



What's going on in this picture?

Ask kids to tell you. They can figure it out.

Kids learn most of what they know from looking. Give them the chance to talk about what they see, and their language skills improve. Ask them to back up ideas with evidence, and their thinking skills grow.

It's simple. To help someone learn, start with what they are good at. And then ask them to get even better at that. Provide the right challenges. Their success breeds confidence. Their skills transfer. Even the tests show it.

**All kids can learn.
All schools can succeed.**

VTS. See the effect.

VTS. Learning by looking. SMART.

Everyone wants students and schools to succeed. By building on what students are naturally good at, schools can achieve an unexpected performance boost rapidly and inexpensively.

Looking and thinking about what they see is one of the earliest ways children learn. VTS puts this remarkable ability to use in school. To great effect.

VTS asks kids to

- Look carefully at works of art
- Talk about what they observe
- Back up their ideas with evidence
- Listen to and consider the views of others
- Discuss many possible interpretations



VTS Specifics

- VTS curriculum spans Grades K-5.
- VTS method consists of asking questions and responding to comments made by students in a manner that is both rigorous and nurturing.
- Classroom teachers teach ten VTS lessons a year, each about an hour—easy to fit into even the busiest schedule.
- Teachers learn the method in an initial workshop and start teaching immediately. Regular check-ins are interspersed between lessons to help expand teacher skills.
- Images are available as reproductions for Grades K-2, and either as slides or on CDs for the older grades.
- A website supports the training and provides writing activities for students.
- For Grades 4 and 5, the last lesson ideally takes place in an art museum.
- An implementation in a school is completed in one year for Grades K-3, one additional year for Grade 4, and two for Grade 5.
- VTS costs approximately \$10/student during the years of training and implementation, and under \$2/student each year after that.

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VTS Why kids learn from looking

Infants start using their eyes to learn as soon as they open them. They observe everything—from people and places to animals and things to weather and light—and gradually make sense of what they see.

- VTS asks students to apply these intrinsic visual skills to solve problems—*art chosen and put in careful order, as you might select books for young readers.*
- VTS uses questions that are easy to answer but still challenge students to observe and think deeply. *They develop habits such as brainstorming many possibilities and backing up opinions with evidence.*
- Students find language to express complicated ideas and emotions, aided by supportive teachers. *Talking gives students confidence with words. Ease with oral language helps them become effective writers.*
- Students put their minds together, building on each other's observations, ideas, and knowledge. *They learn to listen, argue respectfully, and find more solutions collaboratively. They hone skills as individuals who communicate and cooperate easily within a group.*
- Students apply these abilities—observing carefully, thinking deeply and expressing one's self—to other subjects. *Success breeds success.*

VTS Thinking skills develop

Most thinking—indeed most knowledge—begins with observations that form the basis for ideas particularly when given shape by language. VTS builds habits of

- Making more, and more complex, observations
- Drawing conclusions, inferring, or interpreting based on observations
- Expressing these ideas during discussions and in writing
- Citing evidence to back up interpretations, what is known as evidential reasoning; 'I think this because...'
- Considering a range of possibilities—being able to brainstorm, to accept multiple viewpoints, and to use qualifying language: 'It could be this.' Or 'It might be that.'
- Revising: 'At first I thought, but now I think...'
- Elaborating: 'What I meant was...'

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VTS Why art?

VTS uses pictures to unleash a thousand words—thoughts and feelings kids have gathered through experience. Art pulls them in. Why?

- Art's subjects cover age-old stories addressing human, often universal concerns and conditions.
- Art is intentionally ambiguous, open to a variety of valid interpretations.
- Feelings are embedded in art along with information, triggering a full range of expression from viewers.
- Layers of meaning, symbols and metaphor encourage probing and reflecting in kids, as they do in adults.

Working together, kids find what is familiar and puzzle over what is not. They apply what they know to interpret a variety of meanings. They mine art for stories about people, places, feelings, eras, activities, and relationships. They pick up on visual vocabulary like colors, moods, styles, and materials to add details. Examination leads to more observations. Observations in turn fuel interpretations and questions.

VTS About the research

VTS is the result of the thirteen-year collaboration between cognitive psychologist Abigail Housen, veteran museum educator Philip Yenawine, and their colleagues. Based on Housen's twenty years of empirical research into how viewers, experienced and novice, think when looking at art objects, VTS was then field-tested for an additional ten years in urban and rural settings, with students who struggle to learn; and across languages and cultures. Major controlled experiments occurred in Byron MN, San Antonio TX, and Vilnius Lithuania. All sites have shown comparable growth in all participants in the study samples, and statistically valid growth beyond that of matched control samples. Research findings are detailed in reports and articles (see www.vue.org).

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VTS The San Antonio story

In a three-year project with what was labeled an “at risk” population of low income, largely Hispanic students, VUE studied the effects of VTS on visual literacy and critical thinking. In the test site, all students had VTS taught by their classroom teachers. Another San Antonio elementary school was used as a control and its students were not exposed to VTS. The second school was matched in demographics and ethnicity, but had a smaller percentage of kids considered “at risk” of failure and more who had a command of English, the second language for most in both schools. In the tests given before the program began, the second school actually scored higher.

At the end of three years, the differences were arresting. Even though the control students started out ahead, the kids in the VTS school significantly outperformed them in both areas, growth in visual skills and in thinking. VUE researchers counted units of critical thought and, against the odds, the experimental kids had double the numbers of those with no VTS. Even more surprising, the academically challenged San Antonio students also surpassed— by a similar margin—the performance of students in a middle class, white, rural community in Minnesota where VUE had just completed a five-year study.

In other words, the benefits of VTS for poor kids who came to school speaking a language other than English and who were performing poorly on tests were profound. VTS was shown to dramatically improve their thinking skills in time to support academic success, in part because of their increased confidence. The data convinced the San Antonio Independent School District to implement VTS system-wide.

Although it is less acknowledged, visual literacy is essential in this increasingly image-dominated world especially when images are used to manipulate. The capacity of kids with VTS experience to read a range of meaning in images greatly increases their ability to negotiate everything from art to ads.

Still under study is the impact of VTS on language. VUE is in the process of collecting data to document changes in writing cited repeatedly by teachers. Preliminary findings suggest that the boost to language will be similarly deep.

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VTS In sum: Boosting performance by building on what comes naturally.

In just ten VTS lessons, spaced over a school year

- All kids grow in thinking and language skills, visual literacy, and confidence. Research shows VTS is especially effective with kids who struggle to learn.
- VTS is effective across cultural and language groups, and works well with students who are challenged in many different ways.
- VTS addresses discrepancies in experience and exposure created by poverty and disadvantage, significantly leveling the field.
- Teachers gain new skills at facilitating discussions, ones they transfer to other lessons, affecting student performance to an even greater degree.
- Teacher and student morale improves as learning proves engaging for all.
- Students master complex skills extremely hard to teach. Elusive “higher level” standards are met.
- Test scores improve, especially given questions involving images, reasoning, remembering details, drawing inferences.
- Dynamics among teachers shift, and a more collaborative environment is created.
- VTS is cost effective. Materials are inexpensive, the training regime for teachers efficient.

The VTS effect.

Successful schools demand that all kids succeed, and not just in basic skills. Our world requires people who can think, express themselves, create, and work together. VTS instills these abilities because it builds on kids’ inherent strengths and on art’s capacity to stimulate. And because it provides the right challenges at the right time.

It’s the boost we need.

VTS was created by VUE. Visual Understanding in Education is a non-profit, public benefit organization (501c3) that conducts research focused on aesthetic and cognitive development resulting from interaction with art. Based on its findings, VUE develops programs for schools and museums, principally VTS.

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