

Using Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) to Deepen Comprehension

by Laura DeMersseman

Understanding Visual Thinking Strategies

I am a teacher at heart and reflective by nature. Due to this I seek out opportunities to enhance literacy learning for myself, but more importantly for my students. I am a Kindergarten through fourth grade Reading Interventionist at an Elementary School. My students are struggling readers and writers; those students who are not yet reading and writing at grade level. Two years ago, one of these learning opportunities presented itself. My elementary school began a partnership with a local museum participating in 22 hours of professional development around Visual Thinking Strategies or VTS. First it is important to understand VTS. The goal of VTS is to use art to deepen learning across school disciplines. It was developed with the intent to build visual literacy, but the results are far greater. Yenawine (2014) explains that for students, “VTS builds a variety of related skills: visual literacy, complex thinking and the language to express it, listening, increasing interest in and capacity to write, and collaborative problem solving. For teachers, VTS provides a strategy to bring out students who often hang back, to level the playing field, to introduce discussion as a vehicle for collective meaning making that extends across disciplines, and to establish a clear means of scaffolding students’ abilities and peer learning.”

The Purpose of Visual Thinking Strategies

The primary objective of the Visual Thinking Strategies protocol is to increase student engagement and participation while deepening thinking, language ability, writing skills, and visual literacy. During a VTS lesson, the students are shown an image and then asked to take a moment to look at the picture. The students are then asked 3 questions: What’s going on in this picture? What do you see that makes you say that? And what more can we find? The teacher is trained to listen, paraphrase, and link. The teacher is central to the process but not the authoritative source.

From Whole Class to Small Group

When I first observed what was happening in the classrooms during the VTS lessons I was impressed. The students were engaged; not only

verbally expressing themselves, but also writing in great depth about their observations. I wanted to take these successes and build on them during my small intervention group time.

As soon as I began the VTS training with my colleagues, I saw the value of this model and how it could be used to support my reading intervention students. Bringing the visual thinking strategies into my small reading groups would allow me to provide strategies consistent to those being used in class and I knew this would greatly benefit my intervention students. By asking the questions and looking at the pictures, I could support the students as we front loaded vocabulary, concepts, and language that might occur in the text. I realized a natural place for the 3 questions would be in the reading phase of my lesson during the book orientation. So I jumped right in and when we were doing the picture walk I would ask my students, “What’s going on in this picture? What do you see that makes you say that? What more can we find?” These 3 simple questions combined with the experiences they were having around the VTS lessons in the classroom had a dramatic effect on my intervention students. Previously the students had minimal engagement and I was doing most of the work. Now it was clear the students were more engaged. I gave the students time to look at the pictures and encouraged them to dig deeper. As they noticed, wondered, discussed, building on the thinking of the group; it was the students who were coming up with the vocabulary and language they needed to successfully read the text. Even more encouraging was the fact that I was also seeing this language and vocabulary appear in the students writing responses. I sat back and smiled, realizing the importance of what was happening. I think it can best be summed up by this quote, “Little by little, students talk themselves into understanding bits and pieces of the world we live in as well as the material we want them to learn. They learn how to learn, how to think and how to communicate effectively with others. They use expressive experiences to aid them in writing. Writing is not so much taught as learned, included in school as it is in life, as a useful tool for recording what one thinks and wants to communicate to others. It’s authentic.”



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References:

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