Visual Thinking Strategies Model

The Visual Thinking Strategies model (VTS) is another educational theory used in arts programs. VTS is practiced primarily in visual arts programs in schools, and it parallels and codifies many of the philosophical principles in the New Museum model. The educational theory behind VTS comes from empirical research done by Abigail Housen, a cognitive psychologist in the Harvard Graduate School of Education. She formulated a theory of Aesthetic Stages, and VTS applies specific methodologies to encourage development through these stages.

The major tool used by Housen is the **Aesthetic Development Interview (ADI)**, essentially a non-directive, stream-of-consciousness interview designed to elicit viewers' thoughts and feelings about visual art work. A large number of open-ended responses is obtained, and like responses are grouped together. In applying this technique, the interviewer will ask open-ended questions, such as, "What do you see in this picture?" and then encourage elaboration. The types of things the interviewee chooses to talk about, e.g., color, emotions, or the "story" in the picture, are then categorized by the stage they represent.[6] An individual's overall developmental stage is determined by how many responses fall into each designated stage category. Individuals can also be between stages, or straddle stages. For example, they may be a stage II/IV viewer if their responses equally exhibit characteristics of II and IV, but no stage III characteristics.[7]

Using this interview technique to study the aesthetic reactions of both children and adults, Housen identified five primary stages of aesthetic development. VTS curriculum is designed to promote development through these five stages. They are:

I. **Accountive Stage**. Viewers are storytellers, and use concrete observations and personal associations to create a narrative about the work of art. Their judgments of art are based on what they know and what they like. Comments are generally colored by emotional terminology, as viewers seem to enter the work of art and become part of its unfolding narrative.

II. **Constructive Stage**. Viewers set about building a framework for looking at works of art, using the most logical and accessible tools: their own perceptions, knowledge and values. If the work does not look the way it is "supposed to," the viewer judges it to be "weird," lacking, or of no value; in other words, their sense of what is realistic is often the standard used to determine value. Emotional responses tend to disappear as viewers distance themselves from the work of art.

III. **Classifying Stage**. Viewers adopt the analytical and critical stance of the art historian. They identify the work in terms of place, time, school, style and origin. They decode the work using facts and figures, categorize the work, and thereby explain and rationalize the work's meaning.

[6] Abigail Housen. "Validating a Measure of Aesthetic Development for Museums and Schools," ILVS Review, Vol. 2 No. 2, (1992), 214.

[7] Abigail Housen, "Three Methods for Understanding Museum Audiences." Museum Studies Journal, (Boston: Boston College of Art, 1987), 47.

IV. **Interpretive Stage**. Viewers seek a personal encounter with the work of art. They explore the canvas, letting meanings slowly unfold and appreciating subtleties of line, shape and color. Feelings take precedence over critical skills as viewers allow the meanings and symbols of the work to emerge. Each new encounter with the work of art allows for new insights and experiences, and viewers recognize that its identity and value are subject to reinterpretation; hence, their own interpretations are subject to change.

V. **Re-Creative Stage**. Re-creative viewers, having a long history of viewing and reflecting about works of art, now "willingly suspend disbelief." A familiar painting is like an old friend who is known intimately, yet full of surprise, deserving attention on a daily level, but also existing on an elevated plane. Time is a key ingredient, allowing Stage V viewers to know the ecology of a work – its time, history, questions, travels, and intricacies. Drawing on their own history with one work in particular, and with viewing in general, these viewers combine personal contemplation with views that broadly encompass universal concerns. Here, memory infuses the landscape of the painting, intricately combining the personal and the universal.[8]

Although stages occur sequentially, all stages are equally important and cannot be skipped. Each stage represents a benchmark level of accumulated aesthetic skills; less experienced viewers are not less adept at knowing how to look at art, they simply have a smaller repertoire of strategies for understanding and evaluating it.[9] Also, while aesthetic development and growth through these stages is related to age, it is not determined by it. A person of any age with no experience with art will not necessarily be in Stage I, and adults will not be at a higher stage than children simply by virtue of age or education. Exposure to art over time is the key to development; without time and exposure, aesthetic development does not occur.[10]

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) techniques are designed to foster development through the aesthetic stages. The VTS curriculum is specifically targeted at developing creative and critical thinking skills – increasing the viewer's repertoire of strategies and ways of understanding – to allow viewers to progress through these stages.

Housen's stage theory impacts VTS in two important ways. One key implication of the progressive stage theory of the VTS curriculum is that **efforts to teach an individual beyond his or her stage are bound to fail** – "developmentally inappropriate concepts do not 'stick'."[11] Hence, VTS must be applied differently depending on which stage the viewer is in. Second, in her studies, Housen found the majority of subjects (and, by extension, the majority of people in general) ranged from Stage I to Stage II/III viewers. **Even among frequent museum-goers, there seem to be relatively few people who have had sufficient interaction with art to move beyond the basic stages of understanding.**

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[8] Abigail Housen. "Validating a Measure of Aesthetic Development for Museums and Schools," ILVS Review, Vol. 2 No. 2, (1992), 215-216.

[9] Karin DeSantis and Abigail Housen. A Guidebook to Developmental Theory and Aesthetic Development for Classroom Teachers. Development Through Art.

[10] Visual Understanding in Education, 9 May 2004 <http://www.vue.org/home/methodology.html>

[11] Karin DeSantis and Abigail Housen. A Guidebook to Developmental Theory and Aesthetic Development for Classroom Teachers. Development Through Art.

As a consequence of these two factors, **VTS curriculum focuses on the needs of beginning viewers.** Most of the curriculum is targeted to age groups from kindergarten to sixth-grade. (Presumably, adults are educated using strategies which are targeted to the same developmental level, but a different age level). Like the New Museum model, VTS does not emphasize facts, dates, or art historical information, as it is stage-inappropriate at the beginning levels. Rather, VTS centers on the utilization of Stage I (narrative) and Stage II (constructive) strategies. For example, over the course of several years, the VTS curriculum intends to enable beginning viewers to:

- Develop a personal connection to art from diverse cultures, times, and places.
- Develop confidence in their ability to construct meaning from it.
- Examine, describe, discuss and interpret what they see in a work of art.
- Draw grounded conclusions about the intentions of the artists who make the works and the cultures from which they come.[12]

To achieve these goals, teachers employ methods that require students to observe and discuss works of art. For example, in a common curriculum format, students may be asked to:

1. Look at as many aspects of a picture as they can find.
2. Describe what they see as accurately as possible.
3. Participate in a class discussion.
4. Draw conclusions based on identifying the evidence they have gathered from a picture.
5. Make distinctions between what they see and what they *think* about what they see.
6. Expand and develop their own point of view.
7. Become aware of the questions they might ask themselves in everyday life as they encounter unfamiliar objects, gleaning as much information from these objects as possible.[13]

A hallmark of the VTS curriculum is the emphasis on the **student's learning processes**, both individually and in conjunction with one another, rather than on the instructor's dissemination of knowledge. "All along, teachers are facilitators of the students' process, never the expert."[14] Self-direction and self-discovery signify development through aesthetic stages.

Another feature of the VTS model is its focus on **long-term growth and the incubation of skills and knowledge**. The formal curriculum is designed to be administered over the course of many years – generally kindergarten through sixth-grade – and to focus on the skills of viewers in Stage I and early Stage II. Students are neither encouraged nor expected to progress through stages more rapidly, so development through Stage V would generally take many more years, perhaps only occurring over the course of a lifetime, if at all. In keeping with the stage theory, continuing education and exposure to art over those years would also be necessary for this to occur.

[12] Visual Understanding in Education, 9 May 2004: <www.vue.org/documents/vtsIntro.html>
[13] ibid
[14] ibid

Finally, VTS views **verbalization and discussion** as crucial components of development. This is partly an outgrowth of the emphasis on self-discovery and "teacher as facilitator," but verbalization also assists students in becoming aware of multiple perspectives. Engaging in group problem-solving in this fashion allows students to gain skill and experience in constructing shared, yet varied meanings for works of art.

Unlike the New Museum model, which is set in the museum, VTS is designed for use in a regular elementary school classroom. Philip Yenawine, who has directed education programs at many well-known museums, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, was one of Abigail Housen's co-developers of VTS. As a result of his influence and the vested interest of museums in developing an aesthetically aware and educated populace, much of the theory, if not the specific VTS curriculum, has slowly been integrated into education programs at numerous institutions, including the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Detroit Institute of Arts, and the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. It has been adopted by the New York City Board of Education, and it may be introduced into the Los Angeles public schools through a partnership with the UCLA Hammer Museum.[15] VTS techniques are disseminated through Visual Understanding in Education, a research and training group led by Yenawine.[16]

[15] Visual Understanding in Education, 9 May 2004: <http://www.vue.org/whatisvts2.html#Whatmuseumsdo>
[16] Visual Understanding in Education, 9 May 2004: < http://www.vue.org/>