Visual Thinking Strategies can help reach the Standards' goals as evidenced in an art-based literacy program for struggling boy writers.

Carpe Diem: Seizing the Common Core With Visual Thinking Strategies in the Visual Arts Classroom

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Eleven Kindergarten and 1st-grade boys bound into the art room on a Tuesday afternoon. In enthusiastic anticipation of the art discussion to come, four rush to the computer monitor for a sneak peak at the William Wegman image selected to motivate the weekly, art-based literacy lesson.

"Awesome!" exclaims one, gazing at the Weimaraner puppy crouched behind a vase of shedding flowers.

"I think that's a Greyhound," asserts another as he gestures toward the image, "Because of his fur and I've seen dogs like that before!"

"No, not a Greyhound! He's like those other dogs we saw… and he looks like he's in trouble," a third boy infers. "See, his head is down and his face looks sad like this." Mockingly, he hunches his own shoulders, ducks his head, and juts out his lower lip.

"I agree with Matt," a fourth chimes in. "He's in trouble 'cause he made a mess with the flowers! Look!" (Researcher journal, January 29, 2013)

Riddles and Roses, 1999, by William Wegman. Copyright William Wegman, 2013.

What has just occurred evidences some remarkable behaviors from some equally remarkable young members of a remedial writing club for boys. Within a few short minutes, they demonstrated multiple capacities attributed to literate individuals by the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, & Technical Subjects (CCSS-ELA). The spontaneous, high-level interaction just described was not a fluke. Instead, it demonstrated dispositions regularly observed from this group of 6- and 7-year-olds—dispositions purposefully nurtured through weekly literacy lessons that begin with rigorous Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) art discussions and subsequent, inspired artmaking.

In the unsolicited verbal exchange just recounted, the boys exhibited initiative and independence in spontaneously approaching, comprehending, and evaluating a complex visual text—articulating their understandings effectively as they built upon the ideas of others. They responded appropriately and respectfully to a small audience of peers, adapting their communication to a self-appointed, collaborative task whose purpose was to construct a shared understanding of the artwork at hand. They intuitively utilized their available resources—the visual text, prior knowledge, past experience, and one another—to make sense of the image. As analytical thinkers, they offered concrete evidence from the visual text to make inferences about its meaning and to justify their claims. The interaction furthermore revealed the critical and constructive evaluation of a divergent viewpoint and one boy even vicariously entered the work as he assumed the countenance, posture, and affect of the artwork's central figure. Clearly, these young boys are well on their way to mastering the complex cognitive capacities the CCSS-ELA expects of literate individuals who meet the Standards by the time they complete high school; and these young boys, identified as struggling learners, have not yet entered the 2nd grade!

Advanced behaviors like these, repeatedly demonstrated by the K-5 boys throughout our study, have not resulted from traditional literacy instruction, but rather from weekly dialogic investigations of visual art using VTS. By developing the young learners' visual literacy via discussions of ancient through contemporary artworks representing a variety of mediums, the communicative literacy by which they critically "analyze, reflect upon, and respond to diverse communication situations" (Rowan University, 2011, p. 1) has expanded as well. This finding has fueled our contention that the CCSS-ELA (NGA Center, 2010), which emphasize integrated literacy, high-order thinking, and cross-disciplinary understandings, have provided visual art education with a carpe diem moment: the opportunity to demonstrate that the capacities upheld by the CCSS-ELA are authentically invited by the unique content of art and can be richly developed through comprehensive, high-quality art education programs. We assert that such programs should include not only reflective and meaningful artmaking, but also routinely conducted dialogic investigations of artworks and visual culture exemplars from the past and present. We further maintain that VTS offers a powerful means for enacting the kinds of evocative and substantive art encounters that will situate art education at the center of a standards-based education for all students.

Overview of Visual Thinking Strategies

VTS is a Constructivist teaching method grounded in the extensive research of cognitive psychologist Abigail Housen and her collaboration with veteran museum educator Philip Yenawine. VTS employs strategically selected and sequenced art images that develop students' abilities to notice deeply, think critically, and reason with evidence as they articulate personal interpretations and build upon the ideas of others within a collaborative group setting (Housen, 2002). VTS discussions are facilitated, not directed, by the teacher who motivates student investigation with three "deceptively simple" (Housen, 2001, p. 15) questions: "What's going on in this picture? What do you see that makes you say that? What more can we find?" (Housen, 2002; VUE, 2001; Yenawine, 1999). Empirically researched in the United States, Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia (VUE, 2000), these questions have been found to elicit not only high-order thinking and reasoning from students in preK and beyond, but also democratic discussion and respectful debate (Yenawine, 1998). When VTS is implemented regularly and consistently as designed, "students grow from casual, random, idiosyncratic viewers to thorough, probing, reflecting interpreters… from finding only personal connections—which is appropriate when they begin—to searching out the intentions of artists and dealing with elements of styles" (VUE Staff, 2000, p. 2).

Overview of CCSS-ELA

The CCSS-ELA outline a holistic vision of literacy that is demonstrated through reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language proficiencies. In a preface to the Standards, which make that vision practicable, an illustrative "portrait of students who meet the Standards" (NGA Center, 2010, p. 7) is provided. This description posits seven capacities necessarily demonstrated by literate individuals, detailing each and briefly describing how it will be evidenced in students who are college- and career-ready by the time they complete the 12th grade. In this article, we examine these capacities through an informed lens as two veteran art educators with VTS teaching experience and first-hand cognizance of the behaviors and thinking the pedagogy evokes as we reveal the theoretical and methodological alignment of the CCSS-ELA and VTS.

Capacity for Initiative and Independence

The CCSS-ELA (NGA Center, 2010) deem that students who are college- and career-ready demonstrate independence in comprehending, evaluating, and communicating their understandings of "complex texts across a range of types and disciplines" (p. 7). They accomplish this as astute, discerning listeners and as articulate, persuasive debaters who, when unknowing or perplexed, assertively pose relevant questions and seek out multiple resources to resolve their quandaries.

High-quality art education that features VTS encourages capacities for independence in these areas and our experience bears out this claim. By engaging students dialogically in investigations of complex and compelling visual texts, we have observed strong investigative initiative and the genuine desire to learn. Encouraged by the open-ended VTS questions previously enumerated, our students eagerly volunteer their own interpretations and build upon those of others. As this occurs, standard English is rehearsed and wide-ranging vocabulary emerges to be reinforced through visual scaffolding as the teacher points to details noted and paraphrases each comment. Miscommunications that arise are routinely clarified or self-corrected by students as discussions unfold; in our experience with K-5 learners and beyond, it is common for unresolved questions to prompt continued, student-motivated dialogues and research after VTS sessions have concluded.

Capacity to Build Strong Content Knowledge

According to the CCSS-ELA, students who are college- and career-ready have established a broad, multidisciplinary knowledge base due to repeated and rigorous engagements with "[cultural] works of quality and substance" (NGA Center, 2010, p. 7). Furthermore, as proficient and engaged learners who purposefully read and attentively listen, their general and discipline-specific knowledge and expertise continually accrue.

High-quality art education that employs VTS to engage students with substantive visual texts from a range of subject matter strengthens their multidisciplinary knowledge base for meaningful artmaking (Walker, 2001) and allows student knowing to assume a visual form. As students "read" works of art (Eisner, 2002; Feldman, 1976) and debate their meanings in the company of peers, expansion and refinement of content

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understanding is perceptible through their speech as well. When art and other content knowledge is authentically encountered and assimilated through VTS dialogues—then transmediated mindfully and abstractly through artmaking—it stands to reason that such knowledge is more memorable and its availability for transfer to other disciplinary endeavors is therefore greatly enhanced (Perkins & Salomon, 1988).

Capacity to Respond to Varying Communicative Demands

Students who are prepared for college, careers, and life in the 21st century are responsive communicators who adapt their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language to the communicative requirements of the situation at hand. They further recognize that when persuasion or debate is necessary, discipline-specific evidence is required to solidify their stance (NGA Center, 2010).

High-quality art education infused with rigorous VTS discussions refines student abilities to respond effectively to varying "audiences, tasks, purposes, and disciplines" (ELA, 2010, p. 7). This occurs as questioning and paraphrasing by the teacher-facilitator and more able peers authentically model content-specific language and appropriate, productive communication styles. The expectation of democratic dialogue and respectful debate (Yenawine, 1998) established through repeated VTS practice further enhances the development of thoughtfully constructed and nuanced communication. Our K-5 boys' growing capacities to entertain diverse peer perspectives and to couch disagreements in well-mannered speech regularly evidence the power of VTS to teach refined communicative competence.

Capacity to Comprehend and Critique

While engaged and open-minded, CCSS-ELA-proficient students are also discerning readers and listeners who continuously strive to comprehend. This criticality involves questioning the assumptions expressed by others and judiciously considering the veracity of their claims (NGA Center, 2010). VTS nurtures this kind of critical thinking, which is also requisite to meaningful artmaking (Walker, 2001), and we routinely witness its emergence as our K-5 boys verbally grapple with complex visual texts. Additionally, revision of previous assumptions and the boys' growing tendencies to preface observations with conditional language such as "I'm thinking *maybe*..." or "It *could* be that..." further evidence the receptivity and flexible thinking being nurtured by VTS.

Capacity to Value Evidence

Evidence-based reasoning supports critical thinking and problem solving, and students who are college- and career-ready apply it proficiently when speaking and writing. These students also anticipate evidence-supported arguments in the discourse of others and, when presented with them, are discerning about their quality (NGA Center, 2010).

Evidential reasoning is a hallmark of VTS and solicited explicitly by the second question of the questioning sequence: "What do you see that makes you say that?" (Housen, 2001; VUE Staff, 2001). 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 interpretations of peers. This feature trains the constructive evaluation of others' use of evidence and, with repeated VTS practice as demonstrated by our boys, students grow to understand that diverse viewpoints spring from individual experience and can often be grounded as solidly as their own.

Capacity to Understand Other Perspectives and Cultures

The CCSS-ELA recognize the heterogeneity of 21st-century colleges and workplaces, and seek to prepare students to thrive in them. At the heart of this preparation is nurturing the desire to understand the diverse perspectives, experiences, and cultures expressed through communicative interactions and texts. Such receptivity is encouraged by providing students with opportunities to critically and constructively evaluate divergent outlooks through in-depth explorations of "great classic and contemporary [cultural] works" (NGA Center, 2010, p. 7).

VTS encourages the capacity to understand diverse perspectives and cultures by engaging students in rigorous discussions of exemplary visual texts from the past and present. Drawing from personal knowledge and experience to construct meaning from these substantive works, students like our K-5 boys enter into their narratives (Housen, 2001; Yenawine, 2009) and, in so doing, "vicariously inhabit the diverse worlds of... artists and their subject matter" (NGA Center, 2010, p. 7). When the sequenced images represent various perspectives, experiences, historical periods, and cultures—the kind of variety recognized to stimulate cognitive growth (VUE Staff, 2001)—student awareness and appreciation of diversity grows. Acceptance of divergence is further enhanced by the multiformity of the peer groups within which the VTS discussions unfold.

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Conclusion

According to Common Core State Standards architect David Coleman (2012), "The arts have a central and essential role in achieving the finest aspects of the Common Core" (para. 2) due to the multimodality of 21st-century texts and the expanded definition of literacy the Standards require. In this article, we have sought to solidly support this claim, spotlighting a fundamental yet often neglected area of visual art content in K-12 classrooms—discussions of artworks and visual culture exemplars—as a viable resource for pursuing the highest CCSS-ELA goals. Through our careful pairing of the Standards' proclaimed capacities of literate individuals with the various dispositions nurtured by VTS, we have posited that high-quality art education—which integrates rigorous VTS dialogues with meaningful artmaking—not only engages students in deeper levels of thinking, feeling, and knowing (Walker, 2001), but also permits our content and practice to support the Standards in rich and powerful ways. Hence, we recognize this as a carpe diem moment for art education and one we must seize without delay if we are to secure the long-sought-after pride of place our unique discipline so richly deserves.

Artworks and visual culture exemplars from the past and present constitute rich and complex cultural texts whose visuality—and the universality of their messages—make them accessible, compelling, and relevant to students' lives. As demonstrated herein, they are also perfect vehicles for teaching the kind of capacities the CCSS-ELA uphold. When instructional images are selected with the developmental stage, interests and needs of viewers in mind—just as one might select printed materials for emergent readers (Housen, 2001; Yenawine, n.d.; Yenawine, 1998), high-order thinking is activated in children as young as 5. Coleman (2012) asserted that because of what the CCSS-ELA demand and "the arts do well… the arts community has the opportunity to take the lead" (para. 10). VTS, which trains keen observation, critical thinking, evidential reasoning, and effective communication (VUE Staff, 2001), provides a potent method for helping art educators do just that and should, therefore, be seriously considered as a central component of standards-based K-12 visual arts education.

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