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# The Eyes Have It: Potent Visuals Promote Academic Richness

Visual Thinking Strategies blazes a path from artistic inquiry to scholastic achievement.

by [Fran Smith](#)  
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A group of students stares intently at a large slide projection of a work of art, until the teacher asks, "What's going on here?" Comments flow -- about the figures, colors, shapes, emotion, story, light, and anything else anyone cares to mention. The teacher paraphrases every answer and continually probes: "What do you see that makes you say that?" Also: "What more can you find?"

This conversation could be taking place at [El Verano School](#) [1], in Sonoma, California, or at Hamilton Central School, in upstate New York, or in K-8 classrooms in cities as diverse as San Francisco, San Antonio, Miami, and dozens of others whose school districts are using an art curriculum called [Visual Thinking Strategies](#) [2] to improve critical thinking, language and writing, and academic achievement. This conversation could even be happening at Harvard University, where VTS is studied as a way to make medical students keener observers and ultimately better diagnosticians and doctors.

Today, a Monday in July, the conversation is taking place at the [Bronx Museum of the Arts](#) [3], in New York City. The "students" are forty teachers and museum educators from around the country who use VTS with children and have come for advanced training. They're looking at Diego Rivera's fresco *Agrarian Leader Zapata*.

There's revolutionary fervor in the room, and it's not only coming from the image onscreen. People talk of VTS as transformational -- for their students and themselves. "It's just like magic," says Audrey Morton Miller, who introduced VTS in her first-grade classroom at Hamilton in fall 2007. "It's an exciting way to get students talking, observing, making inferences, and backing them up. And it's had a big effect on me as a teacher. I've gone from being the expert, the one who always has the knowledge, to being more of a facilitator."

This would be a lot for any curriculum to accomplish. It's remarkable for a program that consists of a mere ten lessons a year, including one at a local museum. Students view art from different cultures, eras, genres, and media -- two or three works in a forty-five-minute session. Then the kids say what they see.

"It's a very powerful tool that can really change how we educate ourselves and each other," says Oren Slozberg, executive director of VTS. "What it basically does is get people to look and think."

## No Right or Wrong

On the student side, the discussion seems more free floating than most lessons they will ever have; rather than receive or spout information, students are meant to discover meaning. For the teacher, however, VTS is rigorously structured. The curriculum specifies what images to show, at what age, in what sequence. VTS scripts the teachers' questions, down to the verbs, and spells out what they do -- and must not do -- as a student speaks.

To focus the group's attention, teachers point to whatever children talk about, and paraphrase their comments to elevate articulation, introduce new vocabulary, and convey that they understand and value every response. Teachers link children's comments to deepen the discussion and enable students to learn from one another. Throughout, they are carefully nonjudgmental.

Many teachers say that's the hardest part to master -- perhaps no surprise in an education culture in which the cheer "Good job!" has become a tic. But the dogged neutrality is also what many educators seem to appreciate most about VTS. This, too, is not surprising in an era of high-stakes testing under the No Child Left Behind Act.

"In our school curriculum today, everything is so focused on right and wrong, there's a fear about speaking out and getting the wrong answer," says Maite Iturri, principal of El Verano, an elementary school with 420 students -- about 78 percent of them English-language learners. "With this program, there is no wrong answer. Students who normally sit in the back quietly are now talking. It's a breath of fresh air."

VTS grew out of the research of cognitive psychologist Abigail Housen. After publishing a theory in the early 1980s on stages of aesthetic development, she formulated the idea that children should be taught to make meaning from images, just as they are taught to build meaning from letters in a book. In collaboration with museum educator Philip Yenawine, Housen created a systematic, inquiry-driven method using stage-appropriate art to teach visual literacy. The approach marked a huge departure from the way schools and museums had always taught art: Show kids *Starry Night* and feed them facts about van Gogh.

"We spent so much time telling kids stories about art, in fact, that we were training them to be good listeners," says Margaret Burchenal, curator of education and public programs at Boston's [Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum](#) [4]. "It's as if you always read aloud to kids and never let them read on their own."

Actually, it was as if you always read Tolstoy aloud to kids instead of working up to him over the course of years, starting with Dr. Seuss. A VTS paper describes what happens when teachers stop telling stories about art that children are not developmentally ready for, and students start "reading" art that they have the capacity to understand: "Over time, students grow from casual, random, idiosyncratic viewers to thorough, probing reflective interpreters. They go from finding only personal connections -- which is appropriate when they begin -- to searching out the intentions of artists and dealing with elements of styles."

But growth doesn't stop there. As teachers adopted VTS as an art program, they reported anecdotally that students applied their newfound analytic capabilities to other assignments. Housen

and Yenawine began testing VTS as a way to strengthen general learning. In a five-year study in the Bryon, Minnesota, school district, Housen found that VTS developed critical-thinking skills that transferred to other settings -- from group discussions to individual writing, for instance -- and to other subjects. In 1998, when the first class of VTS veterans took the state's eighth-grade achievement test, Bryon scores jumped twenty-three points over the previous year, two and a half times the average state increase, Housen reported.

### **Small Commitment, Big Impact**

An independent evaluation of VTS in a very different district -- in Miami-Dade County -- found similar results. Students in the program for three years showed significantly higher growth rates in visual literacy than a comparison group that didn't receive VTS, and this growth correlated strongly with reading and math gains. The program also promoted cooperation, respect, and tolerance for various viewpoints. The 2005 report further noted that VTS was effective for students with limited English proficiency, helping boost vocabulary and writing skills.

VTS, which started in grades 3-5, now spans K-8, and Housen and Yenawine are developing curricula for prekindergarten and high school. About 80,000 students will participate this year; at a time when the focus on reading and math is squeezing out the arts, VTS is growing.

"It's a minimal commitment, with an amazing impact," says Barbara Young, the recently retired superintendent of the [Sonoma Valley Unified School District](#) [5], in Sonoma, California.

The district piloted VTS in grades K-5 at El Verano last year and plans to expand the program to all elementary schools by 2009. Although hard data on the El Verano experience is still two years off, Principal Maite Iturri says a comparison of pre-VTS and post-VTS writing tests shows striking improvement, both in the use of language and the volume. And VTS skills turn out to be transferable not only for the students. "Teachers now have that inquiry frame of mind," Iturri says. "They're using it in a lot of other subjects."

But for Iturri, the biggest payoffs of VTS may not come from higher test scores -- at least not directly, anyway. El Verano is a struggling school filled with low-income children who live in the shadows of the lush, lavish California wine country. VTS has lifted the spirit of the school, she says, as great art can do. "VTS builds confidence and community. It enhances language, communication, and inquiry skills," Iturri adds. "It levels the playing field. The teacher accepts and celebrates all the answers the students give. Everyone is a winner."

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#### **Links:**

[1] <http://www.elveranoschool.org>

[2] <http://www.vue.org>

[3] <http://www.bronxmuseum.org>

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