VISUALIZE GUIDEBOOK

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Cooperation, connection and communication is the hallmark of the Visual Thinking Strategies as developed by Abigail Housen and Philip Yenawine, cofounders of Visual Understanding in Education. Their pioneering work has inspired the development of the VISUALIZE project and some parts of the materials used may include language and information that is courtesy of VTS New York.

Index

PREFACE

The idea of the Visualize Project was born from the desire of several European organizations to improve soft skills and promote tolerance among young people with and without disadvantages. When the professionals from CJD met the expert from IVB "Institut für Visuelle Bildung", Ms. Angelika Jung, they heard about the methodology of the Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) and the application IVB was doing of it. At once, they felt that this methodology is exactly what they have been looking for to work with their youngsters: expressive, striking and fun, and they proposed Ms. Jung to create a joint project. The VTS expert loved the idea and, not long after, both organizations started to jointly develop the project proposal and search for partners. Once the draft proposal was articulated, the initiators presented the idea to CDE, INTRAS and Best Cybernetics, none of which had to think twice about embarking on this adventure. As it turned out later, the project was approved for financing and the partners set out to implement it. It took time and work to put the grounds for its implementation in each partner. The social and education professionals from each organization have undergone training in VTS facilitation provided by the VTS expert, Ms. Jung. These social and education professionals are educators and trainers, as well as caregivers, therapists and social workers, working with youth in the partner organizations. Probably, the most challenging part for our professionals was implementing VTS workshops with the participants upon their return from the training, without the on-site supervision of the VTS expert. Notwithstanding, during the period of piloting VTS with the participants, the professionals and the VTS expert maintained a steady communication and the latter was always available to help the professionals out with counsel. The VTS program was not only successfully implemented with the youngsters in the framework of the project but it also became an integral part of the methodologies used by our professionals in their work with youngsters. Now, after more than two years of the adventure of getting to know VTS and applying it with our youngsters, the project comes to its end.

With the present guide, the partners want to offer a global overview of the Visualize project to any professional working in the field of education, interested in discovering VTS and applying it in his work with children and young people. It commences with a general presentation of the project and the partner organizations, followed by a section that introduces the reader to what VTS is. It continues with a glossary of transversal competencies and abilities that regular VTS sessions help reinforce. Following, the experience of the training of trainers is described, as an essential step previous to implementing VTS with participants. Next, an overview of the experience in each country is offered, in which the milestones and the results of each local piloting are disclosed. The reader can find a depiction of the transformation process the youngsters underwent during the VTS training program. The guide concludes with a

sample VTS lesson plan for those education professionals who, after reading about the experience of the partners in the project, wish to try the VTS methodology with their target group.

THE PROJECT

The idea of the Visualize Project was born from the meeting of several European partners that wanted to explore the benefits of the Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) in groups of people (especially young people with and without disadvantages) to improve their soft skills and to increase tolerance among them and with others.

VISUALIZE is a transnational project, carried out between 2016 and 2018 by a partnership formed of organizations from five European countries- Germany, Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia, Austria, Greece and Spain. Its implementation was possible thanks to the financing received in the framework of the Erasmus + Program of the European Union.

The main motivation of the partner organizations to implement the VISUALIZE project was the latent need of improvement of soft skills and tolerance among their young participants. This project supposed a cross-cultural, transferable, cross-sectoral cooperation by bringing experts in: art and Visual Thinking Strategies, information technology, and NGOs working with youth with and without disabilities into this strategic partnership. The main idea of the project is that the observation of art can contribute to the acquisition of soft skills and tolerance, when applied by means of guided lessons by facilitators and educators. In our case, the target group was young people but the methodology can be applied with any age group. In fact, helping young people to develop cognitive and social skills is a crucial milestone for the development of our globalized society. Moreover, this project inspires "good citizenship" among young people with and without disadvantages by elevating tolerance and generating a global understanding of varying points of view while finding common ground and eliminating the thinking that there's a right and a wrong way to interpret the world around us.

The rationale of the Visualize project is the need for more tolerance building, which is particularly important in the context of Europe of widespread populism, intolerance and fear towards migrants and towards the coexistence of people with different ethnic origin or beliefs.

Another issue is the on-going high unemployment rate in some of the involved countries of the project partnership. The VTS methodology will help to strengthen and

enhance the soft skills in young people -including the young migrants and refugees-, such as communication, self-esteem, social competencies and self-reliance. With VISUALIZE the partners seek to support these youngsters in their training phase, equipping them with skills necessary for their future personal and professional life by using an unconventional and interactive way of learning, thinking and reflecting through the creative methodology of the visual thinking strategies.

Visualize is a project not only for the youngsters but also for the education professionals -teachers, trainers, educators, facilitators- who get a chance to improve and increase their own abilities to manage groups and broaden horizons towards new, undiscovered directions for learning and development. For these reasons, in the framework of the Visualize project, educators and experts of the social sector were involved in trainings to acquire new tools to work with participants' social and civic competencies.

Another fundamental aspect of the project is the decision for it to be carried out transnationally. What better way to improve tolerance among young people and their trainers than working together with persons of different cultures? Indeed, it has a much deeper and sustainable effect, in terms of building attitudes and developing skills, than theory and words could ever achieve.

Furthermore, the partner organizations believe that ensuring and talking about best practice can be proven in the best way if the developed methodology has been carried out and tested in different organizations and different cultural contexts, with somehow similar but not the same target groups.

For these reasons, the Visualize Project has a profound effect on ability of people, not only to interpret visual images and promote social competences among the youngsters but also to spread tolerance towards others, increase communication skills and to promote critical and creative thinking. Therefore, with images, it is possible to help participants expand their language, thinking and listening abilities, resulting in increased soft-skills and transcultural tolerance in an ever-changing world, where art is the first step to open minds.

PARTNERS

The Visualize Project is the result of a strategic partnership between five European organizations: Christliches Jugenddorfwerk Deutschlands gemeinnütziger e.V. (Germany); Center for Development and Education (FYROM); Institut für Visuelle Bildung (Austria); Best Cybernetics (Greece) and Fundación INTRAS (Spain).

Christliches Jugenddorfwerk Deutschlands gemeinnütziger e.V. (CJD), Germany

CJD is one of Germany's largest social and educational organizations. The work of CJD is based on the Christian conception of what it means to be human, with the vision: "LET NO ONE FALL BY THE WAYSIDE!" Since its foundation in 1947, CJD has been offering many different services addressed at persons who receive no other assistance. CJD provides academic education with 50 schools in Germany. It also provides vocational training. In this way, after leaving school, young people can discover their own, personal career path through courses on preparing for a career, orientation courses or in work-oriented production schools. CJD has specific projects in the area of health and rehabilitation. These projects are developed for people who are handicapped or are threatened with a disability, who need an occupational autonomy and a more active role in our society. The same goes for those who require rehabilitation after an accident or illness. Additionally, they have projects for young offenders with open prison sentences and aftercare programs for former drug addicts.

Center for Development and Education (CDEK), FYROM

CDEK is a non-governmental organization founded in 2009 in order to improve young people's quality of life in the Municipalities of Krivogastani and surrounding municipalities (Krusevo, Demir Hisar, Kicevo, Prilep, Dolneni). The main reason that motivated its foundation was the situation of limited opportunities for the young people from the district. CDEK encourages young people from rural areas to open their mind, boost their knowledge and creativity, and pursue a change in the community. It promotes social inclusion of young people and active citizenship through capacity building processes, education and work. It attempts to provide support to young people in all areas that affect them, be it education, employment, health, social security and inclusion, recreation and personal relations. Moreover, CDEK aims to support self-development of young people to raise awareness of diversity and multicultural dimension and promote tolerance.

Institut für Visuelle Bildung (IVB), Austria

Angelika Jung, an Austrian Art Historian, founded IVB in 2015 to train professional facilitators in Visual Thinking Strategy (VTS), a method developed and probed in the US by Abigail Housen and Philip Yenawine. 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. According to the Institut für Visuelle Bildung, VTS is an educational tool that employs images as the starting point for the development of language and critical thinking skills in a group environment. It inspires "good citizenship" through cooperation, tolerance, conflict resolution, free speech and active engagement. It also creates a level playing field among people of varying levels of education, communication skills and differing languages. Appropriate for children and adults, individuals and corporations, VTS builds a foundation for inclusion, integration and inter-cultural exchange.

Best Cybernetics, Greece

Best Cybernetics is a private owned Software, Consulting and Training Company, founded in 2009. It aims to develop programs on the use and application of Information Technology and Communication (ICT) in the Education, Training and Business sectors. It seeks to answer the fundamental needs of educational institutions, businesses and youth organizations. In this way, it develops technical skills enabling them to compete in the knowledge-based economy. It specializes mainly in developing ICT solutions for training programs, high quality eLearning content for Web Based Trainings (WBT), Computer Based Trainings (CBT), multimedia productions and Internet Marketing. It customizes e-platforms, organize e-courses, design and develop contents, produce multimedia contents, define learning strategies and promote virtual communities of practice. It also focuses on the use of virtual environments for education and training, including mobile technology.

Fundación INTRAS

Fundación INTRAS is a non-profit organization founded in 1994, dedicated to high-quality research and intervention in the mental health field. The foundation offers multiple activities and services, such as psychosocial and labor rehabilitation programs, occupational and vocational training, pre-labor workshops, counseling and professional guidance/coaching and social employment. Vocational training programs offered by INTRAS, addressed to young people with mental health problems, learning

difficulties and/or behavioral disorders, are funded by the Ministry of Education and follow the official educational curriculum but including some adaptations, depending on the level of the students' learning difficulties. INTRAS also offers professional guidance and counseling to youth, and it cooperates with a number of enterprises, which provide practical training to INTRAS' students in order to complete the theoretical part of the curriculum.

ABOUT VTS

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) is a method, which uses art to promote the development of cognitive and social abilities. Growth is stimulated by

- looking at the art of increasing complexity

- responding to carefully selected questions

- participating in a group discussion facilitated by an expert.

The method does not teach but stimulates independent observation, free-thinking, and self-confident speaking. It promotes social competences and mutual understanding. VTS can be used in study groups of all ages. Application with children and young people, however, seems to be where the biggest potential lies.

VTS also goes beyond the individual cognitive process and creates interactive, transcultural platforms. It always takes place in a group. The focus is on the viewers and their perspectives. A "right view" does not exist. The conversations about the different perceptions give rise to new ideas, a tolerant worldview, creative thinking and an expressive language - for the individual, but also for the group. The VTS process also involves cultural education and the transmission of democratic values.

VTS has been developed over the last 30+ years based on the Aesthetic Development Theory by Abigail Housen, a cognitive psychologist in the USA. Abigail and Philip Yenawine, former director of education at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, first developed VTS as an effective teaching strategy. A significant influence on this format also had the learning theories of Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, and constructivist Jerome Bruner.

GLOSSARY OF COMPETENCIES

VTS application boosts multiple transversal skills among the learners. Below a selection of skills is listed that have been stimulated most with the application VTS in the framework of the VISUALIZE project.

Observation

Being observant means paying attention to the surrounding world- people, objects, and situations. Training one's brain to pay attention to what is important at a specific moment is an especially important ability in a variety of contexts, such as school, workplace or a personal/family life. Observation is an invaluable skill for personal development as it leads to acquiring new knowledge.

VTS teaches participants to observe artwork closely and profoundly- to find out *"what is going on in a picture?"* Notwithstanding, once a participant has learned to observe, it does not end in a classroom or in a museum, it goes farther and translates into skillful observation of the surrounding world- a transversal skill that translates into a better understanding of how the world works. Additionally, observing the surroundings helps to stay focused and connected to the present moment, keeping the mind away from wandering, which might also reduce rumination and stress levels.

Visual literacy

In our multimedia dominated world, there is a growing need to increase visual literacy - the ability to give meaning to an image. In his article "Thoughts on Visual Literacy"[1] Philip Yenawine, co-creator of VTS, describes visual literacy as a range of skills - from simple identification (naming what you see) to complex interpretation on a philosophical, metaphorical and contextual level. Viewing, questioning, fact-finding, speculating, analyzing and linking the information in the image are essential features of visual competence. The attempt to read a picture objectively is just as important as the introduction of subjective and emotional aspects. Unfortunately classical literacy (reading, writing, and calculating) introduced in our education system only touches the surface of the cognitive understanding of multimedia content.

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[1] Handbook of Research on Teaching Literacy through the Communicative and Visual Arts, 1997, editors: Shirley Brice Heath, Diane Lapp, James Flood.

VTS attempts to come closer to this complex claim. By creating discussions of art, the skills mentioned above are automatically trained and brought to consciousness.

Oral expression

Oral expression is an ability used every single day. In fact, it is the most frequently used way of communication between people. All humans are able to express themselves orally and do it continually. Good oral expression skills make it easier for people to transmit efficiently all kinds of information- thoughts, ideas, and facts. However, not all humans are equally expert in oral communication. To the contrary, when listening to and observing people's speech, it becomes evident that some are definitely more skilled at building and transmitting verbal messages than others. Luckily, the oral expression is an ability that can be further developed and improved with the use of simple exercises and practice.

Oral expression is not limited to speech only. It involves certain non-verbal elements that may add emphasis or shades of meaning, such as coherence, speed of talk, voice pitch and tone, vocal variety and facial/bodily expressions.

VTS helps the learners improve their oral expression skills in two ways. On one hand, the participants are encouraged to participate repeatedly in the session, which helps them become confident speakers. On the other hand, the paraphrasing- rewording of the student's opinions, done by the facilitator- helps enrich the student's vocabulary and oral expression style.

Critical thinking

Critical thinking is the ability to process information, using criteria, and make reasoned judgments. It involves questioning the reality, which is the key to discovery and advancement in any field of knowledge. Its development and application are crucial in today's information society, which places within reach an infinity of information. Critical thinking will help learners to choose from the information available what is significant and valuable and discard what is specious. A skill valuable not only in the academic or professional area but also in private life, which is also full of decisions and choices to make that require previous analysis and assessment.

By formulating the question, *"What do you see that makes you say that?"* VTS encourages participants to analyze internally the information of the image they are visually intercepting before sharing their perception with the rest of the group. Additionally, the learners listen to one another and internally process and assess the information received on other learners' perceptions.

Listening

There is a substantial difference between hearing and listening: hearing is the faculty of perceiving sounds and listening is an action of hearing something with thoughtful attention[2]. Therefore, an essential element of the attitude of listening that differentiates it from the natural action of hearing is its voluntary character of paying *attention*. The latter is precisely what makes effective listening so complicated to many of us.

Listening is one of the most fundamental components of interpersonal communication skills. If no listening takes place, the information gets lost and it does not really reach the receiver. Good listening skills are invaluable at any stage of life in both, personal and professional area, which is why it is so important to foster this skill in children at an early age.

VTS facilitates the development of listening ability in the learners, thanks to the fact that its processes are based on building upon one another's observations, ideas, and opinions. Throughout the VTS sessions, the participants learn that more interesting outcomes can be reached if actively listening to other group members.

Creative thinking

Creativity as a concept is commonly connected with the world of artistic creation but in fact, it is not limited to arts. It can be defined as "*the ability to produce original and unusual ideas or to make something new or imaginative*"[3]. Therefore, we can say that there is no creativity without thinking and this "creative thinking" goes beyond artistic expressions and may apply to any area of knowledge or activity. Finding an unusual solution to a problem that would not be solved by applying a standard proceeding or giving a new, unconventional use to an old object about to be discarded, both are examples of creative thinking.

VTS encourages a careful observation of the image and all its elements and creation of stories behind them, responding the countless *"why"* that come to one's mind with the help of one's imagination. Thanks to these processes, VTS practice stimulates the development of creative thinking in the learners.

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[2] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/listen, accessed: 04/06/2018
[3] https://dictionary.cambridge.org/es/diccionario/ingles/creativity, accessed: 05/06/2018

Tolerance

Tolerance might be defined as "willingness to accept behavior and beliefs that are different from your own, although you might not agree with or approve of them"[4]. Today's societies are extremely diverse in terms of beliefs, practices, ethnic or racial origins, etc. This reality full of diversity creates a need for the individuals to learn tolerance. Even if apparently the importance of tolerance is understood and shared by most of us, we can still frequently observe attitudes contrary to being tolerant. Tolerance includes inviting a new classmate to join a science project's workgroup, no matter the fact that she is wearing a burka or translating what the neighbors are saying during a council to a freshly arrived foreigner who moved in next door.

VTS teaches tolerance through working on images that represent a diversity of cultures, religions, physical features, ideologies, abilities etc. that coexist in today's societies.

Problem solving

Everyone agrees that problems are omnipresent in the day-to-day life. A life without problems is an unreachable utopia. The latter emerge at school, at work, within the households… and in any other imaginable sphere of life. No matter the age, sex, social or economic status, everyone has problems, only of different nature. That is to say, the problems that an 18 years old female student of medicine has to face most probably will not be the same as the ones faced by a 40 years old male IT expert. However, what these two people do have in common is that both of them have to find their ways to solve the problems they encounter on their way. Fortunately, problem-solving, likewise most abilities can be developed and improved with some practice, applying a right approach and attitude.

The ample spectrum of possible answers to the VTS "problem"-what is going on in this picture? - is an excellent representation of a variety of alternatives usually available to solve a problem. Listening to the different alternatives (points of view of other people) and considering them for building your own solution is an excellent way to train the most critical elements of the problem-solving process: searching for/ generating alternatives and evaluating and selecting alternatives; all of these, essential steps previous to implementing solutions.

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[4] https://dictionary.cambridge.org/es/diccionario/ingles/tolerance, accessed: 05/06/2018

Self-confidence

Having self-confidence means to do the right thing even when you have to go against the view of your group. It also means not being afraid of admitting when you make a mistake and learning from those mistakes. People with strong self-confidence often have greater success and are more satisfied with both, their professional and their personal life. Some persons are self-confident by nature and others are not so confident from the start. Notwithstanding, there are methods and tools to develop people's self-confidence through positive thinking, setting small goals, and celebrating their achievement.

Any trainer can observe how some participants enjoy giving solutions to exercises and problems in public, in front of their classmates. Other participants, in contrast, always seem reluctant to give their opinion publicly and never do it unless expressly asked by a teacher. Some might even experience a mental block when asked a question publically and give a senseless answer or even refuse to answer at all. The latter are typical attitudes in those participants who lack self-confidence. In order to foster the development of participants' self-confidence, activities that involve the participation of all participants shall be introduced in the classroom. VTS sessions are a fantastic tool to make the most insecure participants more confident. The latter learn not to fear failure during VTS classes in which there are no right or wrong answers- anything that comes into observers' imagination is correct.

Empathy

In essence, empathy is the ability to notice and understand the feelings, thoughts, and experience of other people. In other words, to put yourself in someone's shoes to understand his situation. Empathy is an ability essential to humans as social beings- a critical element that helps regulate interactions in the society. An exercise of empathy can help explain other people's actions which otherwise might remain unexplained and maybe even lead to a conflict. It may lead to understanding other peoples' stances by seeking the origin of certain points of view in their background. Empathy is an invaluable skill to build good interpersonal relations, based on the respect to diversity. Persons who master the skill of empathy are not only more successful in their personal relations but also more prosperous in professional life, thanks to identifying and understanding other people's needs and inspiring their trust.

VTS is an excellent tool to encourage the exercise of empathy in participants. VTS methodology encourages the spectator to submerge in a pool of features, emotions, and stories behind each living creature represented in the artwork observed. It invites the observers to question, to wonder, to imagine and to seek for answers. This in turn

contributes to getting an insight that leads to becoming more tolerant for the view of others as well as developing the ability to recognize conflicts in a timely manner. We also learn to react with sensitiveness to delicate situations.

Collaboration

Even if operating as a team is not a key objective for the VTS workshops, there is no doubt that the dynamics of the workshops conducted in a group, favor the development of a collaborative spirit among its members. All the participants share their own observations and reflection, which frequently are built upon those expressed by their colleagues. Because of this exchange and processing of ideas, a number of "collective" stories are created. The attractiveness of this collaborative process does not go unnoticed by the participants. They can see clearly that even a small group of people can offer a diversity of ideas, points of view and solutions that cannot be generated by one person. The ability to collaborate- like most abilities we have seen up to now- is a transversal ability that will prove useful in many occasions and will help to achieve better results in any endeavor.

Cultural education

Cultural education generally means participation in the artistic and cultural events of a society. The importance of cultural education for social development processes and the personal development of young people is already recognized by political as well as social and academic sides. Visual examination of artworks - be they pictures, installations or sculptures – forms the basis for creative thought processes. The fact that there is no universally valid, correct, objective answer in art inspires new, unique perspectives and lets man outgrow the normal, already known.

The practical part of VTS training (or VISUALIZE) usually takes place in the museum. The independent engagement with art in a public space is also an expression of a "lived democracy" reflecting the freedom of thinking, speaking and acting.

VTS EXPERIENCE IN PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

VTS TRAINING OF TRAINERS

In May 2017 education professionals from the partnering organizations in Germany, FYROM and Spain attended a five days' workshop conducted by VTS expert and partner in the project, Ms. Angelika Jung from the Institut für Visuelle Bildung (IVB). During the intensive five-day training, Ms. Jung has worked with the participants on the theoretical elements and the practical implementation of the VTS technique in order to ensure the full understanding of its basics.

The training started with a conceptual introduction of VTS. It continued with practical VTS discussions that took place, first in the meeting room- where the group worked with digitally projected pieces of visual art - and then in the Museum Ludwig in Cologne. After this first experience as participants of a VTS session, the VTS expert introduced the VTS facilitation- managing VTS discussions. Essential elements of the role of the moderator such as framing and paraphrasing and the basic principles for selecting images and focusing on details were presented. The workgroup viewed videos, which afterward they jointly deconstructed. Once the participants received sufficient conceptual information, they got the chance to practice managing VTS discussions under the careful eye of Ms. Jung- an essential element of this training given that shortly after they were supposed to facilitate VTS sessions autonomously back home, with their own participants. By the end of the training, Ms. Jung equipped the professionals with sample materials to facilitate them conducting their first sessions with participants.

PILOTING VTS WITH PARTICIPANTS

Between the months of June and December 2017, the professionals who had been trained by the expert from IVB implemented workshops with groups of young participants and users of their organizations activities and services, all of them in disadvantage due to physical or psychological disabilities or difficult social and economic background. A total number of 50 youngsters took part in the workshops which overview and results are presented below.

VTS workshop at CJD

At the CJD-BBW Frechen, part of the Christliches Jugenddorfwerk Deutschlands e.V., 20 participants took part at the pilot workshop, aged from 18 to 24 years old, living at

the facilities of CJD in a boarding school and attending various vocational trainings at CJD. All the participants have a disability or a special difficulty, mostly due to a mental illness or a learning disability, among other restrictions, e.g. obesity. The VTS workshop at CJD contained 10 weekly sessions, facilitated by two professionals.

In the very beginning, some participants' expressed the fear that the VTS workshop could turn out to be like a school lesson. During the first sessions, the group was rather quiet. Participants kept looking at presented pictures. Those who participated offered short sentences and did not fully develop their ideas. Others hesitated and resigned. Throughout the sessions, the facilitators could observe how the participant's oral expression fluency improved. They started to communicate their ideas with more details. Not only their verbal communication improved, so did their body language. The participants seemed to open physically to the rest of the group: they looked at each other, visibly turned their bodies to those participants who were talking at that moment, showing open interest.

The language used by the participants improved visibly, thanks to paraphrasing done by the professionals. After a few sessions, they learned how to express ideas in an abstract way. The content of the words and sentences became richer in information. Some of the participants started to use a very emotional language. Furthermore, everybody got the time needed to speak, free of pressure. The participants learned to wait for their turn patiently. Stuttering participants and those who suffer from other language blockades (f.eg. due to anxiety) are accepted. They learned to speak in front of the group.

The participants' ability to read images improved over the sessions. In the beginning, they seemed to notice only the obvious, central elements of the images but with time, they started to take notice of the tiny details.

Over the sessions, the participants became more self-confident. They came to feel safe and free to express what they actually think of without fearing to be judged. Eventually, even the shiest participants placed themselves in the center of communication and seemed comfortable with it. The facilitators- who knew the participants beforehand- can tell that they even noticed that the participants had started to look at things with different eyes and became more communicative outside of VTS workshop context.

The facilitators noticed a big change in the participants in terms of social competences. Initially, the participants did not let others speak, their talk was unstructured and they interrupted one another; sometimes they were even disrespectful to each other. At some point, it started to change gradually. The facilitators found an interrelation between the quiet and peaceful atmosphere that developed through the VTS sessions and the improvement of the socials skills of the participants. An amazing and quite unexpected result of the program is the friendships the participants have made in the

weeks over which the workshop lasted. Now some of them share their leisure time. Their relations are much closer than before. The facilitators reported that the improvement of social skills started after the basic initial sessions had been finished.

The improvement of the group dynamics and team cohesion could be seen clearly towards the end of the workshop. The process of work on the image became a harmonic chain in which one person begins it, another one ads more information and so on until, in the end, the group is able to link and build up a frame, with the help from the facilitators.

The professionals claim that VTS workshop clearly influenced the participant's behavior in terms of tolerance. They explain that participants at CJD are multicultural and in the past, on many occasions, it was hardly possible to have a civilized discussion among peers. The thinking patterns of participants from different cultural backgrounds are frequently very different, and for some participants, these different ways of thinking are simply unacceptable to the point that, on some occasions, the professionals even noticed implicit xenophobic attitudes. The participation in the program contributed to their learning on respecting other people's opinions even if they are not in line with our own. Now, the participants have learned to share and compare their thoughts, without judging them. One Greek girl, for example, talks about her culture and the group let her talk. They are actually very interested and try to link it to their experiences- they have become more empathetic towards one another. By the end of the program, the negative atmosphere was gone and the tolerance was flourishing. They can talk about their different cultures and traditions and explore things together in a positive way.

VTS program promoted the development of critical thinking in participants at CJD. The trainers always repeated at the beginning of each session that there are no right or wrong ideas or opinions. At the beginning of the program, the participants were acting narrow-minded, hardly allowing anyone to interfere with their opinion. Now, after undergoing the Visualize training, they see differences between assumptions of the others and their own thoughts. One day in a museum, the group watched a painting showing an anchored ship. There was a series of reactions. Like a knock-on effect, the participants had different views, which they coordinated. They became very critical. They watched out for visual shreds of evidence. The trainers have noticed improvement regarding critical thinking even in the participants' daily activities outside of the VTS workshop.

The educational professionals at CJD are very satisfied with the outcomes of the Visualize program and therefore are willing to introduce it among the weekly activities offered to young participants at CJD. Since many youngsters are living on the

compound of the CJD facilities, various activities ranging from different sports, painting classes or even putting a huge puzzle together are offered on a regular basis. Hence, the idea is that Visualize can be a regular feature of these activities and, as result of this, attract more youngsters and maybe even colleagues to spread the technique and strengthen their social skills and tolerance.

VTS workshop at CDEK

At the Center for Development and Education (CDEK) 20 youngsters took part in the pilot workshop. The workshop was composed of 10 sessions that took place throughout the months of June to November 2017. All youngsters were coming from rural areas and the group was characterized by ethnic and religious diversity.

The trainers at CDEK reckon that Visualize program was a completely new method to their work in non-formal education. They have been using images and pictures to transfer information to the participants- to communicate things to them. Notwithstanding this was usually a one-way communication and not a dialogue in which the participants are allowed to freely interpret the images. Thanks to the Visualize program, the youngsters at CDEK got the chance to learn to read and interpret images in a dynamic and interactive way.

In the very beginning of the Visualize program, the youngsters seemed to comment on the images after barely having had a glance at them- the responses were automatic and not reflected upon. It seemed as if the youngsters were only saying what they felt they were supposed to say. Over the next lessons, little by little, participants started to read the pictures and explore the visual text, finding their own point of view, going beyond what is obvious and making their own meaning of images they were looking at. Lesson after lesson, the trainers could observe how the participants' ability to see pictures and give their opinion based on evidence flourished. The trainers noticed that sometimes, "simple" images can sparkle big discussions, and "complex" images might confuse participants and make them not want to share their opinion, especially when they are new to VTS workshops and are still afraid to "fail".

The participants have learned that there are plenty of interpretations of one sole image. In addition, there are many elements that have to be read in order to build an interpretation: objects, people, size, colors, shadows, proportions, symbols, etc. What is important is how we examine the use of visual elements, including interpreting visual language and using our own words to create and express our meaning for the picture.

The trainers at CDEK noticed an important development in various skills such as observation and insight, critical thinking, ability to reflect, and teamwork, among others. Careful observation of the images, searching for answers to the three basic questions in VTS, and having the facilitator paraphrasing each person's response and linking thoughts, all together they create an experience of learning, collaboration, delving deeper, becoming more attentive to details while looking at chosen pictures.

The trainers report how, in the beginning, only a few participants wanted to share their observations, after a few sessions it started to change, every time more

participants were willing to speak, and by the end of the program all of the participants were active in the discussions. The student's self-confidence strengthened, they felt every time more comfortable talking. The trainers were positively surprised seeing how the participants started to reason, back up their statements with evidence and connect all the observed elements as a whole. They tried to upgrade the group discussion as a team and stay open-minded.

The professionals from CDEK account that in recent years radical political movements evolved in FYROM, contributing to growing the division between the young people with different ethnic background and different political views, blocking intercultural dialogue among young people and by spreading narrow-minded views and ideas. As an organization working in a multiethnic context, promoting tolerance and enhancing communication and collaboration between young people within the local community are one of CDEK's main goals. They bring together people with different traditions and beliefs- who usually avoid one another- to learn from and share with one another, through empathy, improving self-awareness and confidence, valuing different perspectives and building relationships with the others. CDEK's team firmly believes that when young people understand that there is no right or wrong way to perceive things around us and that we can learn a lot from each other, it means that there is a good ground for collaboration, from the perspective of respect for other people's point of view. This is what happened during the Visualize training program. The cohesion and tolerance level in the group was very low in the very beginning of the program. However, little by little, a common ground in form of respect and acceptance that there is no right or wrong was created. The participants saw how some of them were looking for details; some were interested in colors, others in the size of the elements, depending on each one's perspective, based on her personal and professional background, a perspective that could change depending on circumstances. On the third lesson, one of the participants tried to dominate with his opinion based on the gender equality and sexuality and tried to influence other student's opinion, but other participants' point of view and family values completely change the direction of the discussion in a positive way. Linking different opinions, they considered that maybe we live in different circumstances, which have a great influence on the development of our values. That is why people have different values that do not have to be shared necessarily but shall be respected.

At the beginning of the program, the facilitators noticed how the participants' language skills varied considerably. As the sessions passed, thanks to the continuous use of paraphrasing, the participants learned that there are different ways to structure linguistically the same message. However, they not only learned from the facilitators. They also learned from each other. Thanks to listening to how other participants

express themselves, the participants had an opportunity to learn new words and improve own expression. Thanks to that, the less talkative participants passed from offering one-sentence opinions to making longer descriptions and those whose commentaries had been poor in information offering descriptions full of details.

The professionals at CDEK plan to use VTS in their daily work with youngsters from rural areas, with different ethnic roots and beliefs. They envisage applying VTS not only with pictures but also with video recordings and theater performances.

VTS workshop at INTRAS

At INTRAS Foundation, the Visualize workshop took place from October to December 2017 and it contained 10 sessions. The participants were 10 youngsters aged 22 to 29. Most of the participants were affected by a mental condition and some had learning difficulties. INTRAS chose to create a smaller working group than its partners from CJD and CDEK did. Due to the severity of the condition of INTRAS, the implementation was adapted to be carried out with a smaller group, up to 10 participants. Many of the basic cognitive abilities of Foundation's users, in general, are very low, being affected by the mental condition itself or by the medication taken. It proved that in reduced groups, each service user can be offered the attention he needs. In fact, it is the only way to make sure the target group benefits from a training.

Two facilitators led the workshop. Additionally, before starting the 10-week program, during the month of June, three introductory sessions took place. Only a part of the participants in the pre-summer sessions signed up for the workshop in autumn, which counted with several new participants. That is why at the start of the workshop in October the facilitators presented VTS rules to the participants from the very beginning.

In the very first session, the participants failed to respect the time reserved to observe each image before commenting on it. Instead, the moment the image was displayed they started to make comments with relation to it. The participants asked the facilitators for information on the image- the author, the year of creation, the artistic movement, etc. In addition, in their interventions, they tended to focus on the formal aspects of the artistic work in spite of being given the instructions not to care about the artist's name or artistic movement. It took about 6 sessions for the participants to start imagining sharing their own stories behind the picture. By then they also got used to spontaneously argument their assumptions.

The facilitators observed that some participants were not used to express their own opinion freely- they are insecure and afraid that they might share a vision that might not be accepted by the group. The trainers had to repeat the 1st VTS question- What is going on in this picture?- over and over again in order to encourage the participants to express their own point of view on what is going on instead of asking the facilitators questions. On the other hand, some participants tried to convince the others that their idea was the correct one, in spite of the fact that the trainers had explained that the goal of the practice was not to find a common point of view or a common interpretation.

Especially during the first sessions, many participants tended to repeat ideas that had been already expressed by other group members. Some participants seemed to get blocked and, since no ideas came to their heads, they preferred to repeat a vision that was already presented by someone else than not say anything at all. In other cases, they repeated ideas simply because they did not listen to what the colleagues said in their interventions. In fact, one of the biggest challenges for the facilitators was to practice the focus on the image and on what the others say with regard to it, avoiding the wandering of the mind.

In the beginning, the group did not respect turns to talk. Any time a thought came to someone's head he wanted to express it right away. Over time, the members of the group learned to wait for their turn and let speak those colleagues who have not had a chance to speak yet. There is more to it, they started to work like a team, something that is not very common between persons with severe mental illness and that is a meaningful aspect of the implementation of VTS with this target group.

During the first sessions, the interventions of the participants limited to describing what they saw in the picture. They did not venture into creating stories based on what they saw. The trainers could clearly see that it was difficult for most of the participants to interpret what they saw in the image, putting it in words. It took the most introverted participants up to 6 sessions to feel comfortable enough to share their thoughts openly.

After a few sessions, the participants started to make analogies to own experiences, emotions, and feelings, which is an excellent way to both, become aware of one's own internal experience and to develop the attitude of empathy with other peoples' feelings. The professionals from INTRAS Foundation believe that it is an incredibly valuable outcome, especially in the context of persons with mental health problems, who often have important issues in relation to own emotions and feelings.

The participants started to show respect towards opinions of others and listen to what the others said. The facilitators believe that the fact of getting to know each other better has made the participants feel more comfortable at the time of expressing their own opinion.

By the end of the training program, the growth of the interest in the analysis of artwork was evident. Discussions over one image became longer and more fruitful. The group could spend up to 40 minutes discussing one sole image that weeks before would have taken them only 15 minutes to discuss. Participants' attitude and the whole groups' interaction evolved significantly over the sessions. Times of exchange of opinions became more synchronized and self-regulated, making the sessions more dynamic. The participants realized the connections between their vision and those of their mates, which was enriching given that they nurtured from each other's ideas. This also showed that the participants paid attention to what their peers were saying.

The frequency of use of basic VTS questions on behalf of the facilitators decreased and the facilitators did not have to bring order in the room anymore. The security and confidence of the participants in contributing to their point of view have increased significantly. The participants became clearly more comfortable in their role and their interventions were clearer, characterized by a more precise and coherent language.

The professionals at INTRAS Foundation are more than satisfied with the evolution of the participants during the VTS program. They plan to further explore the possibilities of applying VTS technique to specific aspects of life in which the users of INTRAS' services- mainly persons suffering from mental illness- experience special difficulties, such as recognition and communication of feelings and emotions or sexuality, among others. The professionals at INTRAS plan to organize a few weeks' long VTS preparation workshop each time the group of participants is new to VTS. This way the professionals will work with the participants on one of the aspects of VTS dynamic that resulted most complicated for the participants with mental health problems- creating a story beyond the literal interpretation of what they see. These pre-VTS workshops will also have as its basis discussing over images but the facilitators will be able to share their vision of what is going on in the picture, in order to provide the participants with a guiding thread.

Due to the striking outcomes of the pilot Visualize workshops, INTRAS has decided to set one more testing group for the Visualize methodology, in a center the foundation has in the town of Toro. For that purpose, the trainers in the first edition of the pilot, in Valladolid, provided an introduction training in VTS to two educators placed in Toro. At the end of May, the second Visualize workshop has commenced. The facilitators from the first edition of Visualize in Valladolid supervised in person the first two sessions conducted in Toro. The idea is to conduct 10 sessions with the group in Toro in order and compare the results of the two workshops, with the objective to create a unified procedure for the implementation of regular VTS workshops in INTRAS' centers throughout Spain.

EXPERIENCES OF PROFESSIONALS

"The Training of Trainers in Frechen permitted us to strengthen a range of communication, social and cultural skills thanks to forming part of an international team. The important practical orientation of the training and the variety of settings (training room & museums) permitted us to consolidate the information and knowledge acquired during the theoretical sessions. Especially, the practical sessions contributed to develop our active listening skills and allowed us to put into effect the elements of VTS facilitation such as paraphrasing and pointing in order to highlight the observations of the participants.

Implementing the program with the youngsters at our Foundation has supposed a completely new way of approaching art and has contributed to the development of cultural background of our participants. Complementing the classroom sessions with visits to museums has enhanced our abilities of to stimulate active participation with a more open and innovative attitude.

The artworks selection process was pretty challenging in what regards to the analysis and profound reflections about the image. Including artworks reflecting socio-cultural challenges- historical or emergent- favored the development of communication abilities and social competencies, such as empathy and respect for opinions of fellow participants.

Visualize has offered to us an opportunity to promote a reflexive, collaborative and sensitizing practice related to "knowledge". Previous to working on this project, we would have never thought that using 3 basic and simple questions- such as those used in VTS- can help to mobilize knowledge, attitudes, points of view and emotions so effectively."

<p align="right">Annalisa and Oyuky, educators at INTRAS</p>

"At the beginning, as a youth worker, I wondered how well the VTS approach would work in the context of non-formal education in Macedonia. For youth workers working with young people from different ethnic backgrounds and inhabiting rural areas, incorporating a new approach is always a challenge. At this stage, I must say that my first experience facilitating VTS had improved my personal and professional skills in general and my teaching skills in particular. Seeing the progress that my group was making, one session after another, provided me with additional energy. After this experience, I am sure that VTS is a unique approach, which motivates students to cultivate willingness and ability to present their own ideas, using different descriptive

words while listening to, showing respect and learning from the perspectives of their peers. VTS builds student's confidence and motivates them to participate in an interactive thinking and discussion process, thanks to which it helps to strengthen their soft skills and tolerance.

I really like this approach as it allows participants to give meaning and their knowledge and experience through exploring works of art with an open-ended discussion.

Summing up: one image, three basic questions and five discussion facilitation techniques, together they can provide participants with key behaviors –social skills, critical thinking skills, language literacy, visual literacy, collaborative interaction with peers, and tolerance."

<div align="right">

Marina, youth worker at CDEK

</div>

"There were participants who told me right at the beginning of the first lesson that they could not attend regularly because of the little free time they have and "wanted to warn me!"

In the beginning, there was also a lot of controversy concerning the personal views; everyone wanted his point of view to be the right one, despite the repeatedly repeated VTS rules, and this was especially apparent with men. Then, suddenly, the disrespectful attitude and the insulting vanished. In addition, new participants signed up at a short notice if someone was absent. They showed an attitude that everyone present in the group was included, and nobody was excluded. Friendships were built in the group. The social contact in general was described as awesome; they were always looking forward to the next session, and showed interest in joint ventures in order to get to know each other better.

Stories were "dug out" on all images, and connected in the first line with their own person (What connection do I have to the picture ....) The own history was brought to the foreground, discussions and often additionally "pedagogical need to talk" developed.

Sometimes, however, the imagination of participants drifted away - but the group dealt with it. A dog was seen as a cow and no one laughed, the group behaved disciplined and the positive attitude strengthened even more.

The participants also paid attention to my performance and especially mistakes, such as positive confirmation of the participants' speech and were happy when I said, "I made a mistake again!" In between, I sometimes asked the participants "Well, how was I?" Normally, I would receive a positive nodding and the answer "getting better!"

The participants showed and reflected in VTS also the effect of their own expression (voice, body language...) and worked on their power of persuasion.

In a separate painting group, the following situation took place: A participant asked another who had just painted a picture "what is going on in this picture?" Some participants answered and followed the three questions without my guidance!"

Gabi, educator at CJD

EXPERIENCES OF PARTICIPANTS

There is something beyond of what is being observed. You can have two different perspectives: one of the author and one that forms in the head of the observer, influenced by thoughts, ideas or feelings at the moment of viewing the image"

Ángel, INTRAS Foundation

"We all have something to look at and it can be the same or different from what the author pretends to transmit. Us, (with regards to the group) we can also think equally or differently, depending on what we see or how we feel".

Eloy, INTRAS Foundation

"I like this workshop because it makes me see new things and new ways to paint what we think. I like what's abstract".

Coral, INTRAS Foundation

"When I observe art I can identify with my emotions. I can see myself reflected in the characters in the image because sometimes I felt like they do (happy, confused, angry...)"

Arturo, INTRAS Foundation

"I like it how VTS connect us in a meaningful way - being in an art museum together, looking at a picture, explore meanings and ideas, communicate your opinion and carefully listen to what other peers say."

Irena, CDEK

"I like the discussion in which every one of us has an equal voice, may think differently without right and wrong way, each one of us expresses his opinion of what he observes and backs up his ideas with evidence."

Vecko, CDEK

"I'm impressed how discussion is upgrading with every shared opinion, through the willingness of each of us to present his viewpoint, to speak out without judgment or fear of consequences. All of us were offer further insights and, with the support of our facilitator, discussion continued encouraging us to explore more and look deeper for a meaning."

Ezmir, CDEK

"After a few VTS lessons, I felt more self-confident to express my point of view, to observe and create an opinion based on evidence, and respect other peers opinion. Maybe all of us observe the same picture, but what we see and think depends on our knowledge and experience, given that considering others opinions expanded our thinking and might change our first perspective."

Emilija, CDEK

"Quite different than usual!"

Dennis, CJD

"I just want to watch and say nothing!"

Stephanie, CJD

"I do not want to sit down!" (Standing in front of other participants blocking the view to the picture, who are allowing it and moving in such a way that they can see the picture).

Nadine, CJD

"Better than in education and school!" (VTS)

Daniel, CJD

"You missed something!" (Participants after visit to Art Cologne).

Andreas, CJD

RECOMMENDATIONS

Below you can find some general recommendations for the education professionals that wish to implement VTS sessions with their target group:

1. The time for implementing VTS sessions should be chosen smartly, e.g. October (beginning of the new school year) makes more sense than summer, just before the holidays;

2. The sessions organized in small groups of up to 10 participants are more intense in terms of learning;

3. The more diverse the group (socio-cultural, ideological, etc.), the more effective the building of the attitude of tolerance;

4. One should begin every session by explaining that there are no right or wrong observations or ideas;

5. It is important to dissuade participants from wanting to "understand" the artwork, with facts about artists, time, current, etc., and to insist that it is about looking at the work of art, being absorbed, asking yourself what you see;

6. The facilitator shall not show agreement or disagreement with the observations given by the participants. His attitude shall be completely neutral.

OUTCOMES OVERVIEW

The most substantial outcomes that have taken place among the participants in all groups are the following:

- ✓ Growth of the interest in art
- ✓ Enhancement of general communication skills such as waiting for your turn to talk, not interrupting when a person is talking
- ✓ Improvement of the oral expression skills: verbal fluency, abstracting, vocabulary use, creating a logical sequence of events
- ✓ Development of the body language: eye contact, empathetic facial and body expression
- ✓ Improvement of self-confidence and losing the fear of public speaking
- ✓ Strengthening of the ability to read images and notice details
- ✓ Development of attitude of tolerance and empathy towards other people's ideas, beliefs and features
- ✓ Enhancement of social relations of the participants in the workshop in general
- ✓ Development of the ability to think critically and support one's opinions with evidences
- ✓ Improvement of the active listening ability
- ✓ Strengthening of creative thinking skills

VTS IN EUROPE

In order to replicate the Visualize project with your target group it is recommended to receive a training on the technique of VTS beforehand.

If you wish to receive this kind of training, please inquire with Angelika Jung of the Institut für Visuelle Bildung, Austria to receive possible contact details of a VTS expert in your country.

Regarding trainings in Germany or Austria, Angelika Jung can facilitate them not only in German but also in English. With this project, she gained the experience necessary to conduct a training with non-native speakers working with different target groups.

CONCLUSIONS

The idea of the Visualize Project was born from the meeting of five European partners that wanted to explore the benefits from the Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) in groups of people (especially young people with and without disadvantaged problems) to improve their soft skills and to increase tolerance among them and with the others.

Although at the beginning of the Visualize workshops, there was certain skepticism among the young participants, in the end everyone agreed on the learning potential of VTS. In fact, all the participants in the Visualize project – both professionals and youngsters – agree that the project has somehow revolutionized the classrooms in their respective organizations, in a positive sense. In this way, the Visualize project promoted perspective talking skills and empathy, developing strategies together, increasing self-knowledge and esteem. The youngsters improved their language, communication, and inquiry skills, building confidence among them as a heterogeneous community. Notwithstanding the participants were not the only ones to learn from this project. The teachers also acquired valuable methodological knowledge and learned that there is always a way to approach any student. Forming part of an international team and discovering the possibilities offered by VTS helped the trainers' to improve communication, social and cultural skills. In fact, they saw how VTS is able to promote reflection and collaboration and to sensitize practice related to knowledge, learning and tolerance. In this way, the use of basic and simple questions – such as those used in VTS – can help to mobilize attitudes, points of view and emotions in an incredible way.

Moreover, facilitators had to affront a lot of challenges: showing respect and understanding of student's points of view without showing agreement (being neutral is essential for the facilitator); emphasizing that there are no right or wrong perceptions (two-way communication between participants and facilitators); using conditional language to keep the discussion open for various view-points; use of non-verbal language: tone-of-voice, facial expression, positioning, pointing, eye contact, to motivate participants to participate.

Most of the youngsters were quite cynical about their participation in the Visualize workshops at the very beginning. The trainers could see it written on their faces and hear it in the tone of their voices. The participants expected that the debate would be around usual clichés, delivered by a teacher in a not far from a traditional classroom method style. Unexpectedly for the youngsters, contrary to being passive subjects of classic teaching, they were given a truly active role as co-creators of the meaning of the artworks. They seized the possibility to give meaning to their own knowledge and life experiences through exploring works of art with an open-ended discussion. In fact,

thanks to the combination of images and VTS discussion facilitation techniques, they discovered their potential in terms of social skills, critical thinking skills, language literacy, visual literacy, collaborative interaction with peers and tolerance. In this way, the whole process has proven an extraordinary way to open a space for the youths to express their ideas, thoughts, beliefs and even concerns.

In addition, participants cultivate a willingness and ability to present their own ideas, while respecting and learning from the perspectives of their peers. They become able to expand their perceptions of art rather than reacting to it impulsively. The thoughts and perceptions of others provide an opportunity to see images from a new perspective and open up to insights one may not have thought of before. VTS also capitalizes natural, visual, skills and provides a space for participants to connect their points-of-view with their personal and/or professional background.

VTS workshops have also contributed to change the very concept of art the participants had before. The professionals who conducted the whole process could see how art, once a distant and unappealing notion, became so much more accessible and meaningful to the youngsters. While making discoveries, exchanging ideas, feelings and information, most of the young people realized what arises for each of them is based on their individual context. As a result, they recognized that just the same as there is more than a one way to look at a piece of art there is also more than one way to look at any given situation in life.

By using transversal learning methods, as the Visual Thinking Strategies, the participants in the Visualize project were able to start a process of re-thinking their own and others view, improving not only tolerance but also communication, self-confidence, self-reliance and self-esteem. Moreover, thanks to working in groups, everyone acted as multipliers and colleagues, combining the creative art context with the educational context in a non-common way, improving one's autonomy, flexibility, and the ability to care and organize (the importance to pay attention to others' point of view and details).

The Visualize project was a great opportunity for both, the trainers and the youngsters to increase their relational skills, to grow personally (and professionally, especially in case of the trainers), to understand that one can make a difference despite the challenges of the globalized world.

For all the reasons expressed above, it is important to promote the implementation of projects such as Visualize in the educational sector, to encourage young people to talk, using discussion as a key tool for learning to think, through cooperation, connection and communication. It is important that all teachers/professionals, at all level of education, open their horizons to strategies such as the one proposed by the VTS.

In essence, Visualize project has helped several groups of participants from three European countries to overcome boundaries of language, religion, physical and intellectual abilities, and other difficulties that inhibit learning and advancement, which are critical for the 21st century.

ANNEX[5]

HOW IT WORKS

VTS is a process of discovery. From the moment a person is born, she uses her eyes to make sense of the surrounding world. This ability is based on the amazing connection between the eyes and the brain, which is created long before the person is able to use its mind consciously. Unfortunately, in the course of the human development, the senses are neglected in favor of the intellect. People talk about what they know and not necessarily, about what they see. It seems that in the current time, one of the most difficult things is to really see in front of one's eyes. VTS is trying to reawaken these naturally given skills that had been used during infancy.

This is how it works:

➢ Open-ended questions

In order to initiate a discussion, three basic questions are used by the facilitator. These questions have not been chosen randomly. They have been tested for many years and are based on the aesthetic development research of Abigail Housen, a cognitive psychologist in the USA. VTS questions have been developed to ensure particular results, therefore it is recommended not to change the wording.

1. What is going on in this picture?

The phrasing of the first question suggests that the image is "about" something that can be figured out. It particularly encourages the creation of a story. This corresponds with the findings of Abigail Housen who says that first time viewers have a natural tendency for storytelling. In addition, this question allows comments of any sort – personal associations, feelings, colors and so on.

2. What do you see that makes you say that?

This question keeps the discussion anchored to the image. The participants are asked to look again and find evidence to support their opinions. By doing so, the thinking process of the individual observers is made visible for the whole group. This requirement helps to develop a fact-based and logical mentality when expressing or debating a position. It is useful in any critical inquiry and most important for good communication skills in general.

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[5] The pioneering work of Abigail Housen and Philip Yenawine, cofounders of Visual Understanding in Education has inspired the development of the *Institut für Visuelle Bildung* and some parts of worksheets or other materials may include language and information that is courtesy of VTS New York

3. <u>What more can we find?</u>

This question helps to delve deeper into the image and make the debate more complete. Details that might be found by looking more closely may even change the whole meaning of the image. In order to convey the message that there is usually more to be seen and talked about than participants first thought, this question has to be asked frequently, independent of hand signs. After all, the habit of making thorough examinations grounded in visual data is the basic concern of any VTS discussion.

➤ Point out the story

VTS discussions are structured in a way to ensure that participants get immediate feedback from the facilitator. As observers speak, the facilitator points with precision to the elements of the image that are being mentioned. Pointing keeps the eyes of the observers on the image and encourages them to keep looking actively. While listening and pointing, the facilitator is attentive and supportive, showing how much the participants contributions is valued. If what an observer is seeing cannot be found in the image, the facilitator has to ask him to come forward and point it out himself. It is important to allow participants to express their opinion by showing to everyone what they mean.

➤ Paraphrase each person's response

Paraphrasing is a key element in VTS facilitation. While doing it, the facilitator points again to what is said. When paraphrasing comments is done correctly and consistently, not only the individual contribution to discussions is honored but also a supportive context encouraging further participation is set. We show not only how to hear but also how to understand what is being said. This is a fantastic confidence booster. It also helps to ensured that everyone hears every comment, at the same time emphasizing the importance of each contribution. By doing so, it is highlighted that listening to and trying to understand others is a desired attitude and valuable skill. It is the basic of tolerance and open-mindedness. To ensure that all contributions are valid on equal basis, generally conditional language is used. In addition, language is also modeled, including vocabulary a participant might be searching for.

On the other hand, paraphrasing allows a short but clear view of how a particular person sees and thinks. When listening intently enough to rephrase a comment, it is as

if the facilitator was delving inside the observer's mind, searching for the link between his thoughts and the verbalizations he made.

Given these reasons, when using VTS, special attention is paid to paraphrasing, which MUST be carried out correctly to maximize the benefits of VTS. It is the tool that is used most to assess the participant's progress.

> ### Link same/contrasting thoughts

Linking thoughts is another key element in VTS facilitation. It shows how different people look at images and consequently at the world around. This diversity of insights helps individuals to overcome the tendency to see things from a single perspective and leads to habits of considering different viewpoints. When given more information, people tend to rethink their first opinion or change their mind. Debating and building on the ideas of others teaches participants multiple aspects of critical and creative thinking.

It is not easy to manage and nurture the group dynamics. The facilitator has to be attentive to everything that is said and, at the same time, pull back to think about how one part of the discussion connects to others. It takes time to develop and refine this skill as well as it takes a while for the participants' conversation to deepen and mature.

> ### Frame individual thoughts

Framing thoughts is another important element in VTS facilitation. It shows how different people approach an image. Depending on culture, social background, values system, etc. people see things differently. Therefore, it is important to try to frame the main idea the observer uses to make a meaning: people, landscape, geography, details, setting, personal experience, artist's intention.

E.g. you are looking at the people in the painting and think about how they could relate to each other…, you are looking at the nature in the background and assume that this scene takes place in a warm country…

We can also label the type of thoughts/thinking we are hearing.

E.g. you are wondering…, you are identifying…, you are weighting the possibilities…, you are considering the idea or notion of…

Framing the expressed ideas brings awareness to the main drive of how a person understands the world. To mirror how the observers function is very important because the way one looks is the way one thinks, is the way one speaks and, finally, makes decisions.

➢ Timing and Closure

There is no specific timeframe given for having a VTS discussion over one image, but generally, fifteen to twenty minutes per image is sufficient. If VTS is new to the participants, the discussions are likely to take a bit longer.

For closing a discussion, it is always good to compliment the participants on their participation with, e.g. mentioning how respectful they were. The group can also be asked to reflect on what they did, to express what they enjoyed or what they might like to tell others about the discussion.

Summarizing or trying to render some kind of consensus is unwise, as it is hard to remember all that was said and is unnecessary if comments were linked throughout the discussion. Summaries seldom do justice to the art or the discussion. It needs to be mentioned that, if the facilitator summarizes, she takes back the reins from the observers. It becomes about her and what she chooses to recall and highlight.

Another mislead is to let the observers think they have "completed" a discussion over a work of art. One of the most wonderful aspects of art is the fact that it can be revisited many times productively. Each encounter brings something new. Therefore, suggesting that the experience is complete and finished is counterproductive.

DO IT YOURSELF: VTS SAMPLE LESSON

PREPARATION

Before starting a VTS discussion, it is important to consider the basic principles for image selection:

- ✓ View the art work you have chosen for your 1ˢᵗ VTS discussion
- ✓ The image must correspond to the development of the viewer
- ✓ The viewer needs a known entry point
- ✓ The topic should interest the viewer
- ✓ The picture should tell a story that can be interpreted differently
- ✓ The sequence of images should be challenging

- Memorize the three key questions
- Prepare the equipment, arrange the seats and make sure the room is dark
- Think about how to introduce VTS to your audience

DISCUSSION

➢ **BEGINNING** Introduce VTS to your audience. Tell the group that this lesson is about viewing images together; that it is all about their viewpoints, their observations, and their ideas. Take the participants' fear away by telling them that there is no right or wrong answer. All that counts are their viewpoints.

➢ **PROJECT THE SLIDE** Ask students/patients to examine it silently.

➢ **QUESTIONING**

Begin with:

What is going on in this picture?

When an interpretation is given, ask:

What do you see that makes you say that?

Throughout the discussion, ask:

What more can we find?

➢ **RESPONDING**
- ✓ Point precisely to what participants describe.

✓ Be supportive as you listen.
✓ Paraphrase each comment / Stay neutral and use conditional language
Link related statements
✓ Whenever it is needed use: "What do you see that makes you say that?"

➢ CONCLUDING THE CLASS
Compliment the participants on their discussion and participation.

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