

Visual Thinking Strategies in the Composition Classroom

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English instruction at the K-12 and college levels includes practice in multi-modal communication and multiliteracies; however, college composition is distinct because it is grounded in rhetoric as a theoretical and pedagogical framework. This chapter demonstrates how Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) methodology can improve student success in the transition to college by providing a bridge from K-12 English Language Arts instruction, based on the Common Core State Standards, to instruction on visual and digital rhetoric commonly provided in college writing classrooms.

Professors and secondary school teachers across the country are collaborating on ways to bridge the high school and college experience and to give students the tools they need to be successful in this transition. Within the realm of language arts and college composition, this transition is an important aspect for college success across disciplines. But while there is some alignment between K-12 Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and discipline-approved college-level learning outcomes, the expectations for what constitute a college-ready writer can vary greatly, and more strategies for helping students of diverse abilities bridge this gap are needed. Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) is an arts-based teaching method designed to augment visual literacy and critical thinking in school-age children; interestingly, it is also being used in university settings to continue the development of twenty-first century habits of mind for working and learning. Although VTS has been used across age groups, populations, and educational institutions, it has not yet been fully explored as an agent for the successful transition from high school to college—a transition requiring students to read and analyze traditional and multimodal texts from multiple perspectives, including the use of a range of rhetorical concepts. This chapter reports on how VTS was used in two English 101 courses to enhance learning outcomes and help sighted students practice twenty-first century habits of mind.

Course Description and VTS Application

VTS was used in two English 101 courses in Fall 2014 and again in Fall 2015. The course was supported by the Office of Community Engagement that awarded Summer Hess, a quarterly faculty instructor, a small grant, which paid for the stu-

dents' museum entries and compensated the instructor for some of the extra hours invested in course redesign. Hess had worked at the Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture (MAC) on a six-month grant-funded project called the Teen Interpreter Program, which trained high school students to engage the public in conversation about exhibitions in the galleries. The program used VTS to train these students in the art of inquiry and critical discussion, and the instructor observed how high school students practiced and excelled in many twenty-first century skills that some of her English 101 students would struggle to apply in the university environment. She was inspired to complete introductory and advanced VTS trainings with the hopes of using the teaching method to help her students transition from a language arts approach to writing to a more rhetorically-driven strategy of analysis and composition. She integrated the discussion method into the English 101 curriculum in three ways: as a classroom warm up, in preparation for the museum visit, and as a vehicle for peer-to-peer and community engagement.

VTS is a research-based teaching method used by museums and educators worldwide to facilitate conversations about works of art. It was co-created through the work of veteran museum educator Philip Yenawine and cognitive psychologist Abigail Housen. Originally developed as a museum teaching strategy to nurture aesthetic development in the early 1990s, VTS quickly grew into a school program to support observation, creative and critical thinking, listening, and communication skills in students. VTS asks students to pause and ponder three related questions: Firstly, "What's going on in this picture?" Secondly, students are asked to reason and search for evidence with the repeated use of the question, "What do you see that makes you say that?" Finally, students are asked to look longer and to probe deeper with, "What more can you/we find?" Housen's research found that regular exposure to VTS augments academic performance in students through the promotion of aesthetic and critical thinking skills, which can be transferred to non-art objects and other subjects, including writing (Housen, 2001). It creates a student-centered environment through engaging and open-ended questions, and validates and encourages growth through the facilitator's paraphrasing of student responses. VTS is a constructivist model and asks students to apply what they know, thereby gaining new insight from the careful scaffolding of a teacher's facilitation and from peer interaction as the conversation builds from their collective reasoning. The strategy grew out of Abigail Housen's research on aesthetic thinking, leading to the creation of an aesthetic development stage theory to understand how we make meaning while looking at a work of art. The VTS framework helps students express their ideas while teaching them how to ground their thinking in evidence.

During VTS discussions, students practice reasoning in a social context and learn to use the ideas of others to expand their perspectives. They experiment with other composition related skills such as observation, interpretation, the provision of evidence, listening, elaboration, argumentation, the practice of new vocabulary, and the

revision of their initial impression or interpretations—all key predicates for effective writing. In this way, VTS was used to support the following course goals: First, to identify and analyze the elements of the rhetorical situation, including context, purpose, audience, subject, and author; Second, to read, comprehend, and analyze a variety of popular and/or scholarly texts; Third, to collaborate in small and large peer groups for the purpose of sharing relevant ideas, respectful opinions, and constructive feedback; and Finally, to develop a recursive and collaborative writing process that includes planning, drafting, revising, organizing, editing, and proofreading.

First, twice weekly VTS discussions were used as a warm up activity to help students shift their attention from other preoccupations to the demands of the classroom and to give them opportunities to practice composition-related skills on a regular basis. In the warm-up, an image was projected onto a large screen at the beginning of every class while students observed the slide and wrote about it for two minutes in response to the opening VTS question: “What’s going on in this image?” Then, the instructor facilitated a 15-minute conversation about the image, during which she mirrored students’ thinking through paraphrasing and emphasized similarities and differences among key ideas. Finally, students returned to the original piece of writing and were asked to record “What more did I find?” in order to help them practice a collaborative writing process. This writing was entered into the students’ Writers’ Logs and submitted as part of their final portfolio. Although encountered as unusual at first, within two weeks students anticipated and looked forward to the exercise at the beginning of each class. The instructor selected images from many mediums and time periods according to the image selection guidelines put forward by VTS co-founder, Philip Yenawine (2003), so as to engage different kinds of viewers and expose them to diverse media and historical contexts.

Next, these discussions were used to prepare students for the museum environment, where they chose a cultural artifact to research and analyze for their final paper. The final paper was a persuasive essay divided into two parts: a visual analysis and a researched argument. Although often reticent to let their guard down in a new and formal environment, VTS provided students with the confidence to interact with works of art in the museum setting. VTS also helped students practice the four habits of mind that bolstered their writing abilities and provided them with the confidence to interact with original works of art in a new context. It gave them an approach for creating meaning that could be applied across a diverse range of situations and reinforced the idea that composition skills can be employed outside classroom. Finally, it gave them practice viewing and analyzing a variety of visual and digital works, which made students more comfortable with the rhetorical skills necessary to complete the final paper. Before the end of the visit, students selected objects from the 100 Stories exhibit, a centennial celebration of the history of the Northwest, which incorporates fine art, video footage, photography, and cultural objects.

VTS at Work in the Writing Classroom

A few samples of student work will help demonstrate the impacts of VTS in student thinking and writing. First, here is the first draft of the final paper of the least college-ready student in the Fall 2014 class:

What I first noticed about the object is how worn out they were. Where my eyes travel next is the writing on the square they were sitting on. My first impression was why there is an old pair of boots here what is so significant about them. The dominant colors on this pair of boots were like a brown and black with a like a leather strap welded over the shoe laces. The brown part of the shoes were on the sides and the rest of it was black including the thick leather strap that was over the laces. Light is used in this object by having the light shine right on the laces. The owner of these shoes was Michael Cain. The size of the shoes is men's large.



Figure 10.1. Kaiser Aluminum Work Boots (gift of Michael Cain, 2011; photo courtesy of MAC Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture).

Here is an excerpt from the same student's final draft:

When visiting the Museum of Arts and culture. I took an interest in the aluminum factory workers boots. The reason they were in such interest because of the history it has behind Spokane. The aluminum factory was big a part of Spokane. The factory was named Kaisers mead aluminum reduction mill. . . . Kaiser

Mead Aluminum Factory was very important in the Spokane's history. . . . When I first saw the pair of boots I really didn't know why they were designed like the way they were. They had very thick padding surrounding a cover over the laces. I am assuming to keep out all the heat, that plan didn't work to well if Michael only quit after two years of working at the mill . . . I believe that when observing Cain's boots, it showed how hard people worked to keep Spokane running. I do believe that showing this object in a Spokane museum was very interesting because it is showing how one simple object shows so much history for one city. The boots remind me of my own shoes. The reason they do is because I have worked in hard labor and every day I would look at them and realized I had a hard day's work that was best part of my day.

While the student did not progress to composing college-level prose, he did engage in critical thinking and analysis and found a rudimentary way to capture his thinking process in writing. In this way, VTS gave the student practice with making his thinking visible, both in speech and writing. For the reluctant writer, this is critical. Learning how to decode an image first through discussion creates a language-rich environment for the writer. That, coupled with the open-ended probing of a visual image nurtures the acquisition of language. Through repeated measurements, VTS has shown to have an impact on student writing. For example, with as few as ten lessons per year in a third to fifth grade classroom, students consistently demonstrate growth in detailed observations, speculative thinking, and evidential reasoning. The skills practiced in discussions transfer to independently writing about a work of art (Yenawine, 2013).

Fortunately, the VTS methodology challenges high-achieving students just as it provides an entry point for those with a less ample foundation. Here is an excerpt from the final paper of one of the students with the highest grade at the end of the quarter.

Miss Tokushima is a pleasant, perpetually smiling doll that was assigned an important task upon her conception: to help reconcile the relationship between America and Japan at a time in which they were at odds. The artist who designed her, Koryusai Takizawa, created her in such a way as to instill a positive frame of reference in the minds of Americans whenever they considered the Japanese. She is small, constructed of porcelain, and lived in Japan before reaching her destination in the United States to fulfill her lofty goal. She is currently housed at the Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture and continues to play a diplomatic role from her perch inside her glass case . . . After performing

extensive research, I believe that Miss. Tokushima is a good representation of the relationship between America and Japan because of the manner in which she was received at the time of her conception and the manner in which many Americans regarded her and other friendship dolls during World War II.



Figure 10.2. Japanese Friendship Doll "Miss Tokushima" (made by Takizawa Korysai, 1927; photo courtesy of MAC Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture).

While this student entered the classroom with a high level of competency, VTS engaged her. VTS is used in the university setting for many of the same reasons K-12 education values the skills and strategies it nurtures—the twenty-first century habits of mind for work and learning. For example, the Rose Museum at Brandeis University has used VTS as a tool for student engagement at a university museum. Harvard Medical School offers an elective course title “Training the Eye,” which also uses VTS as a way to hone observation skills, including clinical reasoning. Learning to read a patient or the plethora of visual information in the clinical setting requires medical professionals to be well versed in the act of looking and feeling comfortable dwelling in ambiguity. Practicing the skill of pulling back and hearing what others have to say about the same image cultivates the social reasoning and intelligence of group thinking. It is justified by the idea that a practice of listening to others prior to a final diagnosis could result in fewer mistakes.

VTS in the Transition from High School to College English Rhetorical Reading

Both the K-12 Common Core State Standards (CCSS)/ English Language Arts (ELA) Anchor Standards for Reading and the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) Outcomes Statement for FYC require that students critically read and interpret a wide range of texts, with a particular focus on the relationship between claims and evidence. This indicates that, to be successful in the transition from high school to college, students need to receive instruction on how to read complex academic texts using the framework of rhetoric, along with practice doing so, at both the high school *and* college level.

Table 10.1. Rhetorical Reading

CCSS ELA Anchor Standards for Reading	WPA Outcomes Statement for FYC
Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently. Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence. Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.	Read a diverse range of texts, attending especially to relationships between assertion and evidence, to patterns of organization, to the interplay between verbal and nonverbal elements, and to how these features function for different audiences and situations

While the CCSS clearly establish that students need instruction and practice in critical reading skills, research on college reading underscores the need for instruction and practice in *rhetorical* reading at the college level. Rhetorical reading is necessary to the process of academic inquiry and writing required at the college

level, as students learn to engage with and write about unfamiliar scholarly texts from a range of diverse disciplines (Jamieson, 2013; Moore Howard, 1993).

VTs supports close reading, rhetorical reading, and text analysis by inviting students to see a text and view it again and again. When students are asked, collectively, to puzzle through what is happening in an image, their responses are often idiosyncratic and grounded in their own personal schema. However, the facilitation process by the instructor allows for naming this type of thinking, which makes students more aware of the framework or rhetorical strategies they engage to “read” a visual text. For example, a paraphrase might include framing their remarks with the vocabulary of rhetorical analysis: “From your perspective this is . . . from your experience . . . to you this looks like . . . from your point of view this might be . . .” A VTs conversation allows for multiple points of view to exist in reference to one source—the image. Thomas, Place, and Hillyard (2008) also found that “our pedagogy and practice is grounded in research that highlights the use of visual images in promoting polysemic understanding, or the ability to make sense of texts with multiple channels of information.” The practice of holding various perspectives afloat, equally, during a conversation gives students practice in analyzing multiple perspectives, which is essential for engagement and participation in the classroom and beyond.

Locating, Evaluating, and Using Evidence

Broadly, the CCSS Anchor Standards for Writing require a few major shifts from most previous K-12 standards: a move toward the reading and writing of informational texts in addition to literary texts, a focus on reading and writing using evidence from texts, an improvement in research skills, and a heavy focus on academic vocabulary. A key shift of the CCSS and central to FYC is the importance of finding and citing textual evidence in support of argumentative communication, and students need to be able to do this with both alphabetic and multimodal texts. Both the K-12 and college standards related to the use of sources include a focus on the location, evaluation, and use of appropriate textual evidence to inform and support the production of informational and argumentative texts.

Clearly, according to these standards, that students learn to use appropriate evidence to support claims is important at both the high school and college level. However, as students transition from high school to college, they face numerous challenges in learning to effectively evaluate and use academic sources as evidence. Jamieson (2013) and Rebecca Moore Howard (1993) observe that, rather than effectively and appropriately “integrating the writers’ ideas with those from . . . sources” (WPA Outcomes, 2014) beginning college writers often engage in “patchwriting,” which leaves them in danger of being charged with academic misconduct. This issue has recently received so much attention in the field that one of

the most successful and widely used composition textbooks on the market, *They say, I say: Moves that matter in academic writing*, is devoted almost entirely to teaching students to interact with, and effectively deploy, academic sources as evidence in researched-based argumentative writing assignments (Graff & Birkenstein, 2014).

Table 10.2. Use of Sources

CCSS ELA Anchor Standards for Writing	WPA Outcomes Statement for FYC
<p>Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.</p> <p>Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.</p> <p>Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.</p> <p>Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.</p>	<p>Locate and evaluate (for credibility, sufficiency, accuracy, timeliness, bias, and so on) primary and secondary research materials, including journal articles and essays, books, scholarly and professionally established and maintained databases or archives, and informal electronic networks and internet sources</p> <p>Use strategies—such as interpretation, synthesis, response, critique, and design/redesign—to compose texts that integrate the writer’s ideas with those from appropriate sources.</p>

VTS can address this issue in a way that many students will find more engaging than completing a textbook reading assignment. Throughout a VTS conversation, when a claim or unsupported inference is made, students are asked to ground their observations in evidence with the question: “What do you see that makes you say that?” The wording of this question directs the student back to the image to cite visual evidence to support their interpretation. In addition, it gives the student an opportunity to elaborate and justify their thinking. This question is used often to give students practice in reasoning in evidence. VTS also gives students multiple entry points into decoding a work of art, which is a complex task, in part, because reading an image is a non-linear process. Unlike written text, there are multiple ways to enter a work of art. A viewer is tasked with organizing their thoughts, seeing connections in a mass of visual information. The VTS question “What more can we find?” draws the eyes and thinking back to the image to continually mine the work for meaning. Skilled facilitation assists the group in this process by verbally mapping the conversation—linking similar and divergent connections where they exist as well as noting themes as they emerge.

Critical Thinking and Habits of Mind

The CCSS and WPA FYC Standards both require that students engage in deep

critical thinking, applying new frameworks (especially rhetoric at the college level), and practice new thinking strategies. The documents that make up the official text of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts are prefaced with what is termed a “portrait of students who meet the standards set out in this document” (National Governors Association, 2010, p. 7). This portrait describes a set of students that are “engaged and open-minded” and who “demonstrate independence,” qualities that we argue can be enhanced through instruction in VTS. This kind of epistemological and pedagogical perspective is also reflected in the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*, a report jointly produced by the Council of Writing Program Administrators and the National Council of Teachers of English (2001), which notes that habits of mind such as curiosity, openness, engagement, and metacognition are essential to success at the college level.

One way to make the kind pedagogical shift that is necessary to foster these habits of mind in students making the transition to college is to engage them in the kind of learning found in the VTS approach. The way that VTS inspires student engagement, twenty-first century skills, and the learning of cognitive strategies can be further understood through the framework of creativity studies. As a vehicle for creative thinking, VTS can be used “to reinforce the situational and iterative nature of composition” and to encourage students to revise their work, thereby improving the “quality, innovation, and/or rhetorical effectiveness” (Lee & Carpenter, 2000). These two scholars also agree that a key take away from the field of creativity scholarship is that “aesthetic creativity is relevant for academic and non-academic work” and is “transferable across media modes” (2000, p. 4). More broadly speaking, Rouzie (2000) suggests that the permission to explore possibilities, make mistakes, and try new possibilities is essential for some students who “may need to feel some permission to experiment with the aesthetic and rhetorical possibilities of playful discourse . . . (651). In other words, when VTS is employed as a strategy to teach creative thinking in the composition classroom, students regularly have the opportunity to analyze rhetorical situations, engage with academic discourse, employ evidence and develop a recursive and collaborative writing process.

Conclusion

More analysis is needed to better understand the potential of VTS to be used in the composition classroom. Additionally, the heavy emphasis on visual literacy could isolate students with visual impairments, unless reasonable accommodations were enacted. But as an initial exploration into the potential for a museum-inspired pedagogy to help students transition from a language arts approach to writing to a more rhetorically-driven strategy of analysis and composition, the course provided strong initial outcomes.

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