

Visual Thinking brought to life for teachers

By Tony Edelstein
Staff Writer

One teacher thought the painting depicted a traveling circus. Another teacher suggested that the painting made a statement about class status. The moderator listened attentively to their opinions, restated their observations for the group and probed to find out what details in the picture supported the respective interpretations. For the teachers at Redwood School, this was their first exposure to a program called Visual Thinking Strategies and they were experiencing a typical VTS lesson.

VTS is a structured program for elementary school students that uses art to teach and enhance observation, thinking and communication skills. Originally conceived as a means to develop aesthetic viewing skills, it has been found to correlate with improvements in students' writing and critical thinking processes.

VTS is the product of a collaboration between Abigail Housen, a Harvard-educated cognitive psychologist, and Philip Yenawine, the former director of education at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. It has existed for about 15 years and schools across the country have adopted it.

However, the program now being implemented at Redwood is the first full school VTS initiative in New Jersey.

Redwood's good fortune is due to a substantial monetary donation by a West Orange couple. Bill and Lisa G. Westheimer have donated \$28,000 to cover the entire cost of bringing the VTS program to Redwood. The Westheimers, who are accomplished artists themselves, were aware of VTS and its correlation with academic improvement as a result of their friendship with Philip Yenawine, one of the developers of VTS. Mr. Westheimer, a photographer, approached Superintendent of Schools Jerry



Amy Chase-Gilden, New York regional director for Visual Understanding in Education, trains Redwood teachers in a new method of teaching through the use of art at the Montclair Art Museum.

Tarnoff and offered to fund the program. Tarnoff received Westheimer's offer enthusiastically and accepted it after seeing a presentation about VTS.

The Westheimers' generosity is particularly noteworthy because they do not have any children themselves. Thus, their gift to the school district was motivated solely by their desire to bring a benefit to West Orange.

"We are committed to our community," Bill Westheimer said. "The best thing for everyone is a good education."

Although Mr. and Mrs. Westheimer were instrumental in bringing the program to West Orange, they did not participate in the decision about

which school would house the program.

"They (district administrators) are professionals," Mr. Westheimer said. "They don't need an amateur like me telling them what to do."

Tarnoff chose Redwood as the site for the program because the staff had experience working on a collaborative art project last year.

To commemorate Redwood's 50th anniversary, art teacher Lisa Schustak spearheaded an effort that involved the entire staff and student body. They made ceramic tiles containing their individual portraits and the tiles were affixed to one of the inside walls.

The VTS program consists of 10

lessons in which students are shown various works of art and asked to discuss them.

The format of the discussion is structured to elicit student responses to broad questions. In particular, the facilitator of the discussion — who may be the classroom teacher or the art teacher — is trained to prompt the students with specific questions depending on the grade level. For grades three to five, the first question is "What's going on in this picture?" The question is designed to encourage students to think beyond the concrete images they see and to make inferences about the story or the message the artist is trying to convey.

Once a student volunteers a response, the facilitator asks the student to support his or her observation by asking "What do you see that makes you say that?" The intent of the question is to prod the student to give evidence from the artwork, which allows the student to practice reasoning and logical thinking. Since a key objective of the program is for students to realize that there are no "right" and "wrong" answers when responding to a piece of art, the facilitator will then seek other opinions by asking "What more can we find?"

These questions that the facilitators are trained to ask are far from random.

"They have all been validated by research," said Amy Chase-Gilden, who gave the VTS presentation to the Redwood staff. "The program has undergone a 15-year evolution."

Chase-Gilden is the New York regional director for Visual Understanding in Education, the organization that produces VTS.

It was Chase-Gilden who also made the presentation that sold Tarnoff on the program.

The Redwood staff will receive formal training in VTS at the Montclair Art Museum. Although the museum is not affiliated with the VTS program, it has agreed to host the training sessions, as well as receive several visits during the year from Redwood students.

"The program is wonderful for the kids," Tarnoff said, "and it's a great professional development opportunity for the staff."

For Bill and Lisa Westheimer, it is an opportunity to have a positive impact in their community.

"The best thing we can do for our community," Bill Westheimer said, "is to teach them. The goal is to enhance all academic successes. If kids can be more analytical and learn to communicate better, they'll really be ahead of the game."