Integrating Visual Thinking Strategies into Art Education: A Curriculum for the Middle School Level

Shelley K. Gibbs

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INTEGRATING VISUAL THINKING STRATEGIES INTO ART EDUCATION
A CURRICULUM FOR THE MIDDLE SCHOOL LEVEL

by

Shelley K. Gibbs

A thesis submitted to the Graduate College in
partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
Art Education
Western Michigan University
April 2019

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to first thank my husband and two sons, my mom, and my stepdad for their continued support during my journey of this program. It has been a very long road with many hours spent focused on my thesis and not always on things at home. I also would like to thank my very dear friends who have continued to be my full-time cheerleaders. Many times, I’ve wanted to give up, they refused to let me get so close to a dream and quit. Sitting for hours, days, and weeks at a computer when you feel life is passing by you can be difficult when you desire to be out and “doing” something, but they realized this degree was something more significant.

I would also like to thank Dr. Christina Chin for her encouragement as I struggled to write this paper. Not being a traditional on-campus student and having a full personal life with ups and downs was something she seemed to understand. She cheered me through and made me believe I could indeed not only get this thesis done but do it well and have a great accomplishment under my belt when it was complete.

I cannot conclude my acknowledgments without thanking Dr. William Charland as well. He was my first professor at Western Michigan University and continued to instruct me through most of my courses. Professor Charland also became my chair toward the end of my thesis. He was a great inspiration and educator. I learned so much under his guidance, not only about art education but myself as a teacher and artist as well.

Shelley K. Gibbs
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Shelley K. Gibbs, M.A.

Western Michigan University, 2019

The purpose of this thesis is to expand and demonstrate how the integration of Visual Thinking Strategies into a middle school classroom curriculum could strengthen and benefit students’ critical thinking and art literacy. There is a growing and overwhelming use of technology and images in our world, to which students are exposed daily. By integrating a visual literacy strategy in a visual art setting, students may learn to slow down and think more critically about what they see and understand, not only in art but cross-curriculum.
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Literature Review

The Philosophy of Visual Thinking Strategies

I first discovered Visual Thinking Strategies by accident. It was entirely an unintentional, yet serendipitous finding. Within three years after my teaching career began, I enrolled at Western Michigan University to start my master’s degree. I am not sure when I first read or saw the term “Visual Thinking Strategies,” but I knew once I learned about it, I started applying it in my everyday life as I explored and immersed myself into my learning. I was digging through education articles and reading about some new developments in art education and found the Visual Thinking Strategies webpage. Instantaneously, as I read and applied the technique to my own life, I was eager to learn more. Always a supporter and lover of teaching more art history, I needed a proven, concrete way to integrate visual art and critical thinking together. It was also important to me to find tools that applied to my culture of students in order to scaffold and bring art and other subject learning to life for them. I wanted to learn more about this technique or “tool,” research this concept of Visual Thinking Strategies, and how to integrate it into my classroom.

When the administration at the public school at which I taught asked me what my plan was to incorporate writing into art, I already had begun, unknown to me, with some modest ideas related to VTS. In my high school classroom, I used a paragraph length artist statement as part of the project rubric and an assessment grade at the end of each lesson. I would also attempt once a week to show artwork and have the students write a paragraph concerning what they thought the artwork was trying to convey to them. Looking back at those first years, I was so excited about talking about art with my students, the process of art and the ideas seemed as though it was
somewhat unstructured. Nevertheless, my administration was thrilled because I had created integrated art assignments that could be measured and assessed. I was the first fine arts educator to incorporate writing and the visual art discussion into class in that district. The students appeared to love it, as demonstrated by their conversation and overhearing them talk about the art for days afterward. They seemed to have retained a great deal of the art and knowledge, but unfortunately, I was doing most of the talking. Visual Thinking Strategies is the opposite of the educator talking for days and is quite straightforward, yet complex in its application. It is a brilliant way for students to use critical thinking and for the students to lead the learning, which promotes autonomy and self-efficacy.

In a VTS session, the questions are presented by the teacher and must be worded correctly, as outlined by the creators, Abigail Housen, a cognitive psychologist and Philip Yenawine, a veteran museum educator (Landorf, 2006). Every word has a direct purpose and if changed or misworded, could affect the way students potentially answer or view the art itself. There is no correction of the students from the educator; there are no right or wrong answers, but instead, a chance for students to explore and create more in-depth critical thinking. The result is more visually literate students with more open and straightforward discussions. Visual Thinking Strategies is not limited to visual art education classes and can be used across the curriculum, from algebra to science, with slight modifications to the way questions are read.

Visual Thinking Strategies can be used in every subject, and at every age level. For example, while art is a visual and seems to be the most logical way VTS could be applied in a visual learning situation, poetry, introducing mathematical equations or even vocabulary can be included in ways VTS is accessible to all subjects (Yenawine, 2014, p. 73).

In reviewing the variety of ways VTS is utilized, educators could have their students look at a complicated math problem, a story problem, or graph to use the same questions VTS
uses in the art room. Offering an algebraic equation, the math teacher may ask; “What do you see looking at this problem? What makes you say that? What more could the students find? The idea is to get the students to slow down their thinking, no matter what the subject or visual presented, and use independent thinking. Yenawine states in his book about Visual Thinking Strategies and applying it cross curriculum as “trying to engage all student in the active processes required to understand something, particularly to take on unfamiliar material and to dig into it with depth and authentic insight.” (Yenawine, 2014, p. 74).

Because VTS is a collective student-led process prompted by a series of simple questions, the students come up with the answers, and with a variety of solutions, they learn there is more than one way to find a solution. Visual Thinking Strategies are consistent, and the questions never change, nor does the overall structure of the student-led discussion change. With practice and knowledge by the educator, VTS can be integrated into any classroom.

It is no longer just the beliefs of art educators or an underground secret that the visual arts are important at every level of development from kindergarten through secondary education. The days of defending art education are becoming slightly less as the visual arts become recognized as a necessary part of the school curriculum. Many schools have removed art education from the curriculum, only to bring it back after a short absence. Art education has come and gone with such movements as the industrial age and the space age. Changes in industry and scientific significance have always pushed art to the back of the line behind math, reading, and science. I believe that art will come into its own again, not behind the core subjects, but alongside them in importance and relevance of education.

The question I often hear as an art educator is how do we integrate and use art across the curriculum and into the core subjects while preserving the importance and foundations of art education? I hear inquiries from the administration and fellow teachers during professional
development that are thrown into a group with me. They realize what I teach is important, but that projects and artist statements are not enough to prove the importance of art education. Needed are substantial ways to show critical and deeper thinking in action. One of the ways that I, as an art educator, can promote art across the curriculum and outside of my classroom is by using and sharing my knowledge of Visual Thinking Strategies.

Visual Thinking Strategies and the instructional method for implementing them was developed over twenty years ago by former MOMA education director Philip Yenawine and cognitive psychologist Abigail Housen and has been used by museums and art educators everywhere to teach how to “read” and understand artwork. The philosophies behind Visual Thinking Strategies are overwhelmingly beneficial, yet inexplicably simple to utilize in a classroom, at any grade level, and in any class. Yenawine and Housen realized something when studying Visual Thinking Strategies. When engaged with them, there were measurable changes in the way students viewed art. Abigail Housen started the research with the ideas of building viewing skills and see if a measurable change in the way students think about art. Within her studies of students, something bigger was recognized, the expansive power of the mind and eye connection and discussing art as a new way to start the cognitive process (Yenawine, 2014, p. 18).

In a world where visuals are ever present with technology and the internet, seeing and genuinely understanding an image is a critical ability that can and must be taught. In today’s visual culture, the need for more visual intelligence and literacy is greater than ever. Whether it is a painting, diagram, math equation, or graphic element, VTS can be used to improve critical thinking skills and get the viewer to reflect deeper on what it is they are viewing.

Visual Thinking Strategies use three fundamental open-ended questions to lead viewers to deeper reflection and meaning. The questions are simple, yet engaging, and allow the
discussion and ideas to be directed by the learners, not the educator. The three questions are: “What do you see going on in this picture?” “What do you see that makes you say that?” and lastly “What more can we find?” Using the three simple questions written by the VTS developers, learners are taught to study the artwork before them with a more critical eye, think more openly, deeper, create unique ideas, and find underlying principles and information (Yenawine, 2014, p. 25).

A challenging issue that learners may face in the classroom is our visually overloaded culture. Hundreds, if not thousands of images flash across our tablets, computers, phones, television screens, and other handheld devices. Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, and other social media apps leave us with as many images as we can flip through within seconds of opening them. With so much visual information and imagery forced upon young and developing minds, I believe that Visual Thinking Strategies is an educational method that can teach students how to slow down their thought process and take a closer look. Not only will this help young developing brains slow down to encode information and store it long term, but it can also help students to understand how to appreciate the moment versus racing on to the next one too quickly. VTS can be used to teach students deeper thinking and to theoretically process an image more thoroughly, thereby allowing them to take away deeper meaning and understanding.

I believe that by using Visual Thinking Strategies in the classroom as a teaching tool, educators can help end the problem of the cursory glance that most students tend to give a new work of art and perhaps even other assignments in a variety of courses. By getting viewers to slow down and critically think about the image and what is happening, students will have a deeper understanding of art. They will understand why it is painted, the significance and importance of art, and open the door for more in-depth discussions and imagination.
Students are exposed to visual stimulation of images of every kind, all day long. I believe that educators and the strategies that are at the core of VTS can teach students to process an image deeper to grasp the meaning behind it at a more intellectual level. I want them to stop, look at the image or artwork, and create a narrative about the artwork. Children are natural storytellers, and Visual Thinking Strategies is the perfect platform to encourage something they already logically do. I think that I can get students to stop long enough, to look beyond the easy, to read ideas in artwork and begin to consider the history and intent of the artist. I want students to formulate views and opinions based on the work before them.

Visual Thinking Strategies: A Simple Concept

We are all too busy, and that is putting it simply. We all have so much to do, so much going on and so much to see daily. We are overwrought with visual stimuli, available in anyone’s hands with advanced technology, at every age level. Many are missing connections with each other and the joy of discovery and imagination. At the core of the future of education, the fine arts, including music, drama, and visual arts, have been pushed to the back of educational importance, off and on, since the space race of the late 1960’s. We are long overdue for a theory, a strategy, or an idea to get people to slow down. See. Think. Process. Understand. Imagine. Reason and Connect.

I believe the solution to this lack of connecting and understanding of what we see and what we understand lies in the world of art. Art is ambiguous; it opens deep conversations and brings forth opinions. It transcends culture, time and language. Philip Yenawine, who is one of the co-founders of Visual Thinking Strategies, and the author of the book "Visual Thinking Strategies: Using Art to Deepen Learning Across School Disciplines,” (2014) was an education director at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. He had been challenged by the board
of trustees to ensure that the museum's visitors were viewing the artwork and getting all they could get out of their museum visits. Were visitors simply drifting through, possibly feeling overwhelmed by the visual information provided, much like my students today, or were they making deeper connections to the artwork?

When Yenawine could not provide all the proof and answers needed to the museum’s board of directors, he enlisted the help of Abigail Housen. Housen is a cognitive psychologist who focuses on how people behave and think, specifically when they are viewing art-work. Abigail Housen discovered as she researched and documented data after interviewing visitors, was that after the museum-goers had attended gallery talks or classes, the information presented was not retained, not even for a short time immediately after the discussion or class ended.

Much like any educator, Yenawine was disappointed that the museum was not providing an impact to its visitors. Much like him, I have repeatedly found myself feeling that I have personally failed as a teacher when I fail to teach a lesson or when I do not connect with a student or class. During my decade of teaching, when a student has not been able to grasp a key concept or a style of art in the years that I have taught art, I have desperately tried to link the work to them personally and on an intimate level. I have used contemporary examples or pop culture that students could relate to, using what they know, understand and what their interests are. My attempts to connect them to art in this manner never really worked or made a connection for them, and ultimately, I honestly did not teach the students to really see and connect with the artwork that was being presented.

It has taken me years to realize that I view art much differently than most of the general population. I view art as incredibly personal. It represents our innermost desires, fears and, joy. In contrast, I believe that many others see it merely as pretty pictures and something beyond their comprehension. This is the perspective that I believe my middle schoolers initially bring to an
artwork. While my middle school students from a small rural school were coming from an entirely different thought pattern than I, I once had been where they were. I was then young and unaware of the more profound meanings, emotions, culture, and critical thinking behind the art. So, how can I get them to see what I do in art?

Abigail Housen worked for over fifteen years observing and interviewing viewers to understand how and what they thought while viewing art. When she conversed with the museum visitors, she used an uncomplicated method of data research. She simply let the viewers talk about the art until they had nothing more to say. While they communicated their thoughts, Housen recorded the comments, then sorted, and analyzed by patterns.

Housen and Yenawine were not surprised to find that the ability to remember information or analytical skills used by viewers were only part of what people were sharing when they viewed an artwork. Their connections were personal; they had stories that came from the art. It was leading to deep and more meaningful experience with the art than just being told the history or the story of the piece. Viewers that are what Housen refers to as “beginning viewers,” have a very satisfying experience viewing artwork, even if they do not know the style of a genre of art or who created the piece. “Viewers” may only spend a few seconds observing an artwork whether in a museum or as a visual in a classroom. They may look with just a hasty glance, a quick look, and then they are moving on to the next piece of artwork in a museum. At the rate that viewers walk, they may seldom take time to consider the piece of artwork on display. The key was to get viewers to slow down, think and do more then take a brief glance at the art. This goal of slowing down, coupled with a deeper understanding, is what I desire for my future students. It is what is leading me to Visual Thinking Strategies as a potential instructional tool and a way to teach deeper, reflections for the students.
How VTS is Facilitated in the Classroom

Wording the Questions and Dialogue of Discussion

During the viewing of artwork, there are at least three types of dialogues that happen internally. However, it is not a singular, one track dialogue; it is an interlacing together of the three categories. They do not occur in any specific order but can arise simultaneously, alternately and at a variety of times during and after looking artwork (McKay & Monteverde, 2003, p. 42).

The first internal dialogue is that which is sparked by the external or verbal dialogue going on around a viewer. This dialogue may happen as viewers look at an artwork or a gallery together. They will actively share and respond to the questions they have internally and respond to what others around them are saying. Anyone who has spent time in a museum, quietly pondering an artwork themselves, has probably heard some of this verbal thought dialogue occur.

The second type of dialogue is the internal or thought dialogue that happens to the viewers as they process the image. It may continue long after the viewer has left the museum or the presence of the artwork. It may be enhanced or expanded by using a journal or sketchbook. The long thought process gives the viewer time to broaden those quick fleeting impressions or thoughts about an artwork. This time and space give the brain time to process the image and have a deeper understanding. I always make notes and sketches in the art museums, even the ones I regularly visit, for a way to continue the internal dialogue and thought process long after the artwork is no longer physically available. This process is likened to photography to share, journal, and process learning long after leaving the “moment.” I will often find the image in a book or on the internet and reprocess what I saw and think. Makay and Monteverde (2003) state that by noting these thoughts and questions, even if it is only in our mind, a more vibrant and more personal understanding and interpretation begins to happen. They explain that viewers may
have simple questions that start with an inner dialogue about the artwork. They may think and have simple questions about the work like Why would someone create this? Or they may ask What is going on in this work? These questions often go unanswered and remain in the viewers’ minds long after the artwork is no longer physically present. In a museum or classroom setting, these are the types of questions that can be answered with Visual Thinking Strategies to help the viewer dive deeper into meanings and relationships within and with the art (Makay & Monteverde, 2003, p. 42).

While the viewer processes what they have just experienced or seen, the third type of internal dialogue takes place. This discussion occurs between the viewer and the artwork itself. The artwork makes one reflect on their relationship to the world around them. This relationship can be especially true if the viewer lets the artwork lead. As people, we may begin to see inconsistencies and imperfections in the artwork or visual element, which then cause the viewer to reconsider their belief about what is art, what the artwork itself is, and what the viewer believes it should be (Makay & Monteverde, 2003, p. 42).

According to Makay and Monteverde (2003), these three dialogues do not necessarily occur independently, but “emerge and happen simultaneously, alternately and at various isolated points.” Within this dialogue, a multidimensional experience by the viewer occurs, and by implementing Visual Thinking Strategies, these different dialogues can be present and allow viewers to have a more productive role in the classroom as they interact with artworks. With multiple interpretations and voices, questions arise, and discussions take place. The processes and discussion have more time to become part of a deeper thought process. The questions for VTS then become a necessary and an accurate tool for guiding students into this deeper learning and thinking. The more I have implemented VTS, the deeper my students can look and dissect the artwork.
The questions used during Visual Thinking are not complicated or excessively worded. They are simple, and yet, the leader must formulate the questions as stated by the creators of VTS. The questions of Visual Thinking Strategies are worded in a way that leads the students to openness, observation, and encourages storytelling. The teacher is merely a guide and remains non-judgmental. Therefore, the students then become the teachers. There are only three simple questions used, that can be found on the VTS website throughout Yenawine’s book. They are:

1. What is going on in this picture?
2. What do you see that makes you say that?
3. What more can we find?

The first question for the students is, “What’s going on in this picture?” It is worded in a way that truly encourages the students to stop, look and think about art in an open way. It also permits the students to look at the art without any prior knowledge, preconceived ideas or history. They can interpret the image and search for meaning in their way. It provides the opportunity for students to listen to each other and to begin seeing what someone else with a different experience may see. The students may attach personal experience and pull from their own lives when they start to use Visual Thinking Strategies. The skills of observation are lost in a society where we are overwhelmed with thousands of visual images and graphics every day. Visual Thinking Strategies can use art to unleash ideas and promote critical thinking (Yenawine, 2014, p. 25).

VTS can help students refine their visual processing skills and teach them to look more meaningfully at an image, while listening to other classmates’ viewpoints. Whether it is artwork from hundred years ago or an image on Google. Essentially, Visual Thinking Strategies is a fundamentally constructivist teaching method (https://vtshome.org). For students to be able to figure out not only what an artwork is about, but ideally, they begin to come up with more than
one way of solving the mystery of the piece before them. In their own language, individually and as a group. To be able to keep a group of twenty-four teenagers off their phones, not talking about anything but art, this is where the power of VTS lays.

The second question is, “What do you see that makes you say that?” This third and final question gives students the opportunity to look further, dig deeper, and implement critical thinking skills. Since VTS is student lead, rather than teacher directed, it almost seems to become a search and find a game for the students. The observation with the first question is a precursory glance, and just like any other visual flashed before the students during the day, the look and ideas are quickly generated. The second question presents the opportunity to permit the student to look again and search for more meaning so that the deeper critical thinking skills can be initiated. Creativity and brainstorming come together for the students as they work through the image. The second question challenges students to prove and explain their views using evidence from the artwork (Cutler, Fiedler, Moeller, & Weir, 2013, p. 57). They must give the why and support their comments and ideas. Therefore, the thinking becomes more meaningful.

The third and final question is “What more can you find?” A few students might only see objects or a random idea, but at this stage is when the viewer will begin to put together a story or idea. Students start to feel more free as they explore their ideas and dig deeper into the artwork (Cutler, Fiedler, Moeller, & Weir, 2013, p. 57).

As students become more familiar and accustomed to the VTS process, the natural progression of using Visual Thinking Strategies moves from simple interactions by students in the form of language and reactions, into much deeper connections and complicated language and terms. They begin to expect the questions and anticipate the flow of the conversation. Thus, the consistency of questions is crucial and an absolute must. Each question’s wording must not change. Otherwise, the scaffolding you have provided for their learning will dissolve. They will
not tune in if the educator changes the structure of VTS and what students have come to understand as the norm for such discussions.

**VTS Discussion as a Learning Tool: Critical Thinking and Problem Solving**

During my research of Visual Thinking Strategies, I have discovered that there are many key ideas and details that the educator must learn before using VTS in the classroom and with students. It is not about standing at the front of the classroom and simply having an open discussion about art. Nor is it a word-for-word, by-the-book, art history lesson presented by the teacher or facilitator. The educator must be well acquainted with his or her students and know if the students have experienced VTS before. Not only do educators need to be aware of their students, but they also must have thorough understanding and knowledge of the artwork and the history or background associated with that artwork as well.

The job of the teacher during a session of Visual Thinking Strategies does not follow the traditional role of a teacher at all. In fact, the educator takes on the role of a collaborative guide. The educator must listen to the students, and only answer with the standard VTS questions. The educator must also guide the discussion to keep it focused and relevant. Students can then examine the contents the problem, or situation that is presented by an artwork, without the educator’s knowledge or opinion being offered. The students can form their ideas, listen to the ideas of their classmates, agree and disagree respectfully, and build their explanations and interpretations based on true collaboration between students. The goal is to get the students to create new ideas, elaborate, refine and analyze, brainstorm and explore as many different ideas and thoughts as possible about the artwork (Cutler, Fiedler, Moeller, & Weir, 2013, p. 58).
Concerns That Could Arise During a VTS Session

Since the primary role of the educator in Visual Thinking Strategies is that of the guide, and not that of a teacher who is using direct instruction, some concerns may arise during the session.

Many art classes have a mix of students that have different learning styles and abilities. There are the students who consistently raise their hand and others who shy away from ever answering or making a sound in class. There are sometimes the students who participate, but their input is often disruptive or inappropriate. Since the goal is to encourage the students into deeper and more rational critical thinking, how does the educator guide the students without directing the conversation?

Sticking with the open-ended Socratic questions is a large part of this process of keeping the students focused on not only the artwork, but also on the discussion itself. How do you refocus the student who is trying to lead or teach the class his direction? The best answer is to know how the students in your classroom learn. The teacher will then see each student’s potential to grow with VTS.

The student that diverts and disrupts may be trying to get attention. Acknowledging what they are pointing out and redirecting the comment back to the art, or linking to what was said by another student, can bring back the focus to the art. Students must be able to share their thoughts openly and without correction for a successful VTS. Therefore, by listening carefully and with acknowledgment, the teacher should be able to move the discussion forward. By listening to students and paraphrasing back to them what was said, the educator can then point out to the students the similarities in what they are seeing and saying about the artwork. Active listening by the educator shows that you are paying attention and are engaged with each student. Paraphrasing indicates that you are not only actively listening, but that you are hearing
what is being said, not simply just repeating the exact wording of the student. Linking statements and ideas from one student to another student can also help keep other learners engaged as they are looking to see what has been pointed out. By linking the student’s statements, you can show the students how their ideas interact with one another and that art is not black and white, but rather open to interpretation (Yenawine, 2014, p. 29).

There may be issues that arise for the educator during a session if they are not familiar with the artwork. It can be difficult to guide students and paraphrase their responses if the educator has never viewed the artwork themselves. It is not necessary to know the entire history of a piece. But the teacher should have a look themselves prior to presenting. If the educator corrects rather than guides the students’ discussion, it can influence students’ responses. What the educator knows, thinks, or feels about an artwork is not of relevance during a Visual Thinking Strategies session. It is not about liking or disliking an artwork. To state one’s opinion would defeat the purpose of a student-led discussion where the goal is to create deeper thinking. Students who may be drawn to their educator’s knowledge and look to them for guidance in art, may hinder their students’ ideas and thought process in finding their own answers to the artwork by sharing their own perspective. For some students, hearing the teacher say how much they like or dislike the artist, or the work, will end the thought process and critical thinking that was taking place during the discussion.

Letting go of the discussion in the hands of the students and the need to “correct” them may be the toughest aspect about VTS. For an educator, controlling their own thoughts and opinions about artwork and responses during a Visual Thinking Strategy session is something that must continuously be on the educator's mind during the discussion. The priority of the educator is to teach thinking and to take advantage of the open-ended nature of students instead of searching for a “correct” answer (Yenawine, 2014, p. 35). Correcting students has no place in
VTS and could potentially turn a student off to artwork or to sharing opinions altogether. As a teacher, that is the basis of how many of us teach: Instruct, repeat, correct, instruct, correct. It is a most troubling habit to break. As educators, we must stop for a moment and try to breathe while students talk. All the while continuing to actively listen while planning on how to repeat and paraphrase what the students has said.

**Why Art is the Answer: Aesthetic Inquiry**

Abigail Housen noted in her research that there are five stages of aesthetic viewing that all people, regardless of age, experience when viewing an artwork (Landorf, 2006, p. 29). According to Abigail Housen, stage I viewers are Accountive viewers. These types of viewers are storytellers. They use personal association and senses to make concrete observations about the artwork before them (Housen, 1999, p. 9). Looking at an artwork they may say, “Here is some bright blue and strange shapes, and over here is lots of orange, I like orange”. Emotions guide the comments in the Accountive stage, something that later disappears as viewers move away from this stage. From another student one might hear “that girl looks sad, she’s surrounded by blue and purple, she might be lost or something”. The statements are based on what the viewer knows and likes (Housen, 1999, p. 9).

During stage II, viewers begin to construct a framework for looking at artwork, using the most logical and accessible tools. According to Housen’s research, “Viewers in this stage use their own perceptions, knowledge of the natural world and the values of their social, moral and conventional world” (Housen, 1999, p. 9) The most intriguing part of stage II viewers is that they begin to see art as “weird” if the subject matter seems inappropriate or naturally off. If themes relate heavily to sexuality or trees are pink instead of brown, then the viewer’s emotions begin to
become subversive. As the viewers begin to distance themselves in this stage, they also began to have an interest in the artist intentions behind the work (Housen, 1999, p. 10).

In stage III of viewing known as Classifying, viewers assume an analytical view and the type of critical stance an art historian would take. They desire to identify the artwork as to where it was painted, who created it, the style, time and source. The viewer in the classifying stage believes that if they properly categorize, then the meaning behind the work and the message it is trying to convey can be explained (Housen, 1999, p. 10).

In stage IV, known as Interpretive viewing, the viewers seek a personal link or encounter with the work of art being viewed. The viewer explores the artwork, letting the meaning of the work unfold slowly and spends time appreciating the subtleties of line, shape and color. Stage IV begins to put critical thinking skills to use with feelings and intuitions. This allows the symbolic meanings to become evident to the viewer (Housen, 1999, p. 10).

During stage V, the final and most complex stage, viewers, now having established a history of viewing and reflecting about artwork, now draw on their own past with artwork. These stage V viewers combine a more personal contemplation with one which is more broadly encompassing of universal concerns. In this stage memories blend with the landscape and story of the art, intricately merging the personal and the universe (Housen, 1999, p. 12).

Each viewer, therefore, experiences observing differently. Some may move from one stage to the next quickly. Some may linger a little longer at a stage. Prior knowledge, experiences and age are all factors. Art is open to so many varied interpretations and opinions. It can seem like a daunting task to teach visual literacy and aesthetic. Students can become easily bored or distracted when presented with works of art in the classroom while listening to their teacher talk and describe and artwork. By using VTS, teachers can engage their students and let them be the educators, leading themselves and their classmates in learning. It is a complete
educational tool in teaching aesthetics and visual literacy. VTS requires no extra funding, no grant money, or textbooks. Once an educator understands VTS and how to lead a session, it can be applied daily and to any visual element in a classroom.

**Visual Literacy**

Visual literacy is a survival skill for students who are living in our contemporary visual culture (Eastman, 2005, p. 41). On some level, and in some way, anyone who can view an image can make sense of it before they can understand any written language or text. Art, in a sense, is the most complex of all imagery (Yenawine, 2003, p. 6). Even as infants and children, we see images that require processing. Many educators that teach in the lower elementary and have students who are beginning readers, use visual scaffolding to help their students further their understanding and to support their early readers and English language learners (Eastman, 2005, p. 41). To continue to use art as a visual teaching tool outside the realms of early elementary for students, past pictures books and artistic letters for learning, the classroom must be a place where the natural framework of visual literacy is built upon. Visual literacy is more than just being able to look and understand the basic idea of an image; it is the need to understand and grasp the image meaning as well. However, as elementary students move to the middle school and then onto the high school level, the visual components like picture books and looking for clues in images becomes less a part of the methods of teaching. Not only do those very imperative daily visual encounters become more sporadic, but so do interactions with art altogether. Using the artworks and visual culture from past to present creates a rich and complex cultural text. The visuality and the universal messages that art can convey makes them accessible, compelling, and relevant to students’ lives (Franco & Unrath, 2014, p. 32).
By speaking and having a conversation using art as a focus, students will have a deeper understanding and think deeper, not only about the image but also about how and when the image came into creation. For example, it is impressive how middle school students, particularly my sixth graders, erroneously find contemporary technology type items in paintings that are a hundred years old or more. Upon further inspection, we often discover it is something more primitive, or an illusion. We work out what is depicted following the steps and questions of Visual Thinking Strategies, and there is almost always a good honest laugh or awe of surprise after a surprising discovery on the student’s part. These moments exemplify what VTS is about: teaching them that visuals can have so much more meaning than what they see in that first glance. With the repetition of such experiences, they then learn to slow down and think deeply about meanings and layers behind the art.

The images chosen and used on the Visual Thinking Strategies site are not randomly picked, they are carefully selected and used. Intriguing as some art maybe, certain subjects should be avoided with younger and middle school students. It is not because these are unimportant or because under some situations they could not be discussed properly, but because each situation involves too many variables to ensure a positive experience (Yenawine, 2003, p. 10). Looking at a Frida Kahlo painting that depicts her physical and emotional pain may not be bad for young viewers but making sure it is school and age-appropriate is. Perhaps some Salvador Dali images could be used on middle school students, but it must be the right image for the right age group. The VTS team that assembles the images has them in age and grade-appropriate categories. There is a natural progression from early elementary to high school, and it is well thought out and built on scaffolding of experiences and age. As stated by Yenawine, the purpose of Visual Thinking Strategies is not to challenge deeply held views or to force conversation about taboo subjects, but
to encourage looking, thinking, and the development of well-founded interpretations (Yenawine, 2003, p. 10).

**Visual and Critical Thinking**

The capacity to think critically is a crucial one. The ability to be engaged, open-minded and able to defend or reason all come from the critical thinking skills. These are required as an adult in college and the workplace. The second question of VTS is the perfect answer to getting students to think in this manner before they are in the real world. Mary Franco and Kathleen Unrath (2014), both art educators, put it this way: “As students respond to this question with concrete visual evidence from featured images, they not only justify their reasoning but also routinely counter the diverse interpretation of peers” (p. 31). From this type of interactive discussion amongst students, they learn that it is okay to have differing opinions about an artwork, to find the deeper meaning with critical thinking, and to back up that opinion with proof.

Creativity and critical thinking comprise the core of Visual Thinking Strategies. Creativity uses patterns, shapes, textures, and colors with visual means, whereas critical thinking involves looking for clues, considering alternatives while listening to opposing ideas, and exploring other options. VTS is the perfect union of critical and creative thinking and produces the perfect interaction that allows powerful learning to occur (Cutler, 2013, p. 57).

Engaging students in storytelling using Visual Thinking Strategies and exploring art deeper with those stories can be unique to each viewer and each class. Every student can pull from personal experiences that may be new to other students. Sometimes, a student’s storytelling goes deeper into plots and character (Cutler, 2013, p. 58). Storytelling can draw out a student who may not otherwise be engaged but has a great imagination. When the teacher is leading,
with open-ended questions and in absence of corrections or arguments, no one’s opinion is wrong (Cutler, 2013, p. 58). VTS can help students see each other’s point of view in a setting where they can feel safe. They become more open to ideas and draw on that deeper critical thinking and understanding.

The Writing of VTS: Another Tool to Increase and Assess Critical Thinking

There is a natural writing component that can be added to Visual Thinking Strategies to further some students understanding and critical thinking. Administration, government, state, and parents always seem to want to see some physical proof of learning, usually showing up as standardized testing. Test and quiz, short answer or multiple choice, are only narrow indicators of a student’s ability (Yenawine, 2014, p. 76). Students may have a better grasp of meaning when given a chance to think in silence and respond with a writing piece, rather than another test filled with essay questions.

Reading a student’s critical assessment may take a bit more time than grading a standard test with an answer key, but it really can show a student’s complex thinking skills and their understanding of the art. In his studies, Yenawine took writing samples before and after ten VTS sessions. It is like a test, even if it doesn’t feel like one to the teacher or the students. It documents more than a standardized test and gives more insight to a student’s thinking (Yenawine, 2014, p. 76).

Methodology

Routine Implementation of the VTS Curriculum

My goal in creating the included curriculum, which has VTS sessions routinely incorporated into each lesson (see Appendix A), is to help my students understand and see art in a new and different way. In my years before learning about Visual Thinking Strategies, I spent
time with students looking at artwork without a strong plan or curriculum in mind. There has always been something about sitting in the dark of my classroom and looking at an artwork projected on screen. Studying the fine details and engaging students about artwork, makes me feel like I accomplished something of worth with my students. I love the idea of creating a safe environment where my students could dissect a work at their own pace, in their own words and be heard, Visual Thinking Strategies would provide that environment.

Each lesson that I created for this curriculum was carefully matched with an image from the Visual Thinking Strategy library. I am a VTS purest and believe that it can and should stand on its own. However, within the context of being a public educator, I know that administration will need hard proof and data for what and why I teach these VTS sessions. To show that I have taught something valuable, and I must have something tangible and real. The thinking and problem solving that occurs with VTS can be turned around and used during the creation of the artwork coupled with the VTS image.

There are nine lessons included, each averaging two to three weeks. A flexible format could be followed without hindering the flow of a classroom. VTS does not need to occur on a weekly basis to be successful, but rather as the teacher deems acceptable for that class. In theory, these lesson plans implement the VTS image at the beginning of each lesson. The images are written into the lessons as being shown before the beginning of a lesson, except one or two. Also, incorporating artwork found on Google by the focus artist or from the same school of art are could be very supportive to the lesson as well. The use of Google to find images is the most common way to search artworks and to search by size, ensuring that important details are not lost. The Visual Thinking Strategies website is full of images to use, with middle school having three complete sets for all three grades. I have modified the ones in the lesson plans out of order that were chosen lesson to lesson, based on the knowledge of potential incoming students and
flow of my curriculum. If I have a class that has not been with me before, or maybe the majority of students are new to my art program I could use the images that are recommended on the VTS website for the grade level before the current class. For example, I may have an eighth-grade class where seven students leave band and join the general electives, with three new students who have moved into the district, and five who just have not had art with me in prior years. Out of an average class of twenty-four to twenty-eight students, anywhere up to 60-80 percent may have never experienced Visual Thinking Strategies discussion before. That would be an instance in which I would back up the set of VTS images to the seventh-grade set.

The lesson plans I have included utilize a variety of techniques and media. I generally have the same students from two to three years, as they matriculate through grades in the middle school setting. I can build on basic art skills like drawing, painting, watercolors and mixed media from year to year, grade level to grade level. The lessons used also coordinate with the elements of arts that we review throughout the semester: various cultures, people, and periods of art history.

Each lesson in Appendix A includes a rudimentary overview, objectives, supplies needed, the VTS image used. Students would view and discuss the VTS image that I correlate with each lesson. It is easy to match one of the VTS images and lesson that I have use for each grade level. The Visual Thinking Strategies do not always necessarily inspire the artwork directly as a whole, but more often lead the discussion into the art lesson. There frequently is a common theme or technique that coordinates. Sometimes the artist from the art lesson and the artist of the VTS image comes from the same background, movement or thought. Sometimes the artist and the VTS image have much in common within the elements of art and principles of design.

After students discuss and view the VTS image, direct art instruction would from me. Student examples are always shown a student example along with a rubric on how the project
will be graded. An overview is given of steps (the more complicated the steps, the fewer given in chunks. The students are given the materials needed and they begin to work on the project over the specified time. Due dates are given after we begin a project. If students are struggling, this gives me time to redirect and reteach steps they may be missing. They finish with a rubric that incorporates a self-evaluation and a one-paragraph artist statement. It is in writing this artist statement that they can reflect on the process, and on the artist or culture that they were introduced to earlier in the lesson, as the inspiration for their artwork. They can explain and offer feedback regarding what was not understood during the process, and the problems or successes that occurred during the process.

Advantages and Disadvantages of VTS

Lack of Interaction with Actual Works of Art

I have been to many art museums and galleries. There is nothing quite like standing in the quiet space before a real painting, print, or drawing. The quiet and peaceful space, the strokes of a brush, the transparency of watercolor, stepping close enough to a drawing to see the scratches of the pencil, this is the passion of art. Every detail can be studied in the museum, but with the flick of a light switch in the classroom, it is all lost on the projector screen.

Technology, with all of the abilities it has to share artwork with students, lacks the real experience of viewing artwork in person. In my classrooms before, we had shut off the lights and quietly studied a digital facsimile of an artwork on screen for a moment. Students are encouraged to move forward or to a better viewing spot if needed. At times, I have found that some of the images have dark areas that are too faint to see. There is not an adjustment to fix the low contrast, and sometimes, those areas contain essential clues and information. When my former students have been written about an artwork that I am projecting onto the screen, they often
come right to my laptop and ask to see the image on my computer (where those dark areas are better viewed).

**The Requirement of Time**

Each minute of the school day is tremendously valuable for educators. We head in before the day starts and often finish long after the students head home. We often run from one task, class or meeting to the next. Time is valuable when running from the copy machine, prepping, and to our desk at the last possible second. Even the most meticulously executed planning time can be thrown in chaos with a printer that won’t work or a frozen laptop. Understandably, educators across the curriculum may be hesitant to give up even a mere ten to fifteen minutes to present a visual activity such as Visual Thinking Strategies. VTS is not something that can be measured by any standardized test. It is not going to show up on any state test in the fall or spring.

It could potentially be difficult to persuade administrators that the class time used for a Visual Thinking Strategy session holds any benefit beyond that fifteen or twenty minutes of time. This notion of time being such a valued commodity is especially true when there seldom is any mention of standard regarding visual literacy and critical thinking. It is a standard that is overlooked in most school curriculums and programs even though it is necessary to teach critical thinking and basic skills (Eastman, 2015, p. 41).

Visual Thinking Strategies will take time to implement. It is not a lesson that could be thrown together at the last moment when a class walks in. With the knowledge that new artwork will be shown to students who may need more than 15 minutes of VTS time and discussion, planning is a must. To make sure enough time is provided for each session, it could be written into the first fifteen to twenty minutes of the lesson plan.
Additional Benefits of Routine VTS Implementation

As I studied the images for Visual Thinking Strategies, I began to become excited and hopeful. I will no longer need to search the internet for sized images that would show all the important details. There will not be a need to worry about safe searching artists, where art that includes nudes or sensitive subjects may come up. I believe that Visual Thinking Strategies has me better prepared for the challenge of introducing middle schoolers to some of my favorite artist and new ones I have yet to discover.

The change between sixth and eighth grade is quite refreshing as an educator. The way students’ vocabulary expands with art projects that I now teach are already exciting. I believe that by adding in the Visual Thinking Strategies, that listening to them will be even more thrilling as an educator. Their deep critical thinking should have a greater influence on what they say about each work, whether it is one on the screen or their own project. Currently, the 8th graders I have, I first had as 6th graders. It is enlightening to have them for three years in a row. I know each student and their learning style, their personality, and their comfort level within the classroom.

Connections with Students

When time is spent really connecting with students, the real exchange of learning begins. When teachers sit and begin to listen to students formulate thoughts about art, they learn so much about them. Students also learn more about each other while listening and building on other ideas
and thoughts. The experience is richer and more advanced than having a student write solely their thought a writing statement about art. In that, VTS is unlike anything else because it so much more than a regurgitating of facts that have been learned.

The fear of being incorrect and mistaken looms over children daily in the school setting. While some students overcome that fear and can process, or simply blurt right (or incorrect) answers, for some children it’s nearly paralyzing. Visual Thinking Strategies, unknown to the students, takes away the requirement for only “one right answer”. As Yenawine states in his book “many requirements of education today are out of line with what kids are ready to learn and ignore the uneven preparedness of students as they enter school” (Yenawine, 2014, p. 157). VTS levels the playing field in the classroom, doesn’t require books or tests and sets reasonable learning goals for each individual viewer.

Conclusion

I have been a teacher for almost ten years. In that time, I have heard and seen many people’s ideas and reactions about art education. People’s conceptions of art education have been a welcome surprise for the most part, and some of it an absolute shock. From the lack of support and funding, to the occasional parent willing to send in paint, or the core teacher who praises the artwork in the hallway, I felt as though I had experienced and learned everything about art education. I have grown weary in my defense of art education. While I almost scream at the top of my lungs about why children need art daily or why cutting my funding will put my students in danger of losing a creative and critical thinking edge, I still have a passion for what I teach.

I genuinely believe that I have found the crucial component of the Visual Thinking Strategies curriculum that makes it a success in any art education curriculum: it is in a way more than a teaching tool, rather I view it as an entire teaching philosophy that could change the way
people think about art and art education. It is so much more than talking about art, it is expanding student’s self-awareness and my understanding of my students as well. It is critically think about, yet openly describing artwork with emotion and personal response. It is a highly social classroom interaction and student-led discussion that is very much missing with the presence of technology. I myself have expanded my knowledge of art and critical thinking as I have researched, studied Visual Thinking Strategies into practice in the last several years. I knew art in its strengths as a powerful and creative teaching tool that could help students in many ways as they create their artworks, but never even realized how much I was getting from it as well.

In the past, when I had first started my teaching career, I would have my students simply write about randomly chosen art and would read the paragraphs back to them then talk about all the art history or the artist, so much was lost. It was all about my ideas and thoughts concerning the presented work of art. It was my opinions and feelings, and not nearly enough of what my students’ thoughts and interpretations were. Visual Thinking Strategies is all about the student and their voice, not mine.

In studying how to facilitate and discuss art within the context of VTS has become an in disposable tool in art education, I was convinced that it could be a teaching tool across grade levels and curriculum. I will continue to try to integrate Visual Thinking Strategies not only in my class, but to continue talking to other educator’s cross-curriculum and administrators until I get their full attention on the importance of VTS. I believe that if educators across grade levels and curriculums could embrace and understand the value of Visual Thinking Strategies, we could, as a district open our students’ minds to deeper and more meaningful thinking. The focus could shift from what have we taught our students with regular testing and data analysis, to teaching them how to process and understand what they are learning. The learning that would become more rich and profound

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If we desire the most learning possible for our children in education and have them grow and become critical and creative thinkers, we must take action. With forward-thinking and innovative approaches like Visual Thinking Strategies. Exposing children to art so they become problem solvers and to look for answers deeper than what is so easily seen at that first glance, we must find ways to open up that channel of deeper thinking in the brain from which critical and analytical thought and creative ideas come. Routine implementation of VTS sessions into the classroom is a key tool that can be used to accomplish this.

People may still see art education as a waste of important educational time no matter what advances are made. All the attention seems to be on assessments, data, and technology year after year. I believe that Visual Thinking Strategies will be the bridge between the core curriculum and art education. It can increase students’ critical thinking and is applicable in all areas of learning by getting students to look deeper than the surface. It can deepen their understanding of art, visual elements, and the world around them by enticing them to slow down and study any visual element. It can generate higher levels of thinking as students start to use prior knowledge and experiences of their own to see into other times, places, and cultures around the world. At the end of the school day, creative ideas will occur more frequently and more naturally. Knowledge will increase, and engagement will rise. All these potential benefits could be expected with regular implementation made possible through this seemingly modest tool of art images and the three questions of Visual Thinking Strategies.
Visual Thinking Strategies Lesson 1: Dia de Los Muertos Embroidered Sugar Skulls

Grade: 8th grade/3 weeks

VTS Image Week 1/Image 1: “Sueno de Una Tarde Dominical en la Alameda Central”
Diego Rivera c.1946-1947

Image Link: https://vtshome.org/lesson-images/sueno-de-una-tarde-dominical-en-la-alameda-central/

Overview: Over several years with me, as they matriculate through the middle school grades, students are taught the importance of understanding that art comes from different cultures and places. Dia de Los Muertos is a great way to incorporate art and culture in the art room. I begin with a Prezi overview of the history of Dia de Los Muertos. We discuss the rituals, art, and food, why people celebrate it in many ways and why it is not the same holiday like Halloween. The lesson concludes on November 2nd with a fiesta.

I teach each student basic sewing skills from 5th grade and throughout middle school. By 8th grade, students begin to learn basic embroidery stitches. In this lesson, students learn the basic steps to sew and embroider an image of a sugar skull. The Spanish class is invited to paint a sugar skull mask with us, and on November 1st, we open our art room to the entire 8th grade to learn about Dia de Los Muertos.

The image by Rivera chosen for this project features much of Mexico’s culture and history. Not only has Rivera surrounded himself (the young boy) by famous writers and artists of
Mexico, including his wife Frida Kahlo, he has included La Calavera Catrina as well. Catrina is a central figure in the celebration of Dia de Los Muertos and her presence in this painting makes it a seamless match for this sugar skull project.

**Objectives:**

1. Students will learn the basic steps to sew and embroider a sugar skull hanging artwork.
2. Students will be able to differentiate between Halloween and Dia de Los Muertos
3. Students will learn the history and meaning behind Dia de Los Muertos
4. Students will participate in a verbal VTS session featuring “Sueno de Una Tarde Dominical en la Alameda Central” by Diego Rivera
5. Students will create a finished sugar skull out of felt fabric, with basic skull elements and at least one type of embroidered embellishment

**VTS Integration:**

For this VTS, the image should be shown during the lessons rather than before or after so that students may realize the connection with the presence of La Calavera Catrina in the center of the painting. This lesson should begin in October and continue through November 2nd to correlate with the celebration of Dia de Los Muertos. Two other projects including papel Picado and worksheets on the culture could be used so students may choose to work on to give them some autonomy to choose when a break from sewing.

**Materials and Lesson Prep:**

- Sugar skulls made of material felt or real sugar for examples (can be purchased in most large cities or ordered online)
• Felt-black, white and various colors
• Needles and thread
• Embroidery floss in different colors
• Cardboard skull template
• Sequins and beads (optional)

Additional Resources: No instructional resources were used other than the VTS image. An online accessible Prezi used from the Prezi database was presented to share the historical and cultural significance. http://prezi.com/7_kpi-54tjb_/?utm_campaign=share&utm_medium=copy&rc=ex0share

Assessment: Students will complete a self-evaluation/rubric with a one-paragraph artist statement after the completion of the project. Summative assessment takes place daily as I check on each student’s progress and answer questions. Student leaders or “Ask Me” students are available to answer questions as well.
Figure 1. Embroidered Día de Los Muertos Sugar Skull
Visual Thinking Strategies Lesson 2: Egyptian Inspired Gold Scratch Art-Designs and Pattern

Grade: 8th grade/1 week

VTS Image 2: “Tutankhamun and his Wife Anchesenamun-Stroll in the Garden”

Artist: Unknown: c. 1330 BCE, 18th Dynasty


Overview: This VTS image is a work from ancient Egypt that can be used to introduce students to ancient Egyptian art. It is simple and traditional in the sense of stylized Egyptian art. Students will learn about the meaning of stylized work and about the ancient artist. Students will understand how the lack of formal training shows in ancient art and the importance of the what the Egyptians left behind.

Objectives:

1. Students will learn the definition of stylized and how it applies to art
2. Students will learn to use scratch tools and their proper usage
3. Students will understand the importance of pattern and repetition
4. Students will experience metallic gold scratchboard vs. the homemade scratchboard they have made previously
5. Students will understand the difference between copying a work vs. using a traditional style of art for reference
6. Students will participate in their second VTS session, use will reflect on similarities in their stylized work and the ancient Egyptians in their artist statement for the finished project.

**VTS Integration:** This image of King Tut and his wife lead easily into the gold scratchboard artwork. Although the similarities are not as obvious as some VTS lessons, the connection is in the flat and stylized work. Egyptian work is scratched into flat stone surfaces and has no shading or 3D elements. In the same way the black and gold scratchboard can be “carved” into with tool. Patterns and design elements can be inspired by the ancient Egyptians work and easily modified by the student to create a unique artwork.

**Materials Needed:**

- Premade gold scratchboard. (Available through most school art catalogs)
- Scratch tools of various widths or line
- Magazines with photos of people
- Work paper to keep under their hand to protect the scratchboard
- Print out of traditional Egyptian patterns and designs
- Image of Egyptian sarcophagus for basic shape reference

**Lesson Preparation:**

- Make sure enough scratchboard is available, plus extra for examples and testing tools
- Students should practice designs and ideas in a sketchbook before starting the final project
• Make certain you have magazines that have ad or stories featuring people 6-9 inches tall
• The students know the proper usage of scratch tools
• Show examples of previous student’s work
• Goals present on a whiteboard with the examples
• Rubric printed and shown to students before the project

**Image Resources:** VTS Website/ Lesson 6, Image 3 (through purchased educator membership)
Other various traditional ancient Egyptian patterns and designs from clip art books or internet

**Summative Assessment:** Students will complete a self-evaluation/rubric with a one-paragraph artist statement after the completion of the project. Summative assessment takes place daily as I check on each student’s progress and answer questions. Student leaders or “Ask Me” students are available to answer questions as well.
Figure 2. Egyptian Inspired Gold Scratch Art
Visual Thinking Strategies Lesson 3: Watercolor Landscape Painting

Grade: 8th grade/2 weeks

VTS Image Week: “Cotopaxi” Edwin Church c.1862

Image Link: https://vtshome.org/lesson-images/cotopaxi/

Overview: Students are taught basic watercolor skills 6th-8th grade. As students continue to experiment watercolors as 8th-grade students, they become ready for more advanced processes in watercolor painting. Students will practice and review basic watercolor techniques before working a simple layout of a step by step landscape painting. The landscape includes white birch trees, blocked with masking tape and the three grounds: foreground, middle ground, and background. Students can choose the color scheme of their sky using wet on wet techniques. The project will vary from semester to semester. Students in the fall quarter will paint a green landscape with fall colors and students in the winter semester will paint a snowy landscape. Both seasons include cast shadows, shadows on the birch trees, and keeping the birch trees white.

Objectives:

1. Students will create a landscape using watercolors and masking tape
2. Students will be able to observe cast shadows and the three landscape grounds from real life visuals and recreate them with watercolor
3. Students will practice watercolor control and experiment with salt and rubbing alcohol to add interest to their painting
4. Students will understand and compare color in relationship to landscapes, shadows and time of year.
5. Students will participate in a verbal VTS session featuring “Cotopaxi” by Edwin Church
6. Students will understand the science of light and shadows, direction, and color based on the season and time of day
7. Students will learn advanced watercolor skills as they create a unique landscape based on genuine principles

**VTS Integration:** “Cotopaxi” is a gorgeous artwork to show students the way landscapes can be portrayed. When discussing in the VTS session, students may have to dig a little deeper with thinking since what is going on may not easily be answered. This image was paired with the landscape project for various reason including subject, but also because the students can be shown how to push color to enhance artwork. In watercolor, building color is so important and the brilliant colors of “Cotopaxi” could be achieved with glazes and layering of watercolor.

**Materials and Lesson Prep:**

- Watercolor paper 90lb
- Semi-moist watercolor palettes
- Brushes
- Water containers
- Paper towel
- Masking tape of various widths
- Salt and rubbing alcohol (optional)
**Additional Resources:** During this lesson, we will often step to the window and door in class and look outside. It is easy to show the students a real-life visual of cast shadows and their color, and the three grounds just by stepping outside. Since this lesson is taught in Michigan, snowy landscapes are not uncommon. Many images can be found online of landscapes with snow.

**Assessment:** Students will complete a self-evaluation/rubric with one paragraph artist statement after the completion of the project. Students are also urged to stop and evaluate their work as the layers are drying. Watercolor is an easy media to layer and add to if the color is not quite right or rich enough. Summative assessment takes place daily as I check on each students’ progress and answer questions. Student leaders or “Ask Me” students are available to answer questions as well.
Figure 3. Watercolor Landscape
Visual Thinking Strategies Lesson 4: In the style of Aboriginal Dot Paintings

Grade: 8th grade/2 weeks

VTS Image Week 4/Image 1: “Eternal Dream” James P. Simon c. unknown

Image Link: https://www.artrecord.com/index.cfm/artist/5829-simon-james-p/

Overview: Some of the most important elements learned in art is not about art, but the way that different cultures and people express themselves to tell their stories with art. It is therefore not about good or bad art, but what the artist must express. This lesson does not have a traditional presentation visual such as PowerPoint or Prezi. Rather than using technology to show examples of how the dots are applied and might look in real life, Aboriginal hand painted items (made for tourist) are brought in and are shown to the students after the VTS presentation. Students are not to copy the Aboriginal symbols, but must come up with their own. It is acceptable in this lesson to learn, but to copy them is not okay. They are the symbols and ideas that the Aboriginal people have used for thousands of years and are considered sacred.

Once the students begin painting, they are urged to use pure color and not worry about mixing many colors. Using their sketchbooks and printouts of aboriginal animals’ outlines, students illustrate either a dream they had or a story that happened to them they would want to illustrate. They will then sketch the drawing on the construction paper with pencil and begin working to fill in the art with various colored dots.
Objectives:
1. Students will be able to define and draw in a stylized manner and explain the difference between stylized and cartoon drawing
2. Students will recognize the significance of art in other cultures and peoples
3. Students will use only the round end of paintbrushes to create an artwork that tells a personal story
4. Students will identify symbolism in aboriginal artwork and its significance
5. Students will define and understand the difference between representational and realistic styles of art
6. Students will create a unique artwork that tells their own story

VTS Integration: Rather than show a traditional Aboriginal art work, the art work by James P. Simon is a modern style of Aboriginal painting that can be used for a VTS session. Students can draw many meanings from the artwork. The colors, use of traditional styled dot work and many symbols could lead students into a very interesting and thoughtful discussion. During the intro of the dot painting, once the students begin to grasp the concept the way art tells stories, a discussion could occur about the connections of how art can tell many stories without words in different cultures and even through time periods. This is the lesson that can help students begin to understand that art transcends language and time.

Materials and Lesson Prep:
- Tempera paint in various colors
- 12x18 black or brown construction paper
- Paint brushes with flat tips on the end, various sizes to add interest
• Q-tips or pencils with new erasers can also be substituted for paintbrush ends
• Aboriginal drawing guide packets
• Water container and paper towel
• Prepared paint cups of various colors with lids is a must since the project is completed with tempera and dries out very quickly


**Assessment:** Students will complete a self-evaluation/rubric with a one-paragraph artist statement after the completion of the project. Summative assessment takes place daily as I check on each student’s progress and answer questions. Student leaders or “Ask Me” students are available to answer questions as well.
Figure 4. Aboriginal Inspired Dot Art
Visual Thinking Strategies Lesson 5: Chirico Mood Perspective Drawing

Grade: 8th grade/2 weeks

VTS Image Week 5/Image 1: “Death in the Sick Room” by Edvard Munch c.1893

Image Link: https://vtshome.org/lesson-images/death-in-the-sickroom/

Overview: During the study of the element of color in 8th grade, students begin to learn more about the psychology and mood that color can convey in artwork and how color can affect mood and emotion of the viewer.

Objectives:

1. Students will learn how to express mood and how to evoke emotion in the art with color
2. Students will create a precise one-point perspective drawing of buildings inspired by the paintings of Chirico
3. Students will integrate watercolor pencils to add color and mood/emotion to their pencil drawing
4. Students will analyze the works of Chirico and Munch’s “Death in the Sick Room” during the unit of color and emotion.
5. Students will understand that mood can affect the viewer's perception of the artwork without adding words or symbols

VTS Integration: Edvard Munch and Giorgio de Chirico both rely heavily on color to convey mood in their paintings. By studying these two artists together, students view varied styles and types of artwork that emphasize color and meaning. Students first exposure to surrealist artist
Chirico is often met with many questions and comments. By using Visual Thinking Strategies and Munch’s painting before beginning the Chirico drawing and PowerPoint, the students are more exposed to color and mood in the art in two distinct art movements and styles.

**Materials and Lesson Prep:**

- 9x12 white construction paper
- Sketchbooks
- Clear rulers
- Pencils
- Watercolor pencils
- Sketch paper for practicing one-point perspective

**Additional Resources:** Various Chirico images from Google. I am careful about which images I use, some of his work is too intense for the middle school level to process. I have changed them over the years based on the students. Before the lesson begins, a pre-made practice sheet can be used. I have a created one with basic geometric shapes and an apparent vanishing point. I find that using this perspective worksheet before the practice drawing, students have a clearer understanding of how lining up points and the ruler are.

**Assessment:** Students will complete a self-evaluation/rubric with a one-paragraph artist statement after the completion of the project. Summative assessment takes place daily as I check on each student’s progress and answer questions. Student leaders or “Ask Me” students are available to answer questions as well. Frequently during the first few days of this project, we start with a warm-up assessment or practicing a one-point perspective in our sketchbooks. The
warm-up practice is especially valuable if there is a long break during the project (of two or more days.)

Figure 5. Chirico Perspective Drawing
Visual Thinking Strategies Lesson 6: Chinese Landscape Painting

Grade: 8th grade/2 weeks

VTS Image Week: “Nighthawks” Artist: Edward Hopper c. 1942

Image Link: https://vtshome.org/lesson-images/nighthawks/

Overview: Edward Hopper is one of the best-known American artists. His painting style is straightforward yet contains symbolism and varied meanings. Students will view his painting “Nighthawks” as a lesson to correlate with a project that studies Chinese landscape painting.

Objectives:

1. Students will learn how to express mood and how to evoke emotion in the art with black ink and subtle color

2. Students will create an India ink drawing inspired by the ancient landscape paintings of traditional Chinese artists

3. Students will integrate watercolor subtly to add color and mood/emotion into their artwork

4. Students will analyze, compare and find the contrast in the works of traditional Chinese artist and Hopper’s “Nighthawks” cityscape

5. Students will understand that there are many types of landscapes and cityscapes, but both have similar layouts regarding both having a foreground, middle ground, and background

6. Students will learn about drawing lines with ink including pressure, line width, and control, dry brushing, and ink washes

7. Students will learn the difference between subtle and bold colors and how it can affect the look of an artwork
**VTS Integration:** Two different types of landscape that tell different stories and hold that hold very different ideologies and purpose. Not only are the demographics and timeline very different for these two types of “landscape,” but also the ideology behind the reasons for the painting. While both are “landscapes” in a sense, the Chinese landscape focuses more on the nature being the most important over the figures in Hoppers’ cityscape. Hopper’s Nighthawks shows humanity within the landscape they have created, with no nature showing while all the focus in traditional Chinese landscape is the land, not mankind. The comparison and contrast are seemingly easy for students at first, but the more they study, the deeper the meaning becomes between the two times and places.

**Materials and Lesson Prep:**

- 9x12 white construction paper for the final painting
- Sketchbooks
- Pencils
- India ink
- Watercolors
- Watercolor brushes and water containers
- Small cups with lids for the ink, ready for the first day of practice
- Sketch paper for practicing ink brush strokes

**Additional Resources:** While I do have a PowerPoint created for the intro of this lesson, as we practice drawing the landscape and rocks unique to China, I find it very useful to Google images of China’s landscape so that students can be exposed to a large variety. I am then able to guide
them through different elements and components of the landscape. I also have a sheet of drawn figures, mountains, and trees in traditional Chinese landscapes that were given to me by my student teacher supervisor. I keep the focus on traditional ideas being passed down generation to generation rather than having students feel as though they are copying work.

**Assessment:** Students will complete a self-evaluation/rubric with one paragraph artist statement after the completion of the Chinese landscape project. Summative assessment takes place daily as I check on each student’s progress and answer questions. Student leaders or “Ask Me” students are available to answer questions as well. During the first few days of this project, we start with a warm-up assessment in the form of practicing traditional ink strokes on manila paper. Students will complete two to three practice sketches to get the full layout of a landscape before starting the final. Some students will even color in the sketch with colored pencils to get a feel for how they envision their final work.
Visual Thinking Strategies Lesson 7: Japanese Notan

Grade: 8th grade/2 weeks

VTS Image Week: Untitled from Plato’s Cave Series by Donald Lokuta c.2011

Image Link: https://vtshome.org/lesson-images/untitled-from-platos-cave-series/

Overview: This project occurs during the element of shape unit. Students can work with simple shapes ranging from organic, abstract, and geometric to create unique works of art that have a balance of light and dark. To begin this project, we start with a simple PowerPoint that talks about the principle and idea behind the balance of light and dark in Japanese Notan. We begin by viewing a Ying Yang symbol as it is widely recognized and has a perfect balance of light and dark. Once they start to see how negative and positive are both important to artwork, we begin looking at former student’s examples. This project can be overwhelming to a student if they do not understand how to “flip” a piece into a mirror image. Each student is given a 4”x4” square of construction paper. They then practice the cuts, flipping and gluing the example in their sketchbook; this seems to help them ease their fear of ruining their final project. If students can see the mirror image flips easily, they are encouraged to create double and triple flips. At the middle school level, I also try to dissuade them from writing words as it becomes more about what is written than the balance. They are also confused when they try to glue the work back down, trying to make it legible rather than balanced and mirrored.

Objectives:

1. Students will learn how to create a balance between light and dark and positive and negative shape/space within their artwork
2. Students will create a practice sketch in their sketchbook ensuring they understand the importance of balance and shape within their artwork

3. Students will use a range of designs including organic, geometric, and abstract shapes to create a unique Notan of their original design

4. Students will analyze, compare and find the contrast in the works of traditional Japanese Notan art and Lokuta’s black and white photograph

5. Students will learn the difference between positive and negative space

6. Students will understand that the negative and positive space in the artwork is equally important for balance

7. Students will increase their paper cutting skills and make craftsmanship a focus of the art

**VTS Integration:** The Japanese principle of balance in the traditional Notan style of artwork lends itself perfectly to the striking contrast of Donald Lokuta’s black and white high contrast photography and painted artwork. The principles behind Japanese Notan is ancient and widely known, and it contrasts and correlates with Lokuta’s high contrast mixed media modern photography. The VTS image and Notan also could also spark debate amongst students about the controversy of art vs photography. It is a statement to prepare for as the addition of black paint may make students raise the questions of “what is art”.

**Materials and Lesson Prep:**

- 12”x12” white construction paper for the final Notan
- 6”x6” black construction paper for final Notan
- Sketchbooks and pencils
- Scrap construction paper in any color- 3”x3” or 4”x4”
• Glue sticks
• Scissors
• White envelopes for students to keep the Notan pieces in from class to class

Additional Resources: While I do have a PowerPoint created for the introduction of this lesson with images of Notan artwork, I find that using many former student’s artworks as an example is much better than a digital image. For many students at the middle school level, seeing a real example makes it click in their brain, for some, the practice Notan in the sketchbook will solidify the “mirror image” concept. When students are struggling with the entire concept, I will simplify the shapes with them and work more one on one.

Assessment: Students will complete a self-evaluation/rubric with one paragraph artist statement after the completion of the Japanese Notan project. Summative assessment takes place daily as I check on each student’s progress and answer questions. The primary assessment is with the first practice Notan. If a student is are lost at that point, I will stop and redirect individually or as a class depending on the number of students who need assistance.

Student leaders or “Ask Me” students are available to answer questions as well. During the first few days of this project, we start with a warm-up assessment in the form of practicing traditional ink strokes on manila paper. Students also will complete two to three practice sketches to get the full layout of a landscape before starting the final. Some students will even color in the sketch with colored pencils to get a feel for how they envision their final work.
Figure 6. Notan Cut Paper

Figure 7. Notan Cut Paper
Visual Thinking Strategies Lesson 8: Georgia O’Keeffe Abstract Floral

Grade: 8th grade/2 weeks

VTS Image Week: “The Persistence of Memory” by Salvador Dali c.1931

Image Link: https://vtshome.org/lesson-images/the-persistence-of-memory/

Overview: Students are sometimes very familiar with oil pastels and techniques by middle school, sometimes not. Very often controlling the oil pastel is the most common complaint. This project gives students a chance to learn simple pastel color blending and techniques with contour line drawings of flowers.

Objectives:

1. Students will learn how to create a unique artwork in the style of Georgia O’Keeffe’s abstract floral works
2. Students will create a thumbnail practice sketches in their sketchbooks focusing on composition and line
3. Students will use prior knowledge of contour line drawing to create a simplified abstract floral drawing
4. Students will analyze, compare and find the contrast in the works of Georgia O’Keeffe and Salvador Dali
5. Students will learn the difference between abstract and surreal
6. Students will learn the definitions of crop, abstract, surreal, zoom in, viewfinder and composition
7. Students will use oil pastels to create bright, vivid colors in the style of Georgia O’Keeffe
**VTS Integration:** Understanding surrealism and abstract art can be difficult art concepts and movements to grasp at the middle school level. Within Dali’s work, there are many hidden meanings and layers for students to discuss with VTS. O’Keeffe’s work is complete abstractions of shape and color and may be harder for a student to find even a sense of purpose. The contrast of Dali’s work containing so many layers of meaning and O’Keeffe’s work leaving so much to the viewer to decide is an excellent contrast in style, neither being a “wrong” way to create. By dissecting the works and understanding the layers, the students can better understand and creating their abstract work in the style of O’Keeffe.

**Materials and Lesson Prep:**

- 12”x12” white construction paper for the final O’Keeffe abstract
- 12”x12” Colored construction paper to mount final artwork on
- Sketchbooks and pencils
- Oil pastels
- Scrap paper to clean oil pastels on
- Glue sticks
- Scissors

**Additional Resources:** PowerPoint of Georgia O’Keeffe’s work and life. There are many videos available online, and sometimes I have integrated those as well. We also discuss why artist enjoy collecting and painting bones. They are fascinated by a coyote, turtle and cuttlefish bones that I bring in during the lesson.
**Assessment:** Students will complete a self-evaluation/rubric with a one-paragraph artist statement after the completion O’Keeffe oil pastel flower. Summative assessment takes place daily as I check on each student’s progress and answer questions. The assessment begins with the thumbnail sketches. If students are lost at that point, I will stop and redirect individually or as a class depending on the number of students needing assistance with contour line drawing.

Student leaders or “Ask Me” students are available to answer questions as well.

Figure 8. Georgia O’Keefe Abstract
Visual Thinking Strategies Lesson 9: Wood Burning

Grade: 8th grade/2 weeks

VTS Image Week: “Fujiwara No Yasumasa Playing Flute” by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi c.1883

Image Link: https://vtshome.org/lesson-images/fujiwara-no-yasumasa-playing-flute-by-moonlight/

Overview: To differentiate between a painting and a print, I show examples of my linoleum block prints and explain that the process that is like Yoshitoshi prints. So many students do not realize that wood can be used as an art tool. It is an important example of how wood can be used as an artistic medium, even when a print isn’t being made. Traditional wood burning, also known as pyrography, has been around since man was able to invent fire. Making marks and designs into wood seems almost innate in humankind. Students also have the option of an added touch of color to their work to enhance the designs and patterns.

Objectives:

1. Students will learn how to create a unique wood burning artwork on the wood of their choice
2. Students will practice on scrap wood before beginning a project
3. Students will use prior knowledge of contour line drawing to create a simplified design or pattern
4. Students will analyze the work of Tsukioka Yoshitoshi using Visual Thinking Strategies
5. Students will learn the difference between woodblock prints, linoleum prints and wood burning
6. Students may add acrylic paint to enhance their wood burned design

**VTS Integration:** Tsukioka Yoshitoshi is a traditional Chinese artist that is widely known as the last of the great woodblock printing artist. His woodblock prints are a style of art that students most likely have not encountered. While Chinese woodblocks almost always have a somewhat hidden story or lesson, the simple lines and flat color can easily translate into burning into wood as a new medium for middle schoolers.

**Materials and Lesson Prep:**
- Wood ovals from the craft store or cut from branches
- Sketchbooks and pencils
- Wood burning tools and nibs
- Other wood shapes-optional
- Acrylic paint and brushes-optional
- String or ribbon
- Drill for holes so art can hang

**Additional Resources:** This lesson does not require additional resources beyond the VTS and prior student examples.

**Assessment:** Students will complete a self-evaluation/rubric with a one-paragraph artist statement after the completion of the wood burning. Summative assessment takes place daily as I
check on each student’s progress and answer questions. Other than line quality issues or burning through too much of the wood, this lesson is quite straightforward and may be best learned by watching the teacher work. Starting this lesson at the end of a unit, and teaching in small groups may be beneficial to both student and teacher. Also, if wood burning tools are limited in number this may relieve some of the lack of supplies issue.

Figure 10. Wood Burning
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