talk, our experience would have been far more successful. I also think that Math Talk should be used to reinforce a skill and not to assist in teaching a new and unfamiliar skill.

I attempted another Math Talk session at the beginning of March. This time, I used the equation $35+27$. The students had an easier time with this problem because they were generally more comfortable doing addition. They were able to come up with five different methods to

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solve this problem and they were able to very clearly explain how they solved it. They offered up answers that included using drawings as well. Overall, it was a much more successful Math Talk time and I think that the students were more confident as well.

Summary

Based on my experiences, I think there is much good behind the idea of using Visual Thinking Strategies in the classroom, even with the youngest of students because “even though they may not all be able to read a book, they all are quite capable of ‘reading’ a work of art” (Housen, 2002). Over a five-year study, Housen noted that VTS enhanced the growth of critical thinking skills and enabled its transfer to other contexts and content (Housen, 2002). Housen also found that when these processes were started with younger students and continued for a longer period of time, the results of skill development and transfer strongly increased. I propose that if VTS were instituted school wide and started in Kindergarten, we would see a significant change in how our students think, process, and cite their text evidence when the time comes.

Next year, I will be teaching first grade and I will be even more responsible for helping to build solid foundations for our young students. I intend to continue using VTS and introduce it at the beginning of the year. I know that as much work as I will be putting into teaching my students phonics and phonemic awareness, I will also need to be providing them with a foundation of how to think and process, and support their conclusions with evidence. A strong foundation centered around phonics and critical thinking skills is one of the greatest gifts that we can give our students.

Yenawine concluded that “in a significant way, VTS gives students confidence and clarity that, with the help of peers, they can comprehend what they encounter around them, learn from it, and move on from a grounded position. Over time, students learn how to readdress

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mistakes and blind alleys, to scrutinize a piece of information or an idea, rethink it, and discard or revise it as needed. They develop curiosity and want to know more. It's authentic life experience; it mirrors what experts do. VTS gives young people permission to wonder, and more, the skills they need to begin addressing the issues that confront our global society" (Yenawine, 2013).

I don't know with complete certainty whether or not my second grade students will be able to cite text evidence when asked to do so, as a result of my use of VTS with them. What I do know is that VTS engages students and encourages rich discussions. It creates an environment that allows students to feel safe to wonder, share their ideas, and step outside of their boxes. It allows them to make real world connections and engage in friendly debates with their classmates. I know that in my class, it expanded their vocabulary, as well as expanded their thinking about many different things. It helped to create a culture in my classroom where kids weren't afraid to share or to disagree with one another. And I know that it laid a foundation for my students that may help them in the future, when they get asked to cite their text evidence. Perhaps when they see that question, maybe they will go back to that one discussion or that one piece of artwork that we talked about and they will remember that if they can support their answer with details, then there is no way that they can be wrong.

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Figure 1



<https://deartsfall2015.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/1-garza-la-curandera-1.jpg?w=1200>

Figure 2



<http://carmenlomasgarza.com/wp-content/uploads/galleries/post-142/full/wc-sandia.jpg>

Figure 3



https://sites.nasher.duke.edu/wordsandpictures/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2013/08/2010_3_1_v2_2000-e1379003974905.jpg

Figure 4



<https://uploads2.wikiart.org/images/norman-rockwell/the-runaway-1958.jpg>

Figure 5



http://ayay.co.uk/backgrounds/christmas/winter_scenes/winter-fun.jpg

Figure 6



<http://www.moirae Elliott.com/paintings/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/detail4.jpg>