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What is Visual Thinking Strategies?

by Adelijn van Huis, 30 September 2026

In the text below, we outline a picture of VTS. We discuss the theoretical foundations on which VTS is based, as well as the method itself. Finally, we take a closer look at the various effects that VTS can bring about. At The Second Thought, we work towards a society where different perspectives can meet, curiosity can flourish, and understanding can grow. VTS is our basic tool for working towards this.

Theoretical framework

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) was developed based on empirical research and various theoretical insights into perception, experience, learning, meaning-making, and aesthetic development. Its theoretical foundation can be understood through the work of, among others, John Dewey, Rudolf Arnheim, Lev Vygotsky, and Abigail Housen. These thinkers approach the subject from different perspectives but share the view that our engagement with our environment (and images!) is not a passive process: people actively make meaning of what they perceive and experience, with both individual and social contexts playing an important role.

For John Dewey, the concept of experience is central. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey describes art not as a separate object that exists independently of the viewer, but as something that acquires meaning within a concrete experience. In doing so, Dewey rejects artificial divisions between, for example, thinking and doing, emotion and reason, or perception and action. According to him, these processes are part of a single integrated experience in which people and their environment continually interact. From this perspective, looking at art is not merely a cognitive activity, but an experiential process in which perception, feeling, action, and meaning making are interconnected (Dewey, 1934).

Rudolf Arnheim approaches this from a different perspective. In *Visual Thinking*, he emphasizes that perception is not a passive registration of reality. According to Arnheim, visual perception is itself a form of active ordering and meaning making. In doing so, he challenges the traditional distinction between perception and thinking: what someone sees and how they make meaning of what they see are closely connected. An image is therefore not simply perceived first and then rationally analysed; meaning already emerges within the process of perception itself (Arnheim, 1969).

Lev Vygotsky focuses on how we learn within socially and culturally shaped environments. Through interaction with others, new perspectives can emerge and individual experience can be expanded. Vygotsky formulated the concept of the zone of proximal development. Some tasks can be performed independently, while with the help of others, peers, people are able to do things that lie just beyond their individual reach. Vygotsky also recognized the crucial role that language plays in

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thinking and learning. Experience and meaning making take shape through interaction with others and through language. Language makes it possible to share experiences, name them, reflect on them, and further develop understanding (Vygotsky, 1978).

Abigail Housen focused specifically on the way people look at art and make meaning of works of art. Based on empirical research, she developed her theory of aesthetic development. She described different ways in which people relate to art and construct meaning. She saw these ways as developmental patterns that can evolve through experience with art. Housen's research therefore forms an important empirical and theoretical foundation for VTS (Housen, 2007).

Drawing on these different theoretical insights, Abigail Housen and Philip Yenawine developed Visual Thinking Strategies. They translated Housen's research into a systematic way of structuring conversations about art and images. VTS can therefore be understood as an application in which different theoretical principles come together: art as experience in Dewey, active visual perception in Arnheim, social and linguistic meaning-making in Vygotsky, and aesthetic development in Housen. Housen and Yenawine explicitly developed VTS from Housen's empirical research and theory of aesthetic development (Housen & Yenawine, 2009).

The theoretical foundation of VTS therefore does not consist of one single theory, but of a coherent body of insights into how people perceive, experience, make meaning, and develop in relation to art and to others. It is precisely the connection between these perspectives that makes it possible to understand looking at art as an active, experiential, and social process of meaning-making.

What is VTS?

VTS is a method that creates space for exploring a (visual) source through dialogue. During a VTS conversation, you invite people to make meaning of an image and then ask them to visually substantiate their interpretation. This sets in motion a process in which people explore their thoughts, feelings, or associations in relation to the image. What have they seen that prompted their response? They explore the visual source and their own inner response simultaneously. They are here, in the present, drawing on knowledge and experiences stored within them. Because in a VTS conversation you look and think together about what you see and experience, you listen not only to your own interpretation but also look through the eyes of others. This strengthens the awareness that, as human beings, we each enter the world from our own particular formation and that there are always other ways of looking.

A VTS conversation fosters openness, curiosity, and appreciation of difference. This makes VTS enriching for all kinds of situations in which people learn, live, and work together. VTS is now successfully applied in many different settings around the world. In more than 15 countries, in hundreds of primary schools, museums, many universities, leadership programmes, healthcare

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institutions, and public and other organizations. In recent years, the number of scientific publications on VTS has increased exponentially. You can find a selection of them here.

How does VTS work?

During a VTS conversation, participants talk about a visually perceptible source. In interaction with one another, they explore that source, each other's perspectives, and their own feelings, thoughts, and ideas. The source can be anything: a work of art, image, text, object, graph — anything at all.^[1]

¹A facilitator drives the process forward through an open attitude, the use of a fixed set of open questions, and carefully attuned guidance in which paraphrasing plays an important role. The group gives direction and content to the conversation; the facilitator follows, sharpens, and invites deeper exploration. A VTS conversation combines a high degree of openness with a predictable structure (Housen & Yenawine, 2009).

Attitude

An attitude of curiosity, openness, and acceptance of all contributions is characteristic of a VTS conversation. The facilitator sets the tone by focusing on understanding what participants are saying and thereby models an attentive and open attitude. Through paraphrasing, the facilitator checks whether she has understood what someone means. Where possible, she also asks probing questions that encourage participants to explain their interpretation based on what can be seen. This creates an explicit connection between perception, and the meaning people give to what they see. Explaining an interpretation makes it more accessible and easier for other participants in the conversation to follow (Housen & Yenawine, 2009).

Effects

While the attitude described above is characteristic of the facilitator's role in a VTS conversation, participants adopt this attitude as well. Over time, they begin to ask themselves questions rather than search for (and believe in) the 'right answer'. It becomes a 'second nature' that they can apply in all kinds of situations; for example, in casual or conflictual interactions, during a 'real' VTS conversation, or when reflecting on their own judgments and beliefs by asking themselves what they base their position on.

Underlying this attitude are skills that both facilitators and participants develop perception, listening, self-expression, (visual) literacy, critical thinking, and cultural responsiveness.

¹ Almost anything can be the subject of a VTS conversation. In the text that follows, for convenience, we will refer to an image or a source. But this could also be a sound recording, film, situation, or interaction between people. As long as it can be perceived by everyone.

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- Perception

We engage in sensory perception from the very beginning of our lives. Even before we can speak, we make meaning of the world based on what we perceive. Everyone can do it and everyone does it. This is the starting point of VTS: the fact that we are constantly making meaning of the world around us, whether it is a situation or a work of art. But this innate capacity is not a guarantee of critical or conscious perception. On the contrary, it is something we do automatically if we do not learn how it works. That is why VTS gently invites you to examine this process of meaning-making. After all, we perceive from the perspective of what we know and take for granted, what we ‘accept as true’.

In a VTS conversation, participants have ample opportunity to look carefully, talk, and explore what they see. It is a conversation with built-in slowing down. On the one hand, because conversations naturally take place over time; on the other, because the facilitator paraphrases every contribution. This extended attention helps participants perceive more deeply and broadly. Participants make connections between different observable elements and pause to consider how they almost immediately process those impressions into meaningful interpretations. The VTS questions prompt them to explain what they see that leads them to put forward a particular interpretation. You could also say that VTS is about looking again and again at the same image: looking again yourself when you consider what you base a statement on, looking again through the eyes of others, and looking again when you are asked, ‘What more can we discover?’ This final question implies that there is always more to discover, as long as we continue to perceive.

- Listening

Exploring the image is, on the one hand, an individual process and, at the same time, a collective one. The first step is to look in silence and relate to what is presented to you, by yourself. Everyone then has the opportunity to describe what they see happening in the image. By listening, you look through the eyes of others. What do they say about the same image you are looking at together? Sometimes you suddenly see things you had not noticed before. Or you may completely agree. An inner dialogue emerges, along with a richly nuanced story. The interpretation you initially had may shift because you incorporate what someone else has added. Or it may not, because you cannot identify with what the other person has put forward at all. During a VTS conversation, therefore, you listen to others, but you also listen to yourself. As all these ways of looking and experiencing are placed alongside one another, the quality of the interpersonal space becomes particularly tangible. Participants refrain from trying to convince one another, and it becomes easier to hear what others are saying. In a VTS conversation, the facilitator connects different perspectives, both observations that build on earlier comments and opposing ideas. Every contribution is welcome and worthwhile. If the starting point is that we explore every response, ‘being right’ or ‘giving the right answer’ disappears from the scene. There are always more ways of looking.

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- Language

Language is a dominant mode of interaction in our society. Through language, we make contact, talk about what is going on inside us, and express how we think about things. VTS creates an opportunity to talk to others from a direct experience. By describing what you see and what you think and experience in relation to it, others learn what is going on inside you as you look at an image. When someone else then responds and describes what they see, an exchange gets underway.

During a VTS conversation, participants look together at a carefully chosen image that encourages them to speak. This engagement often makes it easy to participate. The facilitator reflects what someone has said and can thereby naturally introduce new language, formulate grammatically correct sentence structures, and adapt language use to the group. Paraphrasing creates a pause and 'processing time' for what has been said. Both the speaker and the rest of the group have time to let what has been said sink in. The message can land.

- Visual literacy

Visual literacy is the ability to actively and inquisitively make meaning of the world around us, including works of art and other representations. During VTS conversations, people share what comes to mind when looking at an image. They make connections between different visible (visual) elements and examine how they interpret the work. As mentioned earlier, VTS provides an opportunity to practise perception and meaning making in a structured way, from different perspectives. In this way, the process of meaning-making itself comes under scrutiny (Hailey, Miller, & Yenawine, 2015).

Research into aesthetic development by Abigail Housen (2007) shows that students who gain extensive experience with VTS conversations naturally develop access to a wide variety of thinking strategies for making meaning of works of art. They begin to ask more questions and approach a work of art from different perspectives. For example, they recognize that someone has created the work and made deliberate choices, and they begin to ask what intention may have guided that person's work. Their approach to the work of art also changes from what might be described as looking once and imagining to looking repeatedly and interpreting visual elements in a traceable, coherent way. People, including young people, subsequently apply the strategies they have acquired to other situations and other objects as well. In this way, aesthetic development strengthens the ability to make meaning of the visual world (Housen, 2007).

- Critical thinking

We regard critical thinking as 'reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do' (Ennis, 1991). During a VTS conversation, participants continually weigh whether they consider an interpretation of the work they are looking at together to be plausible or not. Sometimes you have said something yourself, and the facilitator asks you to visually substantiate your statement. You look and think again, and new information often emerges. When someone else speaks, you go through the same process.

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Precisely because of the variety of perspectives, while looking at the same work, it becomes unmistakably clear that our highly personal histories, assumptions, and beliefs play a guiding role in the way we perceive and interpret. VTS reveals how we arrive at positions and almost imperceptibly creates a process of reasonable, reflective thinking. Returning to what you previously thought and said, and changing your mind, also occurs regularly in VTS conversations. Experiencing, thinking, investigating, and reflecting on this process take precedence, rather than the substantive result or outcome of the conversation.

VTS thus provides a place to practise thinking together, where participants dare to take risks and show up with what they see, feel, and think, even when it differs from what others suggest.

During a VTS conversation, you think in relation to others, allow other perspectives in, and find your own position, not separately from others but precisely within the social space. Research conducted by Housen found evidence that students participating in VTS developed critical-thinking skills and transferred these skills to individual art viewing and to viewing non-art objects (Housen, 2002).

- Cultural responsiveness

VTS can be understood in relation to Geneva Gay's principle of **culturally responsive teaching**, particularly in its emphasis on recognizing learners' experiences, perspectives, and cultural backgrounds as resources for learning (Gay, 2000; 2002). It also resonates with the concept of *funds of knowledge*: the skills and knowledge that people develop within their households and communities and bring with them into learning situations (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Rather than assuming a knowledge deficit that needs to be filled with the 'right' information, VTS recognizes that all participants already possess rich skills in perceiving and interpreting, shaped by their own life experiences.

This attitude applies to both the facilitator and the participants. It contributes to an environment in which people can contribute from the position and experience they inhabit, rather than trying to be, think, or participate in a predetermined way.

VTS Practices

A wide range of professionals apply VTS, including primary school teachers, secondary school (arts) teachers, doctors, museum educators, managers, researchers, teachers who provide NT2 language instruction, and library staff. Under the heading 'Practices' you will find examples of professionals who work with VTS.

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