

Growing Literacy Skills with Visual Thinking Strategies on Virtual Art Museum Tours

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Introduction

“What’s going on in this picture?” I ask a group of fifth grade students after a moment of quiet looking at Grace Hartigan’s 1973 Abstract Expressionist painting, Holidays. The painting is composed of large vertical bands of color: red, blue, and yellow. Crisscrossing the canvas are bold black lines that sometimes form recognizable objects, and sometimes meld as abstract shapes that engage the imagination. Virtual hands begin to raise, and the chat box is filled with students’ observations.

“There’s only three colors, red, blue and yellow,” begins Hunter.

“Yeah, those are primary colors!” agrees Kendra, “and there are lots of shapes too.”

As the students nod their heads in agreement, I recap the students’ assertions and introduce new language to frame them as observations. “We observed the artist used a simple color palette of the primary colors and filled the canvas with shapes in bold black paint. What more can we find?”

“Well, I think this is about her emotions” says DeAndre.

Ah, I think, an inference! This fifth-grade class has recently learned to draw inferences from a text and to support their inferences with evidence. I prompt further, “what do you see that makes you say this is about emotions?”

“The colors are all grouped together and the shapes in each color make me think of different things,” DeAndre continues. “Like there is a lot of hearts in the red area so that area

represents love, and the blue... well I'm not sure what's going on in the blue but blue might mean sadness, and in the yellow, there is a lot of happy things like a butterfly and a bird."

"Thank you," I respond, "You're inferring the artist might be communicating her emotions by the way she has organized the painting. You observed the colors are grouped together and that each color has its own shapes and objects that make you think of specific emotions like love or happiness."

"Actually, the red is anger because red is an angry color and there is a knife in the red," Sarah chimes in via the chat box. Another inference!

"In the chat we have an alternative idea for what the colors might represent. Sarah agrees that the colors might represent the artist's emotions but is suggesting a different interpretation. Red might represent anger because she sees a knife in the red area. Sarah, what other details helped you infer that the red might represent anger?"

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) is a curriculum approach that, when incorporated on virtual museum tours, encourages K-5 students to practice close reading skills. In this article, I will introduce VTS as technique for virtual student engagement with works of art. When used intentionally, VTS encourages visual and reading literacy and provides space for students to practice reading skills learned in the classroom (Cappello & Walker, 2016).

Visual Thinking Strategies

Cognitive psychologist Abigail Housen and museum educator Philip Yenawine developed Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) in the late 1990s (Yenawine, 2013). Originally conceived as a method for teaching aesthetic appreciation, Housen, Yenawine and their colleagues found that VTS has further potential to create community, promote collaboration and

critical thinking, support equity of voice, and hone observation skills (Moeller et al., 2013; Zapata, 2017; Moorman, 2017; Monet, 2019, July 3, Connolly, Skinner, & Harlow, 2019). VTS involves a facilitated conversation around a work of art. The VTS facilitator asks three questions to spark conversation among the viewers: 1) what's going on in this picture?, 2) what do you see that makes you say that?, and 3) what more can you find? The facilitator's role is to leverage these questions to elicit responses from the conversation participants, and to paraphrase all responses back to the group. An experienced facilitator will use the paraphrase to weave themes across the conversation, threading shared ideas and different viewpoints together while provoking deeper engagement from participants. Although early VTS guidelines asked the facilitator to be neutral, practitioners have moved away from the term and recognize that every person brings inherent bias and perspective to a discussion, making neutrality impossible and, at times, unethical when paraphrasing comments that contribute harm. Instead, the facilitator leaves their personal opinions out of the conversation to create a judgment-free environment where each participant's ideas and comments are valued. The goal is to facilitate individual and collective meaning making rather than deliver a lecture.

My VTS Journey

Many art museums, notably the Detroit Institute of Art and the Minneapolis Institute of Art, use VTS as the primary teaching pedagogy in their galleries. The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art (The Ringling) in Sarasota, Florida where I work likewise uses VTS with visitors of all ages. My own relationship with VTS has been years in the making, and I admit I was a skeptic at first. I learned about VTS in my graduate level course on museum education at the University of Florida where I earned a master's degree in Museum Studies. The instructor, Bonnie Bernau, was an early adopter of VTS and she regularly taught the technique in her

classes. Though I was initially dismissive of the technique, I quickly realized my new job at The Ringling required skilled VTS facilitation to create welcoming conversations among visitors. Thank goodness Bonnie insisted we learn to use VTS! After I settled into my job at The Ringling, I enrolled in the official VTS training where I spent a month engaging with works of art in company with people from around the globe as we learned to become skilled facilitators. As I took the VTS training online, rather than over a long weekend in person, I saw VTS as both an engagement tactic and a pedagogy for virtual tours for students. The Covid-19 pandemic was several months underway, and I knew students would not take onsite field trips to the museum that year.

Virtual Tours at The Ringling

The advent of the Covid-19 pandemic changed museum programming as museum doors closed and students were unable to take field trips. In the 2020-2021 school year, I introduced virtual tours for K-12 students at The Ringling. On virtual tours, an experienced museum educator introduces 3-4 works of art over 45-minutes via PowerPoint. Hosted on either Zoom or Microsoft Teams, the educator facilitates conversations with students both verbally and through the chat box. To align with the recommendations suggested by VTS, the works of art chosen are visually ambiguous. There is a discernible story present in each work of art, but no clear “right” story, encouraging personal meaning making.

On virtual tours, the museum educator begins by showing images of the museum building to provide a background about the museum itself. Following the short introduction, the tour pivots to the first work of art. The educator encourages all students to offer their observations and thoughts about the work of art, and emphasizes there are no right or wrong answers in art.

After a moment of quiet looking, the conversation begins with VTS's open-ended entrance question: what is going on in this picture?

As I move to the second work of art, a Rococo painting of a woman with powdered gray hair and decadent clothes sitting in a lush landscape surrounded by two winged babies who drape her with a flower rope, the students can hardly wait to share their thoughts before the minute of quiet looking is over. The chat box floods with observations and students signal their desire to share verbally through raised hands.

"Thank you for looking with me," I say as our moment of looking comes to a close, "what's going on in this picture?"

"There's a woman, and she's in love!" Zach quickly proclaims.

"You are noticing the main character in the painting," I paraphrase, "and you think she's in love. Tell us, what do you see that makes you say this woman is in love?"

"Hmm," Zach pauses for a moment, "I think it's because she's dressed really nice, and the flowers being put on her. Yeah, that makes me think she's in love."

Paraphrasing again I respond, "you're using a few details from the painting to help tell a story – you see a woman in fancy clothes surrounded by flowers which reminds you of someone in love. What more can we find?"

"I agree with Zach," Destiny says, "she's in love but she's only in love because Cupid made her."

“Destiny, you’re identifying some other characters in the story,” I say, excited that the students are introducing their own interpretations of a narrative, “what do you see that makes you say that Cupid made her be in love?”

VTS and Literacy on Virtual Tours

VTS facilitators strive to create a welcoming environment where all participants feel comfortable sharing their perspective in conversation. VTS encourages many skills, including increased critical thinking (Moeller et al., 2013) and adroit observation (Connolly, Skinner, & Harlow, 2019). It also creates an open space for social justice discussions (Monet, 2019; Zapata, 2017). Of particular interest to elementary teachers, facilitators can use specific, literacy-based language during VTS discussions to promote literacy skills such as making inferences and citing evidence from a text to support a claim (Cappello & Wilson, 2016).

Logistics of VTS on Virtual Tours

I decided to use VTS as a method for discussions around art on virtual school programs because VTS easily translates to the virtual sphere. As students discuss areas of the artwork in their comments, I use the cursor to circle that area on the screen ensuring everyone understands each interpretation in the context of the artwork. During virtual programs, students have multiple avenues of engagement including verbal communication, chat box, and signaling agreement or disagreement through video cues. After a year facilitating virtual programs, my observations suggest that students feel less reserved and more willing to take risks and engage in thoughtful conversations around art over a computer screen when compared with in-person museum tours. Without the distractions of spacious galleries, other museum patrons, and competing works of art, students are free to fully engage with the work of art shown on the screen. Although viewing

art virtually does lose some of the magic of “the real thing” on a museum wall, the ability to zoom in on small details provides a level of access to artworks that you miss in the museum surrounded by a large crowd while maintaining a safe distance from the painting.

During the conversation, I and my fellow educators use literacy-specific language to paraphrase student comments after each student shares. Paraphrasing is a critical component of the VTS conversation and is used to link comments to previous points made, frame participant cognitive processes, and scaffold emergent layers of meaning. For virtual museum tours, I listen closely to student comments to identify ideas related to reading literacy including making inferences, storytelling, and sequencing. When students make these kinds of remarks, I use language common to the English classroom to paraphrase the comment back for the class, and to ask for evidence from the artwork to support the student’s interpretation. By incorporating terms from the English language arts curriculum in conversations around art, students practice reading skills through verbal communication, as their thoughts and ideas manifest as inferences, evidence-based claims, and stories.

Our last painting for the session is a dark and mysterious landscape by British artist Joseph Wright of Derby. Titled Moonlight Landscape, the muted colors of the nocturnal scene are punctured by bright moonlight reflected off a lake. The moon itself is obscured by a stone bridge traversed by a lone traveler with his donkey. After their keen storytelling with the last painting, students are eager to begin describing their observations.

“This is a dark painting,” Mac asserts.

“You’re noticing the color palette the artist used when making this painting,” I paraphrase, “how do you interpret those colors?”

“I think it’s lonely,” Mac responds after a moment’s thought, “because I observe there is only one person in the painting and it’s so dark like the loneliness in the middle of the night.”

“Thank you for elaborating on your thoughts, Mac,” I respond, “the dark colors remind you of feeling lonely in the middle of the night, and you observed a second example of loneliness in the single traveler. What more can we find?”

“Another interpretation is mystery,” Alice chimes in., participating for the first time today.

I prompt Alice to elaborate, “What do you see that makes you say mystery?”

“The same dark colors Mac mentioned remind me of a mystery story,” Alice continues. “Like the bridge and the cliffs are the setting for the story and the lonely man might have committed a crime! Why is he here all alone?”

“Alice is building off Mac’s interpretation of an emotion but is instead suggesting a mysterious mood,” I paraphrase, “and her observations of the setting and characters makes her think a mystery story might be taking place here. What more can we find?”

“I observe a second character fishing in the lake below,” adds Daniel in the chat box, “That makes me think that the painting is about a journey, both characters are on their own journey.”

“Daniel is offering a third interpretation that the painting is about a journey and brought a second character to our attention, fishing in the lake,” I summarize, delighted students who have been reserved thus far shared their thoughts while providing evidence for their claims.

“What more can we find?”

Conclusion

Visual Thinking Strategies, when incorporated on virtual museum tours, encourage students to actively participate in a conversation centered on art. Close looking and focused discussion on works of art is a new concept for most students, and adhering to the same three-question protocol provides structure and familiarity. On a typical virtual tour, the extroverted students tend to participate early in the 45-minute program, but by the final work of art the less outspoken students contribute their thoughts as well, especially in the chat box. The predictable conversation structure and judgment-free paraphrasing instill confidence for all to participate.

As the tour progresses, students adopt the language used by the facilitator. Predictable patterns emerge as students shift their language to phrases such as “I observe” rather than “I see” and identifying parts of a story like character, setting, and mood. Using terms often seen in a language arts lesson while paraphrasing student comments reinforces critical literacy skills using a work of art as a text. Students listen to the facilitator taking their ideas and framing them in familiar reading terms and adopt the same language as the tour progresses.

Visual Thinking Strategies promotes literacy through close looking and judgment-free paraphrasing. K-5 students stay engaged in VTS discussions around works of art as they make inferences, cite evidence from the painting to support a claim, and identify parts of a story. By incorporating VTS into virtual museum programs, museum educators use an online-friendly method to teach not only visual literacy and art appreciation, but to reinforce literacy initiatives in the museum.

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