

# Visual Thinking Strategies: Learning How to Teach With Art

*By learning how to teach with art, the Visual Thinking Strategies curriculum, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, began.*

*November 2013*

<http://www.utne.com/arts/learning-how-to-teach-with-art-ze0z1311zbla.aspx>

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Visual thinking strategies start by using your own resources — exactly what any of us needs to do when we encounter art that strikes us as strange.

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*Philip Yenawine, former education director of New York’s Museum of Modern Art and co-creator of the curriculum outlined in [Visual Thinking Strategies](#) (Harvard Education Press, 2013), writes engagingly about his years of experience with young students in the classroom. He reveals how the VTS curriculum was developed, and demonstrates how teachers are using art to increase a variety of skills. This excerpt, from chapter 1, “Permission to Wonder,” explains how he began learning how to teach.*

## Permission to Wonder

Like most kids at four and five, my granddaughter, Wyla, made full use of “why”—from “Why is that car stopped?” to “Why is it raining?” One evening a year or so ago, it was “Why does that guy on the billboard look so weird?” She definitely expected her father and me to respond, and we did, but she didn’t seem to pay a whole lot of attention to the answers we made up. She just kept repeating “why?”

Sound familiar?

If our answers didn’t satisfy her, why did she keep asking? Why do so many children?

Maybe posing the question is the point. A child looks around her, and when she notices something she can’t fathom, she asks about it. Our explanations don’t suffice because, I believe, what she really wants from us is to

know if it's okay to be puzzled and curious. She wants *permission to wonder*.

## A Little History

When I was running education programs at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), visitors also asked a lot of "why" questions about the complex, challenging, and often strange-looking art of the past hundred years or so. They wanted our team to explain what was unfamiliar to them, and we duly organized and crafted many explanations. But research showed that the ideas, facts, anecdotes, and analogies conveyed stuck with visitors about as well as our responses to Wyla.

After a great deal of thought—while digesting developmental research and theory by cognitive psychologist Abigail Housen and others—we realized the problem. What MOMA visitors really needed was what Wyla needs: not answers but permission to be puzzled and to think. Consent to use their powerful eyes and intelligent minds. Time to noodle and figure things out. The go-ahead to use what they already know to reflect on what they don't: the first steps in learning. Again, not answers but ways to figure out things on their own.

All of us have the capacity to engage with the unfamiliar. We do it often—for example, picture yourself in a city you've never visited. You're not going to leave your hotel totally bewildered. You'll look around, take in the scene, and head out, making sense of what catches your attention because of past experience. This is not to say you won't seek out maps and guides, but even without, you're not completely at sea. You start by using your own resources—exactly what any of us needs to do when we encounter art that strikes us as strange.

At MOMA, we needed a new strategy. We understood that the impetus for growth comes from curiosity—and our visitors, like Wyla, were plenty curious—but for them to grow, we needed to help them find the means to answer questions and solve problems themselves. By providing answers, we might have scratched the itch to know, but we were denying our visitors the opportunity to go through the effort involved in learning.

## Teaching That Didn't Stick

In 1987, roughly halfway through my time at MOMA, several trustees challenged my staff and me to find out if anyone learned from our many educational options. We were asked to be accountable for our teaching: were we effective? Did people learn what we taught? Sound familiar?

MOMA's education department offered a range of programs and materials to aid our visitors—most museums do—because surveys we conducted revealed that many wanted help. Museums have no mandated curriculum, but we offered standard tools of visitor education: teaching programs such as lectures, gallery talks, school group visits, teacher workshops, and so forth; an array of printed devices (e.g., labels and brochures); and audiovisual materials (such as introductory videos to exhibitions and interviews with artists).

These programs varied in terms of duration (from an hour to weeks) and targeted audience (from kids to scholars), but in most of them, we tried to explain why modern artists do the often-confusing things they do. We directed people's attention to details in images and objects, sometimes by way of questions, as we shared information and ideas interspersed with pertinent biographical stories and historical information. We offered analogies to help bridge the gap from what was familiar to a given audience to what was strange. We provided suggestions for looking that we hoped people could adopt and use when they encountered unfamiliar art. We sometimes included studio activities to help make certain points clear.

To all appearances, we did it well. Audiences were consistently responsive and enthusiastic. We could see their engagement. Evaluations were positive. Programs consistently filled.

Mission accomplished, it seemed.

That said, visitor evaluations didn't quite satisfy the MOMA trustees asked to help pick up the tab for our efforts. They prodded us to assess more deeply: "Visitors seem to like what you do, but does the teaching make any difference? Do people leave knowing more than when they came in?"

As we all know, those aren't easy questions to answer. Determining who learns what in schools remains challenging territory, despite decades of attention and many means of assessment. But we took the directive seriously and set ourselves the task of finding out. Given that testing visitors wasn't really an option, we turned to Abigail Housen, a cognitive psychologist who studies how people think when they look at art, and asked her to help us see if people retained what we taught them. She went to work gathering data about our teaching programs in particular.

To our surprise and great dismay, she found they *didn't* retain what we taught, even immediately after an experience. When visitors attending gallery talks, for example, were asked moments later to retrace their steps and relate what they remembered from the talk they'd just attended, they didn't even recall all the images examined, much less provide an accurate recounting of what they'd been told.

The news upset all of us, but perhaps me more profoundly than others: I wasn't interested in providing programs with no impact; teaching without learning wastes everyone's time and misses the point. I wanted what the trustees wanted: for our visitors to gain knowledge about the complicated objects artists devise—information visitors knew they didn't have and were motivated to learn. But even more, I wanted our visitors to get more pleasure and meaning from art. And I wanted such engagement to happen when people were on their own, not just when we were around to guide them.

I therefore took the failure to connect personally. I knew the value of art in my own life. Having regular, deep encounters with art seemed basic to my being. Interactions with it in many forms contributed profoundly to my feeling human, and I was discouraged to think our well intended efforts fell short of helping others similarly engage.

## **Why Our Teaching Didn't Stick**

Abigail Housen figured out what was wrong. Housen is a scholar who did years of graduate study working alongside other brilliant people at Harvard University interested in how the mind develops. Her specific interest was in how viewers process what they see in art, a particularly rich and complicated way of thinking. In our efforts to find out what our audiences knew about art and what they learned from us, Housen's focus—thinking—turned us on to something ultimately more useful: not what they know, but how they use what they know.

This is an important distinction. Many tests reveal what information or skills have been taken in and committed to memory, at least for the short term. Too few measure the impact of knowing in action: what gets internalized and actually used over time, even outside the learning environment. Suppose we successfully memorize vocabulary, or dates, or mathematical formulas, and therefore pass the tests—do we actually use this acquired knowledge in our daily lives? Do we retain it months later? Do we apply what we've learned given related circumstances in the future? That was what Housen figured out how to study.

At the time we met, Housen had spent fifteen years observing and interviewing hundreds of viewers in order to understand their thinking as they process art. She developed a simple method to do so in 1978: having viewers talk out loud, in a free-form stream of consciousness, until they had nothing more to say. She transcribed these remarks, broke them into independent thoughts, classified them, and analyzed the patterns that emerged. When she grouped learners by thinking patterns, she was able to determine that people with different experience actually think differently, constituting distinct developmental stages. People with little contact with art apply what they know from their own lives to make sense of what they see. Experts also apply lived experience but add other ways of thinking: a variety of strategies as well as specific concepts and information acquired through lengthy effort.

From her studies of people with a wide range of experience, Housen knew that recall of information and/or skills at analyzing—essentially what we were trying to teach at MOMA—are only aspects of knowledge, not the whole picture. That was useful to acknowledge in itself: despite the value we place on information and analytical skill, they're not the be-all and end-all of knowledge.

I should have understood this already: my own connections to art are usually highly personal. I often fail to think about who made something or when and instead simply get drawn in by how a piece speaks to some not-particularly-analytical side of me. It's the same with reading: recognizing words and sentences is obviously necessary for literacy, but it's hardly all there is to getting the meaning from text. Being a good doctor involves a lot more than the command of facts. And many “uneducated” people know a whole lot about work, the world, and how to do things.

At some level we all know this, but still teaching—including ours at the museum where we had the freedom to choose what we taught—emphasizes this basically academic approach to teaching and learning.

That was a useful reminder, but what was actually shocking to us was Housen's assertion that these aspects of knowledge are basically irrelevant at the beginning stages of experience with art: even if introduced into teaching and apparently appreciated, they won't be internalized and redeployed. They can't be; the foundation isn't laid to contain such experience, so it just won't stick, or at least not firmly.

Fortunately, Housen also held the key to why people came to MOMA despite not “knowing” a great deal and even feeling somehow ill prepared: she knew that, as we look, what goes on in the minds of those she calls *beginning viewers* is satisfying even if they don't recognize a painter or style by name. Whether novice or expert, we can have a good time looking at art in our own way. What didn't help our beginning viewers were approaches like lectures and labels. While they would do fine making sense of images in their own ways, once the specter of specialized knowledge was revealed, they thought, “Oops. I guess I need to *know* something to have the right experience. Please help.”

As Housen went to work helping us understand MOMA visitors, she used her research protocol to get robust data and analyzed what she found in light of the insights her earlier work had revealed about various stages of development. By way of several studies, she found the large majority of visitors to be in early viewing stages. Even though they had contact with art during their lives, they spent little of it with “eyes on canvas” in Housen's words: looking deeply for an extended time and thinking about what they saw.

There's a slight irony here, which came to mind as a result of watching Wyla, that granddaughter of mine. Particularly when she was a toddler, she spent extended periods of time with her nose to the ground, watching bugs or whatever. We might call this her “eyes on canvas” time: she was having essential primary experience with the physical world. She looked upward at birds and saw planes and helicopters—she lives in Los Angeles—and *helicopter* ended up being one of her first words. And that's the point: having had the experience of noticing something, she connected a name with the thing, and it stuck. It remains stuck. Now at the ripe old age of six, she knows both the generic form of helicopters and differences between the types that crisscross the skies above her neighborhood. She spent time looking, became curious, listened to what was said, asked questions, and learned what was interesting to her. We've all seen some form of this with myriad kids. Why, then, does so little of the instruction we design reflect it?

Here's another irony: given the example of the lengthy, apparently riveting examinations of art objects that were part of our teaching, visitors didn't even pick up the habit of extended observation from our example, something innate in the likes of Wyla. Significantly, visitor studies at many museums reveal time and again that people glance at works for mere seconds, from which only the simplest impressions are possible. These same people wouldn't expect to understand a poem or story without reading it carefully—even rereading it—and then thinking about it. But they rarely applied that strategy to looking at art, not even after our teaching interventions.

When Housen applied her research tools to determine what our visitors retained from our programs—which facts and strategies they recalled and used—she found that those who turned to us for help were at a point where “learning to read” was the need, not being inundated with facts and ideas, no matter how intriguing. Meanwhile,

Housen determined that our staff was at later stages of development; we had spent more time with art, were actually schooled in it, and spent our professional lives working with art and artists. As a consequence, we thought differently from our visitors. Our teaching made sense to us, but—although they could apparently take it in—our visitors couldn't retain it. It wasn't what they needed.

Our teaching was out of sync with what was developmentally reasonable. What an individual is capable of learning at any point is dependent on his (or her, of course; I go back and forth between the genders when I write) stage of development—just as when a child is learning to walk, she's not ready to skip. Partly because we were able “presenters,” people could follow what we said and conveyed that they enjoyed the experience. But even though we gave people what they asked for and appreciated, it didn't stick. Interviews showed they remembered bits and snatches, but often out of context, and they even misunderstood much of what we said. They might, for example, recall that a particular Russian artist (Kasimir Malevich, as it happens) painted his precise geometric shapes by hand, without the aid of tape, but would still wonder why he'd bother to paint a white square on a white background. Or why we in the know considered it an earthshaking choice. And this in spite of our eloquence on just such issues ...

Here's one way to think about our conundrum: our teaching seemed to engage audiences, but not enable them. Although attentive and appreciative, visitors still didn't learn viewing skills, facts, or ideas; we didn't even empower them to be keen observers.

This led to confusion: when you consistently command the attention of viewers, and when they praise and thank you for your efforts, it is hard to face that, when tested later, they retain little of what you taught.

Sadly, as too many of us know, the same thing happens every day throughout our educational system. Theoretically, K–12 education fosters sets of skills, provides a base of knowledge, and sends young people on to colleges or into the workforce prepared to undertake complicated tasks. But statistics tell us we succeed less often than we'd like; most performance assessments report that U.S. students' collective deficits in achievement and deficiencies are widely lamented by the people who want to hire them or who face them as college freshmen.

Teachers of myriad subjects confront this issue constantly: we teach; they don't learn, at least not enough. Most of us want to change that.

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*Reprinted with permission from [Visual Thinking Strategies: Using Art to Deepen Learning Across School Disciplines](#) by Philip Yenawine and published by Harvard Education Press, 2013.*