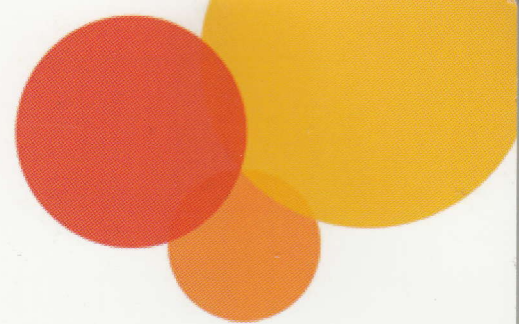


IRISH ASSOCIATION OF SPEECH
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Update

MAGAZINE

Autumn/Winter 2014



IN THIS ISSUE.....

Professional Registration in Speech and Language
Therapy in Ireland

The Importance of Lung Volume at Swallowing Onset:
A Clinician's Journey

App Review: Proloquo-2-go App – from Assistive Ware



IASLT

Improving Speech and Language Therapy Students' Clinical Skills using Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS)

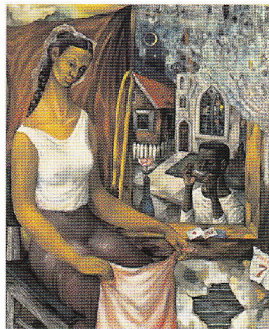
All undergraduate students in the College of Medicine and Health at University College Cork are now learning Visual Thinking Strategies or VTS. VTS aims to develop students' observation and critical thinking, which will in turn enhance their clinical skills. The approach is based on the work of its co-founders Dr Abigail Housen, a cognitive psychologist, and Philip Yenawine, an art curator and museum educator. To implement the College-wide initiative to introduce VTS to all healthcare curricula, experts travelled from Seattle, USA, to UCC to train 20 members of staff as VTS facilitators in 2012 and 2014.

Group viewing of art works as a learning tool in healthcare courses stems from the central role that accurate observation plays in diagnosis and clinical decision making. Despite its importance in clinical work, educators rarely teach observation skills overtly or in a structured way. With origins in the learner-centred orientation of Piaget and Vygotsky, VTS has been widely used in primary and secondary education, and more recently in medical education and nursing programmes in the US and UK.

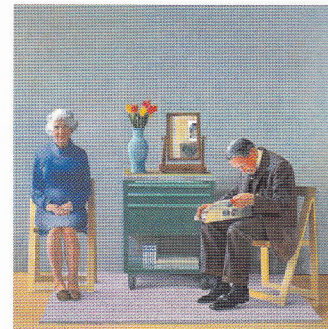
However, as far as we know, UCC is the first to introduce VTS into a speech and language therapy curriculum.

During a typical VTS session students view art images, such as the ones above, that have been carefully selected by facilitators. The art works are chosen on the basis that they are open to multiple interpretations and are therefore likely to stimulate group discussion. Selected works often contain complex and ambiguous components for this reason. For each image, there is an initial period of "silent looking" requiring students' full concentration and attention.

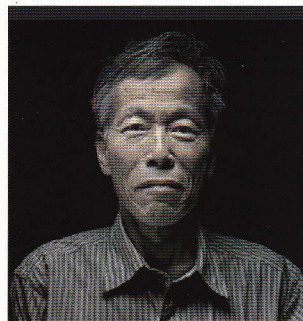
A trained VTS facilitator asks structured questions during sessions, highlighting particular elements observed by the students. A small set of recurring questions are posed throughout the VTS session to focus students'



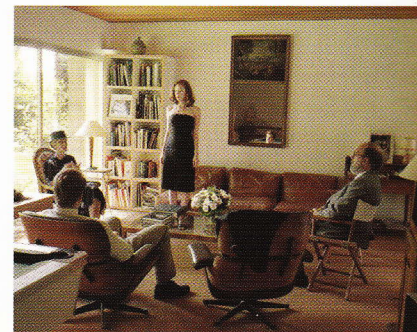
Frederick Jones



David Hockney



Denis Rouvre



Jessica Todd Harper

Examples of art work used in VTS sessions for speech and language therapy students at UCC.

observations and thinking. Following the silent looking period, the facilitator opens by asking "What's going on in this picture?" The facilitator's role is to paraphrase, in a non-judgmental way, the students' observations and draw their attention to links and varying interpretations across the group. Following each paraphrase, the facilitator asks the group "What more can you find?" to encourage other students to contribute further observations. Discussion of one artwork might continue for 15-20 minutes.

The students volunteer their own interpretation of what they see and the facilitator probes their underlying reasoning by asking "What do you see that makes you say that?" The students listen to observations from others and consider the different perspectives presented. At this stage individual biases as well as cultural differences, attitudes, and assumptions are often revealed and highlighted by the facilitator for discussion in the group.



A VTS session (above) and selecting art works for use in the curriculum (below).



In VTS sessions the facilitator aims to create an atmosphere where students feel safe in expressing their own interpretations of images. This security is necessary in order to elicit the fullest possible range of observations and interpretations from the group. At the end of a session the facilitator encourages students to reflect on their own clinical practice to draw links between the multiple possible interpretations and ambiguities that often arise in real life situations. Students are encouraged to note their own traits as viewers, for example whether they first go to the detail or take in the whole picture, and how such traits might play out in clinical contexts.

Recent research studies have demonstrated the positive effects that viewing art can have on students. Improved clinical skills, such as enhanced observation, more sophisticated descriptions of clinical imagery, greater tolerance of ambiguity, have all been reported. It is implicit that the development of these clinically related skills will have direct benefits for students' diagnostic skills, client care and inter-professional team working.

VTS on the BSc Speech and Language Therapy programme consists of five 1-hour sessions. Introducing a relatively small arts component to the course will create a balance with the strong scientific evidence-based orientation of the rest of the programme. In clinical work there is often no "right answer". Many possibilities exist and open communication and interaction with others enables fuller exploration of them. VTS aims to provide an enjoyable way for students to gain insight to this process. The benefits of introducing VTS to healthcare curricula are currently being evaluated in various research projects conducted by staff and students in the College of Medicine and Health at UCC.

Prof Fiona Gibbon and Dr Alice Lee
28th July 2014
Department of Speech and Hearing Sciences
University College Cork, Cork.

Further Reading

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