ECHOES ON EASELS

VISUAL THINKING STRATEGIES

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Illinois State Museum Society

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ECHOES ON EASELS

Introducing hard histories, or topics that come with complex stories and big feelings and require thoughtfulness and intentionality when implementing in the classroom, can be daunting.

The Illinois State Museum offers the use of carefully curated pieces from our art collection as a tool to introduce hard histories in the classroom.

Providing examples of creative expression representing troubling periods of our nation's past as well as context and guiding questions, Echoes on Easels aims to serve as a catalyst for important classroom conversations about histories that need to be preserved, and stories that must be shared.

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Incorporating art into the classroom can feel like further complicating the already challenging practice of introducing hard histories. Children and adults alike can feel a sense of unease and hesitancy to engage with art because of a commonly held belief that art is not "for us." We often feel that there is no space for our thoughts or opinions about art if we aren't experts on the subject. However, ISM seeks to dispel this notion. We believe that art is for everyone and that all opinions from all ages are welcome. To help build confidence, increase critical thinking, and foster visual literacy, we introduce the practice of Visual Thinking Strategies.

Visual Thinking Strategies, developed by Abigail Housen and Philip Yenowine, involve facilitated discussions on visual images with students. By asking three simple questions in a special order and with thoughtful pacing, educators can lead learner focused conversations about art that encourage students to explore their own ideas, support their statements, and build skills like empathy, collaboration, and communication.

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STEP ONE

Stop and look. Invite your students to look at a piece of art for 30-40 seconds in silence. Gauge the energy in the room. If students need more time, add a few extra seconds. If you feel the students are starting to stir and may be ready to share, cut back the time if needed.



Untitled (Two Figures in Landscape)
Mike Ferris

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STEP TWO: THREE QUESTIONS

1. WHAT IS GOING ON IN THIS PICTURE?

The phrasing of this question is important. If we ask, "What do you see in this picture?" students can feel challenged to make a list or inventory of the images they see instead of exploring the potential story being told by the picture. Asking "What's going on," instead encourages them to consider how the individual pieces of the puzzle all work together.

In this question, they can see the big picture, make an assessment, and get to know the piece.

2. WHAT DO YOU SEE THAT MAKES YOU SAY THAT?

You as the educator will be able to gauge when and where to ask this question in the conversation.

This question is posed to encourage the student to identify details in the picture that help support their statements. These are comments that can be open to interpretation. By supporting their own ideas, students can build critical thinking.

3. WHAT MORE CAN WE FIND?

If you've reached a lull in the discussion, use this to generate more ideas from the group.

This can also be used to encourage all students to participate. If there are some students who have not yet commented, use this question to bring in more ideas and keep the conversation going.

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FACILITATION

As you facilitate the discussion, be mindful of three things: Paraphrasing, pointing, and pacing.

PARAPHRASING

After each student makes a comment, take the time to paraphrase what they said and report it back to the group. By summarizing what the student shared, you are ensuring that the whole group has heard the point that was made, while also demonstrating to the student that they were heard and understood. This is also an opportunity to make sure that you captured what they were trying to say. After paraphrasing, you can ask, “Did I do an ok job explaining your point?” or “Did I get that right?”

POINTING

As each student shares what they are seeing in the picture, point to what they are referring to. Use your finger as a guide to each part of the piece that the student is discussing. This helps the rest of the group follow along with what is being discussed while also demonstrating to the student talking that you are on the same page and looking at the same things.

PACING

Take the temperature of the room and pace out the questions accordingly. If you see that students are thinking deeply after you have asked, “What is going on in this picture?” allow for enough time for students to get their thoughts together to share. Gauge when to ask question three if you feel that students may be running out of ideas or are stuck on a certain point.

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FACILITATION

VTS discussion can be as long as 20 minutes and as brief as 3 or 5 minutes. Use your best judgement in deciding when to wrap up the discussion. At the end of every VTS conversation, remember to thank your students for sharing. Discussing art can be a vulnerable experience, so validate your students' ideas and show your appreciation for their willingness to share.

NEUTRALITY

It is important to note that you as the facilitator are discouraged from sharing praise or judgement of a student's comments. Leading a VTS discussion means that you are not guiding the conversation or leading the students to a certain point. If a student shares a statement, do your best not to imply that the answer was right or wrong. VTS is about developing and supporting our own ideas, and not right or wrong answers.

PRACTICE

ISM has curated a virtual exhibition of pieces from the ISM art collection that you can use to practice VTS in the classroom before using art to introduce a historical topic. Use these images as a warmup for the class and familiarize yourself with the practice of leading a facilitated discussion on art.

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VTS: THE COLLECTION

The Illinois State Museum proudly offers a diverse body of original artworks from our fine art collection.

Use these pieces to introduce Visual Thinking Strategies into the classroom.

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Untitled - Soccer Field
Deborah Bright
1980

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57th Street Art Studios

Emil Armin

1978

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My Neighborhood Project
Artist Unknown
1994

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Fiesta

Emilio Amero

1983

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Deer Woman
Shane Balkowitsch
2024

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Untitled (Summer Scene with Bathers)
William Penhallow Henderson
n.d.

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The Visit III

Arthur Geisert

1981

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Untitled

Yuichi Idaka

n.d

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Untitled

Marc Adams

1987

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