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Visualize

An innovative training concept for strengthening
the tolerance and soft skills of young people

IO2 Development of the training paths + testing phase

Evaluation Report

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P2: Institut für Visuelle Bildung

The Institute for Visual Literacy was founded by Angelika Jung, an Austrian Art Historian, in December 2015 to train professionals. The Institute for Visual Literacy offers professional training to teachers, trainers, instructors or training supervisors in the field of visual literacy to foster social development as well as improve academic achievement.

Contributions:

P1: Christliches Jugenddorfwerk Deutschland e.V., CJD Verbund NRW/Süd Rheinland

P3: Fundación INTRAS

P4: Center for development and education

P5: Best Cybernetics

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Executive Summary

VISUALIZE is an innovative training concept for strengthening the tolerance and soft skills of young people funded by Erasmus+, Strategic Partnerships for Youth. It provides professional training to social and education professionals working with youth - educators and teachers, as well as care givers, therapists and social workers-, in the field of visual literacy, which are the so called experts of this project. It encourages tolerance and social development, as well improving academic achievement. With the use of images and discussion, young people experience various viewpoints and build on each other's thoughts. VISUALIZE enables students to use existing visual and cognitive skills to develop confidence and experience, learning to use what they already know to figure out what they don't know.

While participating in discussions about art, young people gain self-esteem and skills in the fields of communication, critical thinking and social development. Good citizenship is inspired through cooperation, tolerance for the views of others, sensible conflict resolution, free speech and active engagement. It also creates an even playing field among people of varying levels of education, communication skills and differing mother languages. The VISUALIZE program uses images at its core, and is therefore, well suited to serve heterogenic learning environments (inclusion, integration, transcultural affairs).

The central objectives of the program are:

1. The immediate need of our target group – young people – to contribute to the creation of a more tolerant society, especially for young people who are vulnerable to various political movements in the EU and countries-candidates for the EU. With Visual Thinking Strategies, users obtain the skills necessary to effectively deal with the migration challenges we currently face in the EU.
2. The use of Visual Thinking Strategies, a method developed by Abigail Housen and Philip Yenawine, helps prepare young people for the job market by improving their soft skills. During the training phase, experts from the participating countries test and further develop the basic strategies in their field of expertise increasing communication skills, social competencies, empathy, self-esteem and self-reliance.
3. Finally, this project is designed to equip organizations with useful new strategies and approaches which combine art education in an uncommon way. Therefore, young people, trainers and educators alike will benefit from the project.

Description of the target groups:

A total of 50 young people participated in VISUALIZE programs in three countries: Germany, Spain and FYROM. In Germany, the group was composed of apprentices with special needs - physically and/or mentally. In Spain, young people attending the program had mental illnesses. Participants from FYROM were composed of young people from rural environments influenced by various ethnic principles and political doctrine.

VISUALIZE focuses on the following evaluation questions:

- Question 1: Does participation in the VISUALIZE program affect participants ability to interpret visual images?
- Question 2: Does participation in the VISUALIZE program affect participants development in social competence and soft skills?
- Question 3: Does participation in the VISUALIZE program affect participants behavior in terms of tolerance towards others?
- Question 4: Does participation in the VISUALIZE program promote participants language development?
- Question 5: Does participation in the VISUALIZE program promote participants critical thinking development?

Participant Findings

1) The Visualize program had a profound effect on ability to interpret visual images.

The VISUALIZE program was effective in developing visual literacy skills. Participants who were initially silent, began to articulate what they actually saw (list of things) and created their own stories. Over time, participants saw more detail and discussed them from different perspectives. They spoke longer with more complex sentences. Listening skills elevated as they began to build on each other's ideas. Self-confidence increased and their body language became more engaged.

2) The Visualize program promoted social competence and soft skills among young people

The VISUALIZE program, with its use of art as common denominator, encourages participation in open-ended discussions regardless of cultural background, physical or mental challenges or language ability. During the course of the program, participants learned common rules of conversation. They understood the program was not about right or wrong answers, but different points-of-view. Understanding that diversity can be an asset which opens the mind to new insights, an important step in social development. Subsequently, they learned to wait for their turn to speak

even when they disagreed. Experts also observed significantly improved listening skills and elevated attention spans among nearly all participants.

3) The Visualize program impacted tolerance towards others.

Along with improved social competence and the use of soft skills, tolerance and understanding of others increased. Even though some of the young people were strongly influenced by ethnic backgrounds and different political parties, they began to listen to each other. When participants began to understand that everyone is shaped differently based on their upbringing, culture and value system, they started to gain tolerance and understanding for other participants. They also began to understand that listening is a skill by which one gains an understanding of the needs, demands and preferences of the people around us. As a result, listening and accepting different opinions became normal. They started to compare their thoughts and to explore different cultures and traditions with a certain amount of empathy.

4) The Visualize program increased language development

With each discussion, participants articulated more detail and became bolder in expressing their thoughts. To ensure that everyone in the group could hear each comment, the expert paraphrased each response. By doing so the group was introduced to proper grammar, new vocabulary and even specialized language without being corrected directly. Listening to their peer group was another way of learning new words and phrases. The results could be seen in tolerant interactive discussions. Stutter and stammering and people who suffer from other language blockades were accepted as equals. All participants learned to speak in front of a group, without being embarrassed, in public (museum).

5) The Visualize program promoted critical thinking skills.

Participants in the VISUALIZE project demonstrated critical thinking skills through their use of evidential reasoning, the ability to provide logical and factual support to their comments. They quickly learned to support their opinion with visual evidence, frequently using “because...” statements in their response. When the program started most participants had a clear idea of right and wrong and would not allow others to interfere with their viewpoint. By the end of the VISUALIZE program they were able to allow a process of discovery building on each other’s ideas, creating new perspectives as individuals and as a team. Most important, critical thinking skills were not limited to the program. Trainers noticed that these skills filtered through to other areas of daily life. Some of the participants became quite creative continuing to search for visual evidence in their environment.

Implementation Findings

a) Participation in general

Initially, the rules of discussion had to be repeated constantly. Participants were quiet and reserved, just mentioning a few words of what pictures they were looking at. In isolated

cases they did not say anything at all. Although they had been told that every response was valid, insecurity remained. However, with time and the recurrent first VTS question “*What is going on in this picture*”, participants began to develop their own viewpoint. Especially in the field of mental health, extra time for preparation was necessary. It is suggested to start future programs with smaller groups. Once the participants have learned the rules of discussion the group can be enlarged.

b) Attention span and preconceived opinions

Initially, students were unable to observe the artwork in silence. As soon as the image was shown, they began talking without studying the art. Their thoughts surrounded preconceived opinions or questions about the artist and the artwork. Studying a painting was foreign to them. However, with time and VTS skilled guidance, experts eventually managed to bring the focus back to the image, creating a meaningful discussion based on visual evidence.

c) Museum visits

After three (out of ten) sessions, the rules of conversation became engrained. Discussions held in local art museums became special highlights of the program. These sessions created exciting and interesting debates among young people – even about abstract art – bringing awareness to their various viewpoints in a civilized way. Participants felt free to express themselves without fear of being judged.

d) Expert experience

Participating experts found the underlying method of the program, Visual Thinking Strategies, most effective, easy to use and appropriate for their target groups. The 5-day training was recognized as good preparation for the use of VTS in the professional field knowing that the program was a work-in-progress benefiting young people and experts alike. While using this art-based and participant-centered approach was new for most experts who were impressed with the results they experienced. Open channels of communication via Skype meetings and well-written final reports helped to improve all aspects of the VISUALIZE program.

Further measures for the future:

All participating organizations will continue to use VISUALIZE to work with young people. Furthermore, VISUALIZE is planning to target other groups.

Spain: Experts plan to expand the program to an adult target group in the mental health field.

Germany: Experts plan to establish firm times within their organizations to offer regular VTS social training for all young people.

FYROM: Experts are planning to introduce VISUALIZE in primary schools. Moreover, they have begun to further develop VISUALIZE to discuss theater performances.