

Book Review: VTS in Montessori Environments

This cognitive approach is more than just looking at pictures

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Young people today are inundated with visual images in television shows, advertisements, and social media, as passive consumers and as future citizens. This steady stream of visual stimulation raises several questions:

- Where are opportunities for students to become engaged with visual content? How can they develop curiosities around visuals that scaffold critical thinking and visual literacy activities?
- How can educators do this in a formal classroom environment to promote the growth of visually literate future citizens?

Using almost 30 years of research, the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector (NCMPS) and Philip Yenawine present the case for Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) as an opportunity to apply these strategies in the Montessori learning environment by centering engagement with art. The overall goal of VTS is to provide an accessible, transformative learning experience through an open-ended discussion of visual art that increases a student's literacy, language, and critical thinking skills.

VTS is a student-centered pedagogy in which the instructor selects a piece of art and then facilitates an inclusive discussion with carefully selected questions. Considering VTS and Montessori together creates a convergence of two pedagogies in which discussion, analysis, and writing about

art are conduits to improving visual and critical thinking and enhancing language and social development.

VTS aligns well with the Montessori approach of integrating and discussing art throughout the curriculum, and this Playbook supports educators in developing their skills to incorporate these strategies in their classrooms. Five chapters comprise *Visual Thinking Strategies in Montessori Environments*. Chapter 1 connects VTS and the Montessori environment. Chapter 2 provides guidelines for facilitating lessons, and Chapter 3 connects the VTS approach with language development. Chapter 4 focuses on assessing VTS. The last chapter reflects on the future of the Montessori environment, imagination, aesthetic development, and human potential.

VTS and Montessori education

In the past two decades, connecting art and the social studies curriculum

VISUAL THINKING STRATEGIES IN
Montessori
ENVIRONMENTS



National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector and Philip Yenawine
NATIONAL CENTER for
MONTESSORI in the PUBLIC SECTOR

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through means such as the Visual Discovery method has become increasingly popular throughout traditional schools in the United States, often in

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textbook series. Created by Teachers' Curriculum Institute, the Visual Discovery method guides students to collect evidence, make inferences, and create hypotheses by analyzing visuals and sharing their thoughts through engaging activities such as graphic reading notes and dramatic role play. The Visual Discovery method often focuses on primary sources as artifacts, using academic language within the content area. Although engaging, this activity is often manufactured, with limited visual primary sources in prescriptive textbooks based on narrow state standards. The Visual Discovery approach lacks the depth, preparation, and formal training of VTS. The drawbacks of the Visual Discovery method have been widely discussed as a problem within traditional social studies classrooms. All of traditional education, not only social studies instruction, could benefit from a holistic approach to VTS.

VTS is a more authentic and holistic approach to visual source analysis than the Visual Discovery method. It is also grounded in cognitive science. When interwoven with the Montessori Method, VTS is open-ended, purposeful, and powerful for generating human creativity as well as criticality.

Visual Thinking Strategies in Montessori Environments focuses on the connection between VTS and Montessori education. The authors describe the strengths of both models of learning but argue that they are greater together: "We have gained an appreciation of how the two pedagogies align in purpose and in practice, putting students at the center of learning and creating opportunities for them to engage in critical thinking, complete conversations, and meaningful collaborations" The authors acknowledge that some readers may have gone through VTS training, so a goal of the book is to provide a companion guide that highlights connecting

to, and focusing on, the Montessori learning environment, where art and the appreciation of art are central to learning culture and language. However, the authors acknowledge that this book is not a substitute for formal VTS training.

NCMPS and Yenawine further provide a rich history of the development of VTS at the intersection of museum-education practices and cognitive-psychology research with a focus on visual thinking—where "looking... shapes thinking". VTS proposes that looking, thinking, and talking, especially in a group, contribute to impactful social learning. Careful thought goes into connecting visual thinking and the three planes of childhood that form the foundation for Montessori education with attention to learner development, opportunities for growth, and connections to research. The sections that follow highlight pieces of each chapter, with commentary.

Facilitating a VTS session

Chapter 2 provides the "how" of the VTS pedagogy and detailed guidelines for facilitating lessons in a Montessori environment. When considering the imagery to use in teaching, the authors remind users to be provocative and engaging with their selections, to meet students where they are by selecting work that may connect with their existing knowledge but with enough ambiguity to lead to rich discussions. Educators can support students' curiosities, depending on their age, through cycles of questioning: "What is going on in this picture? What do you see that makes you think that? What evidence supports that? What more can we find?"

Just as important as the questions, the authors remind readers of the responsibility of the instructor to actively listen, direct attention to the visual, paraphrase student comments, and be neutral in their interactions.

Of particular note in this chapter is the focus on "the art of paraphrase" and "basic orienting vocabulary". How educators facilitate student-centered learning through open-ended questions and their ability to respond to students by paraphrasing their ideas are key to validating student thought. Particular care must be taken in activities such as these because they help build and maintain focus. This chapter provides examples of how to effectively facilitate a VTS session and how not to, including the consistent vocabulary necessary to describe what, and how to see a visual. Illustrative examples are also provided.

VTS and language development

In Chapter 3, the authors explore the intersection of VTS and language development at each plane of development and focus on the various educational opportunities offered for each age group. For the birth-to-age-three level, the authors provide readers with an appreciation of visual acuity's role in language acquisition, specifically related to the importance of naming and engaging in dialogue and the role of prepared Montessori environments. Because early childhood "is a time of rapid and often dramatic growth in thinking and communicating," the authors discuss the language explosion and emerging vocabulary at this stage. The authors emphasize the importance of conceptual and social exploration for elementary students. As part of this discussion, the authors examine the role of classroom communities in creating and inspiring a literate culture and the social nature of learning a language. Related to older children and adolescents, they say that "it's a time to practice intentional listening, increasing sophisticated interpretation and articulation of ideas, and collaborative

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processing. It is a time of very rapid and often dramatic growth in thinking and communicating”. When older students become more comfortable with the VTS process, they can create “looking circles,” like literature circles or book clubs, in which to practice looking and thinking skills with peer groups. The curiosities sparked by VTS in Elementary and Adolescent students provide both informal and formal writing opportunities like journaling, reflections, analysis, and synthesis of content.

Assessing VTS

The authors explain methods of data collection and assessment through direct observation for tracking student learning in Chapter 4. Key to this process are teacher reflection and paraphrasing what the student says: “When we listen intently to accurately grasp a child’s thoughts, and as we consider how to rephrase the comment, we are briefly seeing and thinking as the child does. We are following the child.” Regarding the expansion of children’s visual literacies, NCMPS and Yenawine present several VTS tools for “keeping track of this developmental arc” and monitoring student thinking by analyzing writing. It is extremely helpful that the authors not only outline the process but also provide several in-depth tools for, and examples of, assessing discussion and writing, including tracking types of talk, pre- and post-writing

samples, writing rubrics, and progress reports. This tool kit gives educators rich examples of how to apply and assess VTS to capture student growth through various measures that are appropriate for tracking student progress in a Montessori environment, as well as for evidence-based decision-making in a traditional classroom.

Further reflections

In the brief last chapter of this book, NCMPS and Yenawine restate their case for VTS in the Montessori environment. One area of needed future research is the potential social benefit of VTS research, which is rarely studied but often anecdotally discussed in Montessori schools. The authors also remind us of the challenges of careful listening and the need to purposefully model listening skills. Last, to realize the more peaceful world that Maria Montessori envisioned, they ask educators to cultivate opportunities for imagination in their students. If we are to invest in humanity, we must teach children empathy and care—and VTS can have a role in that.

In *Visual Thinking Strategies in Montessori Environments*, NCMPS and Yenawine create a practical text that provides readers with the foundations and procedures to create, facilitate, and assess VTS. The examples throughout are valuable to the hesitant practitioner, and the suggestions for further readings provide the curious

mind with additional theoretical and empirical works to explore. For the trained (or untrained) VTS Montessori educator, this text is a logical guide to supplementing instruction or introducing the strategies for the first time. Realistically, this volume is more than a supplemental guide for Montessori educators; any educator can use this Playbook as a framework for fostering visual literacy in their learning environment.

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