

Visual Thinking Strategies for Public Conversations

The Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) discussion protocol has several applications. In museums, it provides a way to help less-experienced viewers of any age grow in both confidence and the ability to derive meaning from art. VTS fosters careful looking and employs facilitated group discussion in the galleries. In school classrooms, VTS is a sequenced curriculum of art images that includes at least one museum field trip. Classroom teachers learn to skillfully facilitate their students' discussions. VTS is being used with medical students, social workers, and other groups that seek to develop observation and communication skills. Additionally, VTS can be used to open conversation among diverse groups by providing a shared starting point – a carefully selected art image – and providing a safe, non-judgmental discussion space. There is a well-developed training program for those who want to become VTS facilitators.

VTS is the creation of Harvard-trained psychologist Abigail Housen and museum educator Philip Yenawine. Housen spent over twenty-five years studying the ways people develop from novice to expert viewers. Her research provided museums with valuable insights into the needs of their most typical visitors: non-expert art viewers. Yenawine's concern about the marginalization of art in our society led him to design new strategies to introduce art in schools.

“What’s going on in this picture?” is the opening question in VTS. When viewers make interpretive comments, the facilitator paraphrases, then asks, “What do you see that makes you say that (for example, that the man might be angry)?” This question encourages opinions that are grounded in visual evidence, visible to all. All comments are paraphrased by the facilitator, allowing everyone to hear, understand, and confirm their meaning. The facilitator draws the group’s attention to related ideas: “So we have another possibility to consider. You suggest this figure may be sad, rather than angry.” As participants explain their observations and insights, they listen to each other, may possibly change their minds, and develop ideas that go beyond their original ones.

Art is by definition multi-layered and often ambiguous in meaning. There are many ‘right’ answers – in fact, the more of these that the group shares, the richer their understanding of the artwork. This kind of meaning-making activity with visual art exercises a viewer’s intellect and emotions and draws on personal experience; it is a compelling, whole-person activity. The thinking processes encouraged in VTS are authentic; they are the same ones that experts use when faced with complex, unfamiliar material, whether in the arts or in some other field

Research indicates that participation in VTS discussions over time helps participants develop important skills for dealing with new and complex information in many subject areas. They practice critical thinking and logical argumentation, and exercise language skills in the course of the VTS discussions. They internalize valuable strategies for learning that are both modeled and encouraged by the facilitator. The application of this mode of learning to interactions in other civic spheres has great potential.



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For more information, visit the website of Visual Understanding in Education at: www.vtshome.org

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