

What do you see that makes you say that?

Visual thinking in Montessori environments



Keith Whitescarver and **Jacqueline Cossentino** introduce Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), the fascinating approach of using art to develop children's thinking skills

At about 1:15 in the afternoon, just following lunch and after the younger children have either left for the day or settled in for naps, Ms Winter gathers the ten 4.5 to 5 year-old children to the rug. As the children find comfortable places, she fastens a large, laminated poster to an easel. The image is by Paul Gauguin, though she does not tell the students this. Instead she says, in a quiet voice, "Let's all take a minute to look quietly at this picture." For about 50 seconds there is silence. Eleven pairs of eyes are fixed on the poster.

Ms Winter then opens the lesson with a question that is by now familiar to the children: "What do you see in this picture?" Immediately hands fly up and Ms Winter calls on the first child. "I see a man standing in a garden thinking about his pigs," offers a five-year-old named Sienna. Each time Sienna identifies a detail in the image – the central figure, the green field, the animals – Ms Winter points to it. "So," Ms Winter paraphrases, "you see a figure [pointing], which you think might be a man, and it looks to you like the figure might be standing in a field [pointing] attending to pigs [pointing]."

After a brief pause to check to see if she's captured Sienna's idea, Ms Winter asks, "what do you see that makes you



The Swineherd, Brittany (1888) by Paul Gauguin

say that person is thinking?" Sienna responds, "Well, his hand is on his chin, and sometimes when my dad is thinking, that's what he looks like." "OK," Ms Winter says in response, this time to the whole group, "the figure's pose is reminding Sienna of a similar gesture her father makes when he's thinking. OK, what more can we find?"

Again, hands fly up and so follows the same progression of (1) description, followed by (2) paraphrasing, (3) a request for evidence, and then (4) a prompt to look further. That progression is repeated several times during the twenty minute discussion. Every child participates, each eager to share their interpretations, to hear what their peers have to say, and, perhaps most important, to keep looking for more.

Thinking through art

The children's house described here is in its eighth month of using Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) to enhance the prepared environment. Once a week, Ms Winter opens her afternoon work period with a similar lesson,

Middle school students at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston

which is always a discussion of a work of art, always focused on close observation of the art, and always anchored by three deceptively simple questions: What's going on this picture? What do you see that makes you say that, and what more can we find?

VTS is both a method and a curriculum built around discussions of works of art. It is used in more than two hundred elementary and secondary classrooms in the US, Europe, and Asia, and its purpose is not to teach about art, but rather to assist children in developing thinking skills through discussion of art.

The key elements of the program – group discussion, open-ended questioning, consistent requests for visual evidence to support interpretation, and neutral responses to student comments – come easily to Ms Winter. In fact, her Montessori training, with its emphasis on precise, calm speech and meticulous attention to the work of the child make VTS an unusually good fit for Montessori environments.

Most of Ms Winter's afternoon students are either decoding or reading, while others are still mastering sounds. Weekly VTS lessons provide opportunities for all students, regardless of their reading level, to practice rigorous thinking skills like inference and speculation. At the same time, Ms Winter uses discussions as opportunities to introduce new vocabulary through intentional word substitution in her paraphrasing ("attending to" for "thinking about" pigs, for instance).

Those oral skills, bolstered by detailed observation, feed literacy development

in the spontaneous, self-directed manner that characterizes authentic “explosions” into reading. Language explosions, as Dr. Montessori describes them, are fueled, in part, by the realization that words, spoken and written, open doors of discovery and that writing and reading enable communication. The child, according to Montessori, is intrinsically motivated to know and be known, and language is the primary means of interacting with knowledge of all sorts.

Ms Winter capitalizes on the natural desire to think and talk about images by supporting the transfer of oral discourse to written expression. Following each discussion, she places the posters in frames and hangs them on the wall, at eye level to the children, so they can continue their discussions and, if they choose, to write about the picture.

Similarly, she maintains a rotating selection of postcards in her language area. Students may choose one that interests them and, using the lined paper and pencils Ms Winter keeps nearby, write their answers to the familiar question: What’s going on in this picture? Students who are not yet writing may dictate their responses to either an older student or an adult, who will then, using a highlighter, transcribe the students’ language onto paper, which the student may then trace.

The group discussion element of VTS offers structured opportunities to practice grace and courtesy through respectful debate, a skill particularly relevant to older children. Students are encouraged to acknowledge others’ comments and to back up agreement or disagreement with visual evidence from the picture and to listen carefully as each student contributes to the collective construction of meaning.

Following the Viewer

Headquartered in New York City, VTS is the brainchild of two US educators, a

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cognitive psychologist and a museum educator, whose shared experience told them that appreciating art has much more to do with learning how to look at it than listening to others explain it.

Philip Yenawine, the art educator, commissioned Abigail Housen, the psychologist, to evaluate his education programs at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Yenawine wanted to know what, if anything, visitors were learning when they visited the museum.

Housen, similarly, wanted to know how people make sense of art. The results of those initial studies were astounding.

The vast majority of museum goers, Housen concluded, take almost nothing away from their encounters with art. Most don’t even remember what they saw during a visit to a gallery or a museum. How to explain such dramatic failure? More important, what is the remedy? The answer, it turns out, is strikingly similar to Maria Montessori’s assessment of the schools of 1907.

Teaching most often misses the mark when it aims to follow content rather than the child. As Dr. Montessori observed more than a century ago, children show us what they need. Our task as educators (teachers as well as parents) is to observe carefully, provide support in the form of appropriate environments in which to explore, experiment, and refine ever-developing skills and understandings.

Like Montessori practice, VTS Programs are carefully structured to meet the developmental needs and interests of students. At their core, every VTS Program is comprised of a set of carefully selected and sequenced visual images and lesson plans. The images and lessons were years in development

and have been extensively evaluated. The Gauguin image used by Ms Winter, for instance, is part of a sequence of ten lessons specifically designed for five year-old children.

A rigorous, and engaging, three-year professional development series is connected with whole school implementation for districts or individual schools seeking to participate in VTS. The professional development provides teachers with the skills needed to both ask appropriate questions of students and to respond to student comments in a fashion that nurtures participation and facilitates students’ thinking.

Montessori classrooms are among the US classrooms using VTS. Interest is growing among Montessorians because of the compatibility of the two approaches. A teacher-training workshop for Montessori teachers was held on February 4, 2011, at the American Folk Art Museum in New York. A webinar providing an overview of VTS is currently being developed and will be broadcast later this year to Montessori teachers. ■

To learn more about Visual Thinking Strategies visit their web site:
<http://www.vtshome.org/>

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Margie Gibbons, a teacher at Lexington Montessori School, facilitating a VTS discussion

