Cultural Literacy Through Art

[The article should be read along following the slides in the accompanying .pptx]

How do we use art in foreign language classes? When we do – do we focus on the style of the painting or the artist’s technique or her choice of colors?

Could art facilitate our students in gaining an instantly deeper understanding of the culture of the language being learned? Would it be possible to use art to enable the students to just “absorb” the “story” of the culture through an image? So, that perhaps even first semester students could reach a more complex understanding of that culture - -that their otherwise natural limited proficiency may restrict them to gain that through reading/translating traditional texts?

SLIDE

As for me – viewing “Washington crossing the Delaware” tells me a lot about America – just by looking at the image – “stories” that I intuitively sense - even if I didn’t know English very well. Anyway, all these questions were swirling in my head on a cold January afternoon in 2014.

That January I had unexpectedly I found myself with two unplanned weeks before the start of the spring semester. One morning reading the Education Section in the NYT - an image caught my eye.

SLIDE

Under the heading “What’s going on this picture?” an orange was being passed between two people through a slot in a metal door. I got curious and clicked on to find out more about the NYT Learning Network, which was sponsoring the page. That let me to an article about the Visual Thinking Strategies™ and fast forward -- I signed up for the two-day VTS Practicum, which by coincidence was being held at the De Young Museum in San Francisco the following week.
I spent two days learning about the theories behind VTS, exchanging observations with fellow teachers and enjoying art – some of which I still to this day remember in minute details. As the seminar progressed I started thinking: “What if I could open a door for Danish learners to reach a deeper understanding of Danish culture through the viewing of art?” That was the initial inspiration for this project.

So, what exactly is Visual Thinking Strategies: Let’s return to the image I saw in NYT.

VTS poses three simple questions after giving the students/viewers a silent moment to just look at an image:

What’s going on in this picture?

[then after students’ responses:]

What do you see in the picture that makes you say that?

[and after more responses:]

What else do you see?

[when the comments are beginning to slow down:]

Thank you all for contributing.

[As for the image in NYT it is called “An immigrant’s dream” – dessert for an immigrant detainee in Adelanto Center.]

VTS was first used at New York’s Museum of Modern Art – when the need to give their patrons a better experience became abundantly clear after exit surveys indicated that most patrons remembered next to nothing EVEN being surveyed just 10 minutes after finishing a docent lead tour. Then VTS branched out to be used in Arts Education in K-12– especially at schools offering the Core Curriculum.

The two scholars behind VTS that I need to mention are Philip Yenawine, former education director of New York’s Museum of Modern Art and Abigail Housen, professor
of Art Education and Director of the Graduate Program at Massachusetts College of Art, a cognitive psychologist, who studies how people think when they look at art. Both are cofounders of Visual Understanding in Education, a nonprofit research organization that trains teachers to use VTS. As described above VTS is governed by a few somewhat strict principles – this slide shows a live VTS session.

**SLIDE**

**Take a moment and look at the picture.**

Why the silent gaze – well, it takes time to sense the story within the image. Sitting still and observing will engage your aesthetic imagination and create a connection with the image. Think how rushed we often are – like in a museum -- how many times have we not looked at a painting for a few seconds and then moved on. The longer you look - the more the painting starts to belong to you.

**What’s going on in this picture?**

It is important that the picture is regarded in and of itself – no one is asked to name the artist, the painting style– it is just what YOU see. So name what you see going on.

**What do you see that makes you say that?**

This prompt gives the students an opportunity to own their statement and justify their observation.

**What more can you find?**

The use of the word “find” is important – it invites the students on a detective quest together. Which again creates a social experience – the students are sharing and learning from each other.

**Listen** – The teacher confirms that you are heard.
**Point** – by pointing the teacher creates a shared observation. Many students state that this makes them feel proud: “This is my observation that we’re all looking at and talking about!”

**Paraphrase** – …each comment! Change the wording, but not the meaning of what is said. In rephrasing - demonstrate the proper sentence structure and vocabulary - to assist with student language development. This will be especially relevant in a FL class.

**Accept** – …each comment neutrally. This process emphasizes a useful pattern of thinking, not giving the right answers. Students are learning to make detailed observations, sorting out and applying what they know.

**Link** – …answers that relate, including both agreements and disagreements. Show how some observations and ideas stimulate others, how opinions change and build.

**Thank you** – thanking the group and just let the image be. There’s no solution per se. Avoid summaries; linking throughout is enough to show how conversations build.

Some studies report that VTS seem to create a more equal playing field among the students with indications that introvert students often participate more enthusiastically in a VTS session than in a normal classroom setting.

In addition to growth in aesthetic understanding, VTS also supports the growth of creative and critical thinking skills, which transfer to other subject areas.

So, the principles of a VTS session may perhaps not look unique – but the process seem to create richer outcomes in art classes - than if you had asked: “What do you think of this painting?” or “Who do you think painted this?”

**SLIDE**

This slide is part of a transcript of a VTS session in a 4th grade US classroom to give a clearer understanding of how the exchanges between teacher and students evolve.
when using the VTS method to talk about an image. The example is taken from Philip Yenawine’s book *Visual Thinking Strategies* (2013).

So far the examples have shown VTS being applied to settings where everyone shares a language – be it English or in an English Language Learner class – VTS is has not widely been applied to foreign language classes.

When you decide to introduce VTS in a FL class the first task is to create the script in that FL. Here is an example of the VTS prompts translated to Danish.

**SLIDE**

Secondly you would to think about strategies to breach the barrier between what the learner sees and experiences when viewing the image, which is probably much more than she can express. One solution could be that the student could reply in a shared language --as needed - and the facilitator using the FL in the paraphrasing.

For my spring 2015 BLC project I wanted to see if a somewhat “pure” version of VTS would work, HOW it would work, and not the least IF it would work – so in my test sessions I decided to stay as close as possible to the VTS method as I could – but I did use the language choice model described above.

Some important comments about the image selection itself – Images should be figurative and realistic. They should have a strong narrative, have some ambiguity and mystery, show action or implied action, have some kind of accessible meaning that interests a given audience. I have called this that the image should “tell a story” or “have a story”.

I was able to run 4 sessions this semester using VTS with Danish language learners here on campus. My primary goal was to test if the VTS strategies would work in a FL classroom. The images, and the format of the viewing process varied somewhat from session to session. All images are by Danish or Nordic painters. I will now discuss my findings:
I had two groups of Danish students to work with this semester: Danish 2 and Danish 4. Danish 2 students had at the moment of the test classes between 65-70 in-class hours of instruction and were mostly “true learners”, while the Danish 4 students consisted mostly of heritage speakers and study abroad returnees. In the first session Danish 2 we viewed these three images.

SESSION 1 DANISH 2

SLIDES

Each image viewing took about 10-15 minutes. The images I chose each had a story that I thought would appeal to the students and engage them. I had told them that they could answer in Danish or English. If they responded in English, I would paraphrase in Danish. Normally the teacher is interacting directly with the students in front of the image – here I was “absent” or behind them – I had to interact on the screen we all looked at using a red pen pointing.

The session went well and the students were engaged with the images. Most of the conversation did however center on naming objects. “There are apples” “There’s a child” – but several times the conversation did go beyond that into justifying a statement.

About three weeks later the same students answered a questionnaire [not looking at the paintings] – and I will list a few examples in English if they were written in English, if in Danish I have translated. I was curious as to how much they would remember of the images and I think that it was remarkable how many details they did remember.

SLIDE

Picture 1: “I remember the girl drawing in the room with books and an apple (?) on the table. There was also a bird (though I can’t remember where) and a birdcage on the wall.”
Picture 2: “The second picture depicted many people in front of a bustling street in the harbor, where a large cargo ship floated. Many looked as if they were immigrants, with luggages [sic] and sacks beside them. A group of men looked in deep conversation and one was patting another on the back. A group of women sat with children, some of whom were eating oranges. There was a horse and carriage on the cobbled street beside them. They were also standing and sitting by a building.”

Picture 3: “The third picture was of a wedding party with a table set up in a grove of trees and several people standing around. There was no food on the table, only champagne. All the men were bearded and one woman had a small child with her.”

I also asked them if they “saw” a story in the images – and the following are some samples collected from their responses:

Picture 1 “distracted girl doing homework...” “shows some sense of leisure”

Picture 2” a historical snap shot of a time of high immigration?” “emigration”

The jury was out regarding whether it was im- or e-migration.

Picture 3 “Danish drinking culture” “The Danes know how to celebrate” “…how much Danes enjoy celebrating and celebrations”

So while of these responses indicated a beginning deeper understanding of the images – in terms of taking the understanding to the next level of “decoding imbued cultural clues” – I am not so sure that that part of the session worked. Partly the images may not have had enough “action” or “mystery” [such as the girl abstracted] – but the story responses were again mostly listing more observations of what was going on in images.

SESSION 2 DANISH 4

SLIDES

I decided to use the theme of “1864” – the last war that Denmark initiated against Prussia. The 150-year mark had just been observed in 2014 in Denmark – with events all
year long and co-commemorations with Germans in the Schleswig-Holstein area. Including a for TV series production “1864”, which is now made into a movie also titled “1864”.

This was a session with an agenda - clearest to me, while hidden for the students - and my least true to VTS session. I had a “conclusion” that I hoped the students would reach. Not just that war is bad – but that the loss of the war was devastating for Denmark to untold traumatic degrees and still today is deeply traumatic for Danes to relate to.

I chose two iconic historical paintings and two poems: one from 1848 and one from 2014 and lastly two recent music videos with the two poems set to music.

The session had three stages:

2 Pictures using VTS
2 Poems read and discuss
2 Music videos seen/heard and discuss

All segments were portraying two sides of the war: the optimistic/nationalistic pre-war feeling and the devastating result of loss of the war.

In a post-session questionnaire their answers did not show that the students really deeply had seen or understood the national stories embedded in these texts, images – but maybe had begun to grasp:

Q If you were to write an essay after seeing the two images?

“I would have written about how the Danes’ feelings changed from before the war to after the war”

“I would have written that it didn’t go very well for Denmark”

In summary: They agreed that each step deepened their understanding. The students seem to have understood that the result of the war was traumatic for DK. But the whole session became too teacher driven and went against the VTS approach – which claims that the images “should” be enough.
SESSION 3 DANISH 2

Tivoli and Bakken

In class they had read a very tongue-in-cheek essay from 1982 by Dan Turell, a Danish columnist, on the differences of Tivoli and Bakken -- two Danish amusement parks – whose differences could perhaps be likened to Disneyland versus Coney Island.

Turell reflects on the socioeconomic differences between the two places in regards to the clientele/the designs and so on – and that in Denmark you go to the park that your class “belongs” to. Bakken is for everyman and Tivoli for the more “privileged”.

I showed the class three sets of two images of Bakken and Tivoli: two depictions of the old days, two posters from the 1970s and two oil paintings.

Granted that it was Monday at 9AM – the session was very quiet. It could be the images – that they told the “story” well enough or there were no story- not leaving much mystery for the viewer to discover. But I was still surprised – there should have been plenty of objects and verbs to name. Also having read the text – I thought it would help by giving them a bit of a heads up. A week later the students wrote an essay on the VTS session and much to my surprise these were many great observations:

“The images helped put “a face to the name”, so to speak. While it may not be difficult to conjure up images of cheap or expensive theme parks, these images have things in them that are more culturally specific to Denmark, and more specifically to Tivoli and Bakken. The images placed them geographically (city versus rural). The images of couples and families were more “laid back” in Bakken. In Tivoli they were more “fancier.”
“The pictures were especially useful because they provided an opportunity to seek and find new words as necessary instead of trying to cram a list of words into one’s head. The learning process felt more organic and thus, very useful”

SESSION 4 DANISH 4

SLIDES

Based on the “silent session” I decided to go back to some images I had used earlier and always had very good responses to. The theme of these images is a set showing social differences centered around a dinner group and a set contrasting a mural depicting all good things the social-democrats have achieved with a portrait of a person in a state sponsored home for the elderly.

This turned out to be a fantastic session and in some ways the truest to the VTS method – we spoke only Danish, they were good at turn taking, and we reached some very good in-depth discussions about the images. Also, it should be mentioned there was absolutely no agenda from my side – just the images... Did it help that I had to engage directly with the image in front of students as VTS proposes? Did it matter that the images very good from a VTS point of view? How do we understand the process of art viewing and how do we measure it?

I believe that VTS could be used in the FL classroom – but I will argue that depending on the proficiency level of the class other avenues outside just viewing the images are OK to take. Such as in session 3 – the written response yielded some very good insights. Perhaps the narrative attached to the images are not that easy to “transfer organically” – at least it seemed to help to directly address those narratives. Just viewing and talking about the images did not seem to open my imagined “door” – perhaps just a little, but not fully. As session 2 showed – the more angles the topic was looked at the deeper they understood.

There’s no certain way to KNOW what the students came away with – but if I use myself as an example and the fact that I so vividly remember the images I saw 1 year ago and
the feelings they called forth in me, the stories we as viewers found and shared – I hope that the images the students saw this semester -- may just be with them and perhaps get activated at some point in their life. Suddenly an issue may arise in a discussion and suddenly one of the images appear in their memory and conjure up the “story” of that image.

Maybe the value of a VTS session is just to share the aesthetic exploration of art as a social act - and perhaps that may be value enough...

Thanks to GSI Ian Thompson, the Scandinavian Department, for letting me borrow his class and thanks to all the students for volunteering! And thanks to the BLC – especially to Keith Hernandez for patiently video recording all the sessions.