

Collaboration Approach to the Integration of Visual Thinking Strategies in a 3rd Grade Classroom

2004-2005 Action Research Project

Contact:

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How will the use of the Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) methodology, combined with other writing strategies, support and impact the writing of third grade students?

Rationale for Study

One third of my class was identified in the lowest 25 percent of the third grade population in reading. Their communication and visual literacy skills were a challenge for this underachieving population. They had difficulty articulating observations and ideas, as well as to listen to and consider those of others. I wanted to give students the opportunity to develop their oral speech, writing and listening abilities to improve their reading comprehension. Research shows a definite relationship between writing and reading. Reading is critical to the promotion of third grade students. It was important to me to address the development of communication skills, so I decided to implement the Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), developed by Phillip Yenawine and Abigail Housen in collaboration with a local university professor. VTS focuses on the development of critical thinking and observational skills through the use of open-ended questioning techniques using visual art images.

Background/Context

Myrtle Grove Elementary School is a pre-kindergarten through fifth grade school located in a lower socio-economic community in Opa Locka, Florida with an ethnic breakdown of 92% Black Non-Hispanic, 1% White Non-Hispanic, 1% Asian/Indian/Multi-racial and 6% Hispanic. There are approximately 638 students of which, 93.3% of the student population is economically disadvantaged, as evidenced by those receiving free or reduced priced lunches. Myrtle Grove Elementary has a student body that is extremely

transient in nature. The student population is largely derived from single parent homes. This includes students in foster care and homes where grandparents are the heads of household. Students are in need of extra help in mastering the skills taught and require close supervision and redirection. Therefore, several tutorial programs and flexible scheduling have been established to provide additional assistance for our students.

This study was implemented in my third grade class, which consisted of 21 students, some of whom were identified as gifted, learning disabled, or speech impaired. One-third of the students had been retained the previous year and five of the students looped with me from the previous year.

Research

- Research has shown the validity of using art as a stimulus for developing critical thinking skills. (Eisner, Eliot. *Educating Artistic Vision*. 1997. The Macmillan Company)
- The development and theory of Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) as Phillip Yenawine states, is based on several antecedent educational theories. (Yenawine, Phillip. *Theory into Practice: The Visual Thinking Strategies*. Presented at the conference of “Aesthetic and Art Education: A Transdisciplinary Approach,” sponsored by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation Service of Education. September 27-29, 1999, Lisbon Portugal. www.vue.org)
- Research has shown that students improved in their abilities to articulate their thoughts and in problem solving skills. (Longhenry, Susan. *Thinking Through Art at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts*. *School Arts Magazine*. Volume 104, Number 7, March 2005.)

Data/Tools

The Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) uses art to teach visual literacy, critical thinking, and communication skills. Through a series of ten lessons facilitated by Dr. Jill Farrell from Barry University, students had the opportunity to look at and think about art images representative of a diversity of time periods, artistic styles and cultures. Each lesson lasted forty-five minutes to one hour, and used three images. The lessons were taught two to three weeks apart and were followed by writing and drawing activities. The students examined art of increasing complexity, responded to developmentally based questions, and participated in-group discussions to stimulate growth.

Writing is one way to obtain concrete evidence of what the students are learning from VTS discussions. Pre/Progress/Post Writing assessments evidenced the growth of the students. Attendance records, audiotapes, videotapes, direct observations, work samples of writing and drawing, collaborative conversations, student and teacher reflections, standardized test scores, and lesson plans were also used. Each VTS lesson was analyzed. During the post-writing assessment, students wrote about one of the images shown in the VTS Student’s Site located on the Internet. The students selected the picture they wanted to write about. The students responded in writing to the prompt,

“What’s going on in this picture?” The writing assessment was un-timed. The writing rubric used was designed to assess critical thinking skills and was developed from the assessment pathmarker designed by Visual Understanding in Education (VUE), for classroom teachers implementing VTS.

Analysis

Visual Thinking Strategies significantly increased all students’ visual literacy and aesthetic development, as well as, ensured maximum participation, which developed a democratic relationship among the participants. Writing samples provided evidence of growth in language skills and thinking. Seventy-one percent of the lowest 25% of my students showed improvement in their reading skills as evidenced by the state standardized test. Eighty-five percent showed significant learning gains.

Policy Recommendations

The field of education is constantly in a state of flux as a result of a never-ending search for the most effective means by which to educate our lowest achieving children. The implications resulting from this project will provide students the opportunity to participate in instructional strategies implemented through the art discipline.

This action research study revealed a number of policy implications, which could benefit students’ writing skills through the arts:

- Time and funding is needed to provide training of the Visual Thinking Strategies for all teachers in low performing schools.
- There should be a greater emphasis on the integration of the arts throughout the curriculum in order to promote the development of aesthetic thinking in all students.
- More opportunities should be provided for collaboration between classroom teachers, university faculty and community resources.