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Socially Engaged Pedagogy in the Zoom Age

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Abstract

Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Museum of Contemporary Art's Education Department was, as were many others, confronted with our audience's rapidly changing needs in a newly digital landscape. As LAUSD closed down all in-

person instruction on March 16, 2020, teachers, educators, and families were faced with new challenges in providing adequate access to online distance learning for every student. And yet, Educators in MOCA's School Program, Contemporary Art Start, were determined we could adapt. It was through a sustained commitment to DEAI work, months of action research, ongoing critical reflection, and our unique team culture created by a robust community of practice that MOCA Educators found ways to not only respond to the challenges posed by virtual learning, but even found space to joyously innovate and enact our values in new and exciting ways. Contemporary Art Start (CAS), MOCA's award-winning year-long school partnership program, serves five thousand students and one hundred teachers annually from elementary, middle, and high schools across L.A. Facilitating six tours weekly, CAS Educators use the inquiry-based teaching methodology, Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), to lead learner-centered conversations about contemporary artworks. The teachers in CAS are trained to use VTS in the classroom. In tandem with their two visits to MOCA each year, teachers attend PD workshops, are given a contemporary art curriculum, and receive classroom coaching visits from CAS Educators. Starting in January 2021 under a grant provided by the Leonard Hill Charitable Trust, the CAS program will expand, growing its staff and serving a burgeoning network of teachers and students throughout Los Angeles. In the Summer of 2020, CAS transitioned to online programming. Preparing to lead virtual tours and programs on Zoom in the Fall of 2020, the team of CAS Educators reflected on the pedagogy of VTS and our departmental values of embracing the multiplicity of perspectives, increasing access to contemporary art, and making education more collaborative, inclusive, and learner-centered. We pondered: what would it look like to adapt socially-engaged pedagogy to the Zoom age and could our impact be tangibly measured? In order to center student voices and acknowledge the multiplicity of perspectives, we focused on the new ways students were communicating over Zoom. Striving to facilitate rich VTS discussions with new modes of digital communication, we wondered: As socially-conscious facilitators, what should we privilege when navigating virtual environments? How could the use of online functions, such as chat, align with the goals and values of VTS and CAS? Furthermore, in the endeavor to make education more inclusive and learner-centered, we critically examined our own process of image selection and the possible social implications of artworks. Looking to increase public accessibility to contemporary art, we experimented with digital tools to help reach new audiences. Through these adaptations, we emerged with novel ways to facilitate rich VTS conversations online. Our process of adapting the program continues to this day, as Contemporary Art Start continues to privilege the iterative nature of social praxis and values transformation through reflection.

Introduction

When a dancer moves their body, experimenting physically with form, space, and movement, they often practice with a mirror and a coach, teacher, or fellow dancer. The ability to act in flow, to physically see one's decisions play out, and to take the time to review how those decisions look in actuality is a given in the practice of dance. When we turn to the art of teaching, this rhythm of experimentation, reflection, adjustment, and coaching¹ is just as important. A critical, accountable, robustly reflective community for cohorts of educators is crucial for success. Contemporary Art Start (CAS) is an award-winning² year-long school partnership program at The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. In CAS, this type of community has allowed us to stay nimble and responsive to changing needs and conditions of the students and teachers we work with. During the tumult of 2020/2021, which included a global pandemic and vast crises of (amongst many more things) health, education, and social justice, this type of community space was tested and proven instrumental in the survival and thrival of our work. As a group, we made bold pivots to respond to the needs of teachers, students, and each other, all while remaining anchored to our learner-centered pedagogy. We, two managers and one Senior Educator for CAS, are writing this article to reflect on the many lessons learned during those years, and to share the ways that community and reflective practice facilitated that learning. We believe sharing the adjustments we made to our teaching practice will continue to be relevant for all readers interested in staying responsive to learners' needs. As with all reflective practitioners, our community of practice is a dance that mirrors the emergent evolution of natural spaces, a messy intertwining of personalities and organisms who respond and shift in relationship to the ever-changing environment they exist within.

Contemporary Art Start: MOCA's Model for School Partnerships

Today, CAS serves seven thousand five hundred students and one hundred fifty teachers annually from elementary, middle, and high schools across Southern California. Facilitating six museum tours weekly, CAS Educators use Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) to lead learner-centered conversations about contemporary artworks. VTS is an inquiry-based teaching technique designed to move viewers through the stages of aesthetic development, deepening meaning-making and enjoyment of artworks. CAS trains one hundred fifty partner teachers to use VTS in the classroom. This pedagogical training is supported through and by

¹ As Atul Gawande writes, coaching does not have to just be for athletes. In fact, we at MOCA align ourselves with Gawande's assertion, one that Visual Thinking Strategies also aligns itself with, that "Coached teachers were more effective".

² California Association of Museums' Superintendent's Award for Excellence in Museum Education, 2012.

the four pillars of CAS: multiple museum visits, hands-on teacher professional development, classroom curriculum, and family involvement opportunities.

The practice of facilitated reflection is deeply ingrained in the structure of CAS. The staff of educators regularly engage in rigorous debate about the choices we make as facilitators, and the structure of the program itself. Most of these conversations happen at the program's weekly, three-hour staff meetings. At these meetings, the entire CAS staff³ engages in detailed debriefings of tours and CAS programs, workshops logistics for upcoming events, and practices teaching and coaching each other in VTS. The staff also reads texts on art theory, social justice practice and contemporary pedagogies and takes turns facilitating open-ended conversations about them. Our practice is anchored in writings of bell hooks (2010), Paolo Friere (1970), Philip Yenawine (2013), Abigail Housen (1997), and more.

Because of this consistent reflective work, CAS's best practices, procedures, norms, and the value of self-reflection are all born from a lineage of dedicated intellectuals that have held positions in the program over the years. Through a rhythm of experimentation, reflection, and adjustment, the program has found ways to adapt to the changing needs of students and teachers and to support and engage the various individuals who work in CAS. One intention in writing this article is to provide a detailed account of that process, to exemplify a responsive teaching and adaptive practice that might be helpful to others.

Kim Kanatani developed CAS along with Vas Prabhu in 1986 (Hoel, 2018) to address the perceived "need to provide future audiences with the opportunity to develop an in-depth understanding of contemporary art as a form of visual communication, personal expression, and social commentary" (Kanatani, 34). Even in its early iterations, the CAS curriculum encouraged teachers to be open to the "subjective, ambiguous nature" (Kanatani, 34) of contemporary art, by valuing process-based, dialogical learning. Over time, the staff and educators at CAS have gradually altered the program to create more space for conversation, and to decenter hierarchies of information and academic research. The current Associate Director of Education, Jeanne Hoel, has been instrumental in deepening this practice by first shifting from a general, conversation-based pedagogy including the Socratic method, to the use of VTS almost exclusively. VTS is a more replicable teaching strategy for classroom

³ At the point of writing this article, the CAS Staff consists of the Associate Director of Education, Jeanne Hoel, CAS Manager Alice Bebbington, School and Teen Programs Manager Michelle Antonisse, Education Assistant Kathya López and eight part time educators (Braden Hollis, John Lee, Janet Lee, Jasminne Morataya, Annie Roos, Tatiana Sanguinette and Marita Zerbe)

teachers, enabling them to hold rigorous and student-centered image discussions⁴ without prior knowledge around contemporary art. Then, she advocated tirelessly for paid educators, insisting on compensation for hours of professional development as well as the sharing of power through community-building practices.

Visual Thinking Strategies and CAS

CAS has continuously sought to support students in the surrounding Los Angeles area through sustained support of individual teachers. CAS is driven to “invest in L.A. teachers to help students access the transformative power of art” (Hoel, 2020). By supporting teachers to have a year of image discussions through a standards-aligned curriculum in the classroom, Contemporary Art Start strives to support students in their ability to:

- Value multiple perspectives
- Have meaningful experiences with art
- Increase critical thinking and reflection skills
- Increase speaking and listening skills
- Gather evidence and generate inferences
- Improve academic vocabulary (Hoel, 2020)

The aforementioned goals are achieved through regular, VTS discussions held throughout the year⁵. As Philip Yenawine (2013), co-founder of VTS, puts it:

VTS uses art to teach visual literacy, thinking and communication skills - listening and expressing oneself. Growth is stimulated by several factors:

- Looking at art of increasing complexity
- Answering developmentally based questions
- Participating in peer group discussions, carefully facilitated by teachers.

(p. 19)

By centering student voices, CAS supports teachers in achieving their goals of integrating arts successfully into the classroom. One CAS teacher shared in 2020, “CAS has made me aware of art and its complexity. In turn, it makes me want to be a better teacher to serve my diverse population” (Internal CAS teacher survey, personal communication, November 2020).

⁴ By “image discussions,” we are referring to conversations around a shared aesthetic experience. This phrase has become a shorthand in the CAS community for art experiences that are often visual but may engage all senses.

⁵ Through in-classroom conversations and their two MOCA field trips, CAS students participate in up to 30 VTS discussions each school year.

Currently, 86% of the 45 schools we serve are Title I⁶, 95% are public schools, 82% are in the Los Angeles Unified School District. We are anchored by a responsive teaching model and the core value of student-centered accessibility, and those both change with the shifting needs of our population. Los Angeles Unified School District is spread over 710 miles and enrolls more than 650,000 students, making it the second largest school district in the nation (LARAEC, 2018)⁷. While the program works to center the diverse voices of students, a learner-centered pedagogy also impacts teachers and CAS staff. We have seen the trust and empowerment between these groups expand, as staff cultivate a supportive environment for teachers' learning, and in turn, teachers support their students' open exploration of artworks.

Hoel (2018) writes about how the teaching strategy used in CAS has informed how the team works together:

The values and processes of VTS deeply inform our closely-knit staff culture. Over years, VTS discussions have trained us how to listen carefully to one another, to collaborate, and to welcome diverse and unexpected points of view. Our weekly meetings provide time for us to bring this reflective, inclusive process to bear on programmatic challenges, such as how to best prepare teachers and their students for upcoming exhibitions. (para. 6)

In this carefully designed pedagogy, VTS, (Housen, 1997), there is a facilitator and a group of participants. After the group spends time quietly experiencing the artwork (or text), the facilitator initiates an open conversation by asking "what's going on here?" As people begin to answer this question, the facilitator listens carefully, while pointing to anything mentioned. They then paraphrase the comment in their own words, often rounding out vocabulary and framing ways of thinking. If applicable, the person who made the comment is then asked, "what did you see that made you say (that)?" This question usually points to a specific part of their statement, the choice of a particular word, a value judgment, or an assumption without evidence. By asking for these clarifications, the facilitator encourages participants to back up statements with evidence, share specialized knowledge, and more deeply explore their own

⁶ "Schools in which children from low-income families make up at least 40 percent of enrollment are eligible to use Title I funds to operate schoolwide programs that serve all children in the school" (US Department of Education).

⁷ 74% of students in the district are Latinx, 10% are White, 7.7% are African American, 3.6% are Asian, 1.9% are Filipino, and less than 1% are American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. In the 2019-2020 school year, there were 119,626 English Language Learners in the District, and, according to the California Department of Education, 77.4% of students receive free or reduced lunch.

perspective. The third question is: “what more can we find?”, which the facilitator asks in order to reset the conversation and open up the social space for divergent thinking.

In a VTS conversation, the teacher, educator, or facilitator is “not the authoritative source; instead, the students drive the discussions, aided by the teacher” (Yenawine, 15). This shift in typical power dynamics allows the teacher to “no longer merely [be] the-one-who-teaches, but one who is [themselves] taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn, while being taught, also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (Freire, 80). Through this methodology, the facilitator relinquishes the role of knowledge-keeper and instead affirms the multiplicity of perspectives, and the importance of divergence in a well-rounded interpretation of any text. In addition, by precisely paraphrasing what they heard a participant say, the facilitator affirms the importance of the student contribution, and practices active listening. Former CAS educator iris yirei hu (2019) asserts that:

accurately paraphrasing a student’s comment not only helps [the facilitator to] understand what they are seeing, but it honors [the student’s] ideas in a way that encourages them to trust learning—and more importantly, to trust themselves—and that the learning process is both individual to them, and dependent on the group. (para. 2)

The action of paraphrasing may seem simple, but the decisions made here are weighty. The way that an individual hears a comment could reveal deep-seated truths about their positionality, perspective, and what they value in education. As Kabir Singh (2019), another former CAS educator, puts it “facilitators must be mindful that they are listening to their students and interpreting their comments through the lens of their own lived experience” (para. 12). The attempt to accurately paraphrase a comment often uncovers gaps in knowledge as well as assumptions made about artworks and other people. As former CAS manager Kai Monet (2019) puts it, “when we are unconscious of our own biases and internalized racism, ageism, xenophobia, misogyny, etc., we are unconscious to how our facilitation choices may uphold and perpetuate oppressive structures of power” (para 8).

In the CAS community, a large part of our work is to practice facilitating VTS conversations in front of each other, and to debrief these conversations with a trained VTS coach.⁸ Coaching sessions provide a mirror to the facilitator; under the watchful eye of a coach, facilitators can

⁸ CAS budgets to send all its educators to VTS trainings, moving each educator through Beginner, Advanced, Coaching, and finally Coaching II practicums. Because of this structure, the team usually has at least 4 trained coaches on staff. For more information on VTS practicums, please visit www.vtshome.org.

collaboratively fine-tune the mechanics of their VTS practice and examine any emerging biases or inconsistencies. This space replicates a VTS conversation, as it is a container for compassionate listening and the tender unpacking of a text, in this case the conversation itself.

Praxis in Practice: Learning from 2020

The work of CAS is guided by community and conversation, as well as by the texts of experts. We regularly read articles and chapters by thinkers like bell hooks and Paulo Friere to help us ground our practice in theory. Through this action of checking lived experience against the written word, we can further reflect on how our field trips, professional development spaces, and workplace practices align with or deviate from the values we espouse. In doing this reflection, the actions are shifted. This is defined by Freire (1970) as praxis, or “the action and reflection of [people] upon their world in order to transform it” (p.79). In further exploring this term, Freire writes that these “two dimensions, reflection and action, [are] in such a radical interaction that if one is sacrificed— even in part—the other immediately suffers” (p. 87).

Another area informed by praxis is in the images that we choose to present to students and teachers. Our various positionalities as educators inform every aspect of our work with CAS, with each other, and with the art from which we teach. These works represent MOCA’s collection, but also make implicit statements about the program’s values and what conversations are most important to present to teachers, students, and the public. We have had many brave conversations, calling in⁹ each other’s choices and reimagining the images that we present, particularly for the online school tours. Much of this labor has, in the past, fallen on the shoulders of our Black, Indigenous, and People of Color [BIPOC] co-workers. Their lived experience gives them the knowledge base to pinpoint implicitly racist narratives that may emerge from the sequencing of certain images (Singh, 2019). In addition, these brave conversations have uncovered some artwork’s problematic proliferation of certain stereotypes or negative identifiers. This work was emergent, since, when tours were in person, CAS educators would lead conversations about artworks that had been chosen and placed by the museum’s curatorial department.

In the upheaval of 2020, we faced many challenges. In March of 2020, at the beginning of the COVID-19 lockdown, along with many other cultural institutions MOCA laid off all part-time employees, including the CAS Educators. A month later, the rest of our department was furloughed, along with most of the museum’s full-time staff. Students around the world found

⁹ Professor Loretta J. Ross says, “calling in is like calling out, but done privately and with respect.”

themselves migrating to online spaces in the attempt to continue their studies through distance learning.¹⁰ That summer saw a rise in active demonstrations of political unrest, including those surrounding George Floyd's murder by Derek Chauvin on May 25, 2020. Protests demanding justice and accountability for ongoing police brutality reached historic levels across the globe (Cave, Albeck-Ripka, and Magra, 2020), and continue as we write this article (Winsor, 2021). Household names such as Black Lives Matter and @changethemuseum were challenging many cultural institutions to take accountability and revisit their values and mission statements. Organizations were being outed for performative activism and virtue signaling through many channels, including publications (such as the Open Letter to the Getty Board of Trustees) and unionizations. Calls for significant, authentic, and lasting change were being made. Most museums were thrown into a state of great uncertainty (Armstrong, 2020).

With the eventual rehiring of part-time and full-time staff, MOCA's CAS program was rapidly reconfigured to adapt to the radical changes taking place. CAS was able to successfully lead 152 virtual tours over the course of the pandemic, while maintaining the integrity of our program and its learning goals. One CAS teacher shared, "It has been difficult to have all students access class materials and Zoom meetings. It has also been difficult to get students to share their ideas. But our CAS discussions have been the exception to this." Another CAS teacher shared of their pandemic experience:

I can't imagine not being part of CAS. I appreciate you stepping up and making the necessary changes to continue with the program. Personally speaking, CAS has made a difference [to] so many of my students, primarily my English Language Learners. (Internal CAS teacher survey, personal communication, November 2020).

We Move Online

In the fall of 2020, as the MOCA Education team began thinking about the possible structure of virtual tours, we wondered how to facilitate online interactions. In our initial phase of brainstorming, we knew we would likely adhere to our successful, in-person tour structure as closely as possible. We emerged with many questions. First, how might we provide gallery tours while the museum was shuttered? Which components of VTS would stay the same and which might take different forms online? As is always the case with pushing ahead through turbulent times, the future was uncertain.

¹⁰ LAUSD transitioned to fully online classes March 16, 2020 (Kohli & Blume, 2020).

Zoom and Google Meet were determined to be the best way to reach students, as those were the platforms that most of our partner teachers were using to run their virtual classrooms. We determined we would give tours in a presentation format. We highlighted three contemporary artworks on slides and held VTS discussions about each, as though we were stopping at artworks inside the museum. We were immediately grateful for the structure of VTS, as we knew that our guiding teaching philosophy would not change; we would still ask the key questions, paraphrase each student response, ask for evidence when necessary, and point. Some key aspects needed to be translated to accommodate a digital classroom setting. Our three areas of focus were: community agreements for students, roles of educators during tours, and the chat function of Zoom.

Our primary goals in online tours (as with our in-person practice) are to encourage and inspire student looking, thinking, discussing, and learning. Key to having a fruitful and vulnerable discussion about a work of art is the creation of a brave space—one that encourages participants to share and engage in dialogue, even when it is not easy (Arao & Clemens, 2013). In the galleries, before our Zoom tours, we had specific ways of creating this type of space. One method was: we began in-person tours with space for student introductions. Each MOCA Educator and their accompanying group of ten students would sit in separate circles, dotted around the galleries, and share their names and answers to an ice-breaker question. Then, CAS Educators introduced how the rest of the hour would look. They would invite students to share their thoughts, to be respectful, brave, and accepting of silence. Giggles sometimes occurred, and vulnerable moments were shared. With these in-person field trips, brave spaces were often effectively established in the tour's first ten minutes. But in our remote, online tour spaces, the whole class participated at once. At first, we were not sure how to create those warm, inviting, and brave spaces that had seemed so easy in-person, and with smaller groups. We found that we had the muscles and skills to do so, but that this would require work and, as always, experimentation, reflection, and adjustment.

We realized that the visuals of our presentations were key in establishing a friendly tone. Educators took two paid hours to develop their tour slides. They did this by applying original graphics, illustrations, GIFs, and any other elements that gave a welcoming aesthetic to their tours, matching the warm and inviting tone we wanted to establish (in Figure 1, see some of the slides different educators used to welcome students).



Figure 1. Examples of slides different educators used to welcome students.

Replicating the welcoming space of our in-person tours also meant including introductions online. We opened the session with an ice-breaker question¹¹ to the whole class, inviting responses in the chat or spoken aloud. Both aloud and in the chat, MOCA Educators opened up the space by saying something like “Let’s introduce ourselves! Please share your name, pronouns, and one thing that brought you joy this week!” This simple opening allows us to follow bell hooks’ advice to first lay “the foundation for building community... [which] can begin by simply hearing each person’s voice as they state their name... [making] the classroom a place where wholeness is welcomed and students can be honest, even radically open” (hooks, 2010).

Crafting Community Agreements

In order to set expectations, encourage community, and create a brave space, we wrote online Community Agreements. We created these as a group of educators, ideating, and discussing each potential agreement as it came up. These agreements arose from the emergent need to

¹¹ Careful thought was given to the creation of these ice-breaker questions. CAS educators wanted to care for students by asking them to reflect on something that was bringing them joy, or what in their immediate space could be used for an art project.

create behavioral guidelines and support student learning in a new classroom format. The Community Agreements we came up with were as follows:

1. Participate and share your thoughts - please raise your hand electronically or in the chat to share.
2. You may type in the chat, too - please keep your conversations focused on the artwork.
3. When not sharing, please press mute.
4. Keep your camera on if possible - we would love to see you!
5. Listen to each other, build on others' thoughts, and stay open to new ideas.
6. It takes time to think - silence is okay.

Additionally, each tour shared a way-finding slide, delineating the agenda for the tour. This was in response to readings about accessibility, which advocated for clear, outward facing delineations of time through shared schedules (Kern, 2020). Through this carefully constructed introduction, we hoped to create a space where each student felt able and invited to contribute to a rich dialogue that included multiple perspectives.

Throughout a semester of touring, reflection, and shifting information, we adjusted these online Community Agreements as needed. For example, one agreement that was often revisited was the agreement that asks students to keep their cameras on. We ourselves were feeling “Zoom fatigue” and needed moments during work to have our cameras off and not see ourselves or be seen by others. We felt sympathy for students who must also be experiencing Zoom fatigue (Fajardo, 2020). We began to hear from teachers and the media (Moses, 2020) that students couldn't always keep their cameras on because of complex, non-school learning environments and a lack of access to technology. Even if cameras were turned on, it didn't guarantee active participation and engagement. Collectively, we decided to either delete the original “keep your cameras on!” or soften it by adding “if possible - we would love to see you!” We developed our own understanding of what could create the most welcoming space from the start and determined this was one that affirmed students' boundaries and sought to care for their wellbeing.

Reconfiguring Educator Roles

Another way we were able to successfully shift our practice online was by re-examining the roles of CAS Educators during tours. As the team continued to navigate through the unfamiliar, complex digital landscapes of different classrooms and varying grade levels, we noted needs requiring the attention of more than one facilitator. As discussed earlier, CAS asks MOCA Educators to be open to active experimentation and critical self-reflection. Built into each tour shift is a thirty-minute debrief after tours, where members of the team can

provide feedback, appreciations, and air any frustrations with a view to problem-solving. This helped as we collectively defined and further refined what would become three distinct roles for teaching over Zoom. When entering our virtual classrooms, the team acknowledged the numerous complexities of the online social spaces that students and teachers have learned to navigate. Distance learning came with its own set of unavoidable challenges that teachers experienced daily in many classrooms (Fajardo, 2020; Moses, 2020). These included internet connectivity issues, poor audio/visual transmission, the lack of proper tools or accommodations for accessibility, and more. We were able to overcome a plethora of technological obstacles by leaning on a strong community of reflective practice. Like scientific experiments containing various parts for observation and reflection, the debriefing sessions held after each tour provided educators an opportunity to methodically dissect their individual and group experiences to actively improve existing practices.

It was easy to determine that one Educator could moderate a fully verbalized VTS discussion (as with in-person conversations). However, when the tours moved into a digital space, the role of the chat and the aforementioned technical issues complicated our flow. As a result of many conversations, experimentations and after some, unfortunately chaotic tours, CAS Educators experimented, reflected, and came up with three distinct roles: Facilitator A, Facilitator B, and Facilitator C. Although each of these roles demanded a unique set of goals and responsibilities, the Educators were all dependent upon one another. When MOCA Educators entered a virtual classroom and the tour began, Facilitator A screen-shared their Google Slides presentation and turned-on closed captions. Since Facilitator A screen-shared their unique presentation, and led all VTS discussions, they could be likened to an emcee.

As Facilitator A verbally engaged students and verbally facilitated the class, CAS Educators noted a lot going on that needed more support. We noticed in the chat that students may be sharing ideas and concrete observations but were also losing focus. Some students would repeat comments over and over in the chat; in one conversation the statement, “photograph don’t have to be perfect” was typed seven times in a row, and the “artist” emoji was shared six times. For the transcript of this full conversation, please see Appendix 2. Additionally, hands were being raised virtually, on screen, and through the chat - it was overwhelming to track. In frank and open debriefs after our initial tours in the fall of 2020, CAS Educators reflected upon their experience of virtually teaching and shared how overwhelming that role could be at times. Through these open conversations, as well as witnessing firsthand through group observations of tours, the team determined that a second facilitator, Facilitator B, would be useful here.

Facilitator B was a role designed to support the group VTS discussion in ways that Facilitator A could not. If calling on hands was technologically or capacity-wise impossible for

Facilitator A, Facilitator B could step in. If reading the chat while hearing verbal comments was impossible for Facilitator A, Facilitator B was there to present chat comments aloud. The team reflected on how it was monotonous for Facilitator A to both read comments and paraphrase them. With Facilitator B reading comments from the chat, a back-and-forth rhythm, a verbal dialogue of at least two people, helped to break up this monotony. At first, this role was dependent on individual CAS Educators— how and when Facilitator B stepped in shifted as different Educators expressed more or less capacity and confidence. However, through constant group reflection conducted in each post-tour debrief, these flexible options soon became baked into practice, and all facilitators were given the same support. We could not have conceived of these two roles had we not rigorously experimented, reflected, and taken action based on our reflections, enacting our value of teaching through praxis. The Facilitator B role was eventually recognized by the team as that of a chat moderator as well as a kind of a director - a less visible but fully essential part of the teaching “production.”

Additionally, we created an additional, optional role: Facilitator C. Facilitator C was designed to support highly verbal students, tech savvy students, and active chat users. The duties of Facilitator C can be likened to those of a producer, making sure everything runs smoothly. This labor varies for the educator who is assigned as Facilitator C, especially with the frequency of unforeseen circumstances that one could encounter online. Facilitator A might lose internet connection, the Google Slides presentation could be corrupted, Facilitator B may not be able to see on-screen hands, or an exceptionally active chat could prove to be too overwhelming for one person. Due to the unpredictability and unique character of each online classroom dynamic, these three facilitator roles were established as an interdependent system, designed to help manage virtual spaces as a production team would to privilege the overall flow of the tour— the show must go on! We found through reflection these three roles consistently worked in our classrooms. There were many times when a third facilitator was not needed but having the space and mechanisms for support proved beneficial, especially when more chaotic situations arose. Educators felt less stressed, and tours began to run more smoothly. During debriefs, we found that these new roles allowed CAS Educators to support each other and to support students however they wanted to engage.

Examining the Chat

Another component of tours that we focused on was the chat function. Many questions arose concerning the possible effects or value of such online functions for a VTS discussion. In order to look closely and reflect on our teaching practice, we saved as many chat logs as we could, to ground our conversations in evidence. We had lots of questions: How can we actively involve and include the students who are unable to verbally participate? Do these adaptations of VTS and modified community agreements align with our core CAS values?

How might the chat support equitable student access to a rich conversation? How might the chat hinder this?

The urgency to determine best practices for the online chat feature related to the earlier mentioned access challenges that at-home learning presented our students (Moses, 2020). For example, allowing students to use the chat was an opportunity to participate in the conversation, even if a student could not unmute their microphone. Guided by our commitment to accessibility and supported by our community of practice and honed reflection skills, we were able to look carefully at the chat feature, just as we had collaboratively investigated Community Agreements and the triad of facilitator roles. By practicing VTS, CAS Educators engage in an abundance of unseen labor purely through actively listening, accurately paraphrasing, and, if educators are BIPOC, engaging in additional labor by navigating white spaces and white comfort (Monet, 2019). Having frank conversations about labor as a team prepared us to move into a labor-intensive space. By looking carefully at the chat (see Figure 2), we determined new best practices that aligned with our existing pedagogy. Like with our previous reflective practices, the chat became a case study in how our community of practice might help the program remain nimble and educators to remain within their capacity in an ever-changing time.

The screenshot shows a New York Times article titled "What's Going On in This Picture?" with a black and white photo of a woman in a hat petting a cheetah on a boat. A chat overlay on the right shows three comments:

- Jose** (Cerritos, April 19): "The lady is holding a cheetah and they could be apart of a traveling zoo because there's many animals in the background On a boat or ship." (Options: Reply, Recommend, Share, Flag)
- Caitlyn** (California, April 19): "I think this photo is from a white ago, since it's being taken in black and white. The person pictured appears to be a keeper for the animals, seen in how they're experienced enough to be petting the cheetah. Around them is what seems to be a holding ground for these animals, as there are cords and crates presumably for the purpose of loading the animals to take them somewhere. It could be the zoo, or back into the wild." (Options: Reply, Recommend, Share, Flag)
- Marco** (Cerritos, California, April 19): "There is a person who seems to be the owner of the exotic animals on the boat, due to their attire they seem to be in a warm area. Furthermore, the black and white photo seems to show that this is from a long time ago. I think it could be a trainer who is trying to bring some animals to a zoo." (Options: Reply, Recommend, Share, Flag)

Figure 2. Example of the conversations generated through The New York Times' "What's Going On in This Picture?"

We will first discuss what we will call an “Open Chat.” This was a type of chat that had no limits on who could message who, so the written conversation was open and available for everyone to see. Right away, we noticed that this lacked the traditional rhythm of a spoken-aloud VTS conversation. Instead, it looked similar to a text based VTS conversation, like the New York Times online forum What’s Going On in This Picture, which is moderated through the Visual Thinking Strategies national organization.

This type of chat met our accessibility values, as every student was able to type into the chat at any time to express their comments. Yet, as we soon came to realize, Open Chat tours often provided challenges for our educators and, at times, for fellow students. In Figure 3, an example of an Open Chat shows nine students sharing their thoughts on an artwork (shown in Figure 4) over two minutes.

11:35:16 From Frank: I think that the statue is made of marble and those pillars are made of stone
11:35:22 From ANGEL : prove that its rusty because it does not look rusty
11:35:28 From Ariel (she/her) : IT'S THE STYLE
11:35:33 From ANGEL : yeah
11:35:34 From Carter : o
11:35:36 From Mateo : you have to eyes angel
11:35:36 From Renata (she/her) : yesssss
11:35:41 From Carter : I love sauseges
11:35:47 From Ariel (she/her) : CALL ON ME
11:35:51 From AIDAN : what?
11:35:52 From IKER : giant sausages
11:35:55 From Frank : Do you see that pillar blocking the way of the stairs
11:35:59 From Ximena she/ her : OMG ariel.....
11:36:07 From Ximena she/ her : you are right
11:36:14 From Carter : giant sausages
11:36:21 From Ximena she/ her : no
11:36:24 From Carter : giant sausages
11:36:25 From ANGEL : no
11:36:25 From (L.W.) : why are you guys talking about sausages??????
11:36:26 From IKER : It is
11:36:29 From Mateo : maybe
11:36:33 From Carter : giant sausages it is
11:36:33 From ANGEL : i don't know
11:36:40 From ANGEL : why rome?
11:36:43 From (L.W.): oh that
11:36:51 From Carter : giant sausages it is
11:36:52 From ANGEL : why rome

Figure 3. An example of an Open Chat showing nine students sharing their thoughts on an artwork (shown in Figure 4) over two minutes.



Figure 4. Triumph Over Mastery; Mark Tansey, ca 1986 (Oil and pencil on canvas; 60 x 144 1/4 in. (152.4 x 366.4 cm); The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Gift of Steven and Patsy Tisch).

Such a high volume of comments is certainly exciting; it shows exuberant engagement and enthusiasm. Discussing an inquiry-based pedagogy different from Visual Thinking Strategies, Rika Burnham and Elliot Kai-Kee (2011) wrote, “a central part of contemporary gallery teaching practice is devoted to encouraging our audiences to talk freely,” (p. 79) and this bright, iterative space certainly showed freedom and engagement.

But given this level of participation, how should VTS facilitators, used to paraphrasing one comment at a time, navigate this chat? How can facilitators validate each comment through individual paraphrases that serve to deepen group understanding and interpretations? It became very clear that doing so was not possible here. However, closing the chat entirely (and

limiting access to our conversation) did not align with our values. We needed to explore how the chat might help our practice.

Applying the VTS principles to these chats was not, as in a purely vocalized conversation, about validating each typed comment through an individual paraphrase. Facilitator B began to rely more heavily on linking (calling out connections between ideas) and framing (naming types of thinking and modes of exploration) several comments at once. This type of chat engagement functioned as a brainstorming space, an almost cacophony of comments that was too loud for the facilitator to hear individually but did allow for peer-to-peer learning. As we can see in Figure 5, Krystal, Randy, and Pam are all thinking about the same thing, and are even able to agree with one another at times.

12:40:42 From RANDY to Everyone : this bedroom is dinosaur theme
 12:41:00 From Pam to Everyone : I think this is a kids rom cause it has kiddy stuff for example the pillow
 12:41:21 From RANDY to Everyone : and theres kid shoes on the floor
 12:41:29 From KRYSTAL to Everyone : yes
 12:41:38 From RANDY to Everyone : and barney slippers
 12:41:38 From KRYSTAL to Everyone : right next to the Broncosauras
 12:42:02 From Pam to Everyone : And I agree with Krystal
 12:42:17 From KRYSTAL to Everyone : mhm a little bit under his bed.
 12:42:33 From KRYSTAL to Everyone : right next to some dinosaurs Pj's
 12:42:36 From Janet | MOCA (she/they) to Everyone : Sounds like many of you are noticing the specific objects strewn around this space and thinking about who it all belongs to. Sounds like a group investigation :) Thanks for your comments!

Figure 5. An example of a facilitator engaging an Open Chat applying VTS methodologies.

Senior CAS Educator and article author Janet’s paraphrase at the end attempts to link students together by framing what the students are doing in the chat— they are investigating as a group! Janet acknowledges the back and forth between Krystal, Randy, and Pam, who notice the “pillow”, “kid shoes”, “barney slippers” and “Broncosaurus [*sic*].” Janet frames this itemizing by saying, “you are noticing specific objects strewn around this space”. This encapsulates all the different, specific objects they were eager to find, validating each person’s observations while labeling how they are looking at the artwork. This way of labeling student thinking is referred to as “framing” in the practice of VTS (Hoel, 2018). Framing student thinking and linking comments together was one way that facilitators found they were able to uphold the values of VTS within an open chat.

Figure 3 shows an open chat that is not on topic, with 27 comments in 1.5 minutes. This chat felt particularly unmanageable, due to the sheer volume of comments, as well as the numerous

off-topic comments. In another classroom discussion, a student we will call Zeke¹² shared in the chat, “GUYS PLEASE if you have an idea than put it in the chat but if it is a comment then don’t because it pops up for everyone and it is VERY distracting so PLEASE STOP.” We noticed that, in particular, when the chat was opened in classrooms that had not previously had it open, it often became a social space for the students. Short, responsive phrases and repeated statements or exclamations replaced observations about the artwork. But within these phrases, we found lots of cognitive actions: narrative-forming, list-making, disagreement with oneself, and the cross-pollination of ideas. This was all happening concurrently with this, at times rambunctious, social space.

In opposition to Open Chats, we also experimented with what we will call Closed Chats, where the chat feature was completely off. This type of tour experience most closely mimicked an in-person VTS tour, as students on screen vocalized their comments one at a time over Zoom. Through this rhythm, Facilitator A was able to paraphrase each comment carefully and fully, with the attention of the whole class. In reflections on using Closed Chats, the topic of Educator care came up—we found ourselves with less to monitor, and more capacity to listen to the student conversation. Closed Chat tours felt more manageable because they were less labor for the CAS Educators, who were already managing so much on tours. However, access to the conversation was hard for us to gauge. How many students were not participating because they could not unmute? How many more students would have engaged if we had an Open Chat? Were there students verbalizing comments who might have only used the chat if it were available? With all this in mind, and eager to continue our experimentation in the name of increasing accessibility and engagement from the students, we remained open to a third way of facilitating the chat.

Our third chat option was Private Message Chats. In this format, students could use the chat, but only to message one facilitator at a time. This allowed for more harmonious flow between educators, as Facilitator B could serve comments to Facilitator A aloud, without the added pressure of an overwhelming chat. Additionally, the inclusion of this chat feature enabled greater access to the conversation for those who could not participate verbally. The private chat feature did not allow for a communal, brainstorming conversation to develop as in the open chat. In both the open and private chat spaces, we saw students sharing who had not been able to, or who didn’t want to. The fact that other students could not see their comments and respond, meant the facilitators could serve them up one at a time to the group conversation. We found that this method allowed for greater access to the conversation, but

¹² Names of students have been changed to protect individuals’ privacy.

also closely mimicked an in-person VTS discussion, where one comment was being heard at a time.

In our reflections of all three chat options, our community of practice was focused on what would support the students and teachers the most, and by centering them, felt we could arrive at the right way forward. In doing so, we realized that the most viable solution was not to present one of these three options to the CAS partner classroom as our recommended practice. Instead, it was to meet our partner teachers where they were. We were able to ask on our tour visit how each teacher preferred to use the chat. Did they prefer Open Chat, Closed Chat, or Private Message Chats? Following their lead meant the chat was never a novelty for students, and thus limited the challenge of effervescent, distracting, and at times, spam-filled chats. From our own research and critical work, we were able to easily and confidently employ whichever chat option their class was used to. As with all our teaching practices, we are still gathering data and having careful conversations when new challenges arise. Were it not for our reflections as a group, our discussions about labor, and our community of practice, we might not have been so open and agile. We continue to work with this kind of flexibility to this day. We are open to defining new best practices, and we hope to move with generosity and expertise into whichever situation we next find ourselves in. Our staff debriefings after each tour allow us to live out the idea that: “We embody. We learn. We release the idea of failure, because it’s all data” (brown, 2017, p.18).

Reflective Practice: A Reflection

As stated earlier, the backbone of this work comes from reflective practice. By observing others’ teaching and being observed, asking each other questions about the decisions we make and appreciating what is observed, a trust is built. While writing this article, and reflecting on our practice and methods of facilitation, those very methods have continued to shift. This has reminded us that the best thing to share in this space is our process and not an end-point. Much of this work, its constant fluctuation and demand for radical presence, has affirmed that there is, in fact, no end-point at all. With the practice of VTS and its peer coaching, educators find constant ways to question their decision-making and open up dialogue around the very conversation that they facilitated. In group reflections, CAS staff, with anywhere from fifteen years to two months experience in this practice, often share their awe at how iterative and expansive the art, the conversation, and the pedagogy of VTS can be. During the years 2020 and 2021, the staff of CAS found a similar openness in its field-trip structuring. The “rules” and containers for the tours were constantly questioned, revised, tweaked, and improved, making for a better, more learner-centered experience each time. While these shifts may not directly affect the structures for in-person learning, the flexibility, trust and responsive community that was formed will continue to serve our mission. As bell hooks (1999) puts it, “One of the things that we must do as teachers is twirl around and around, and find out what

works with the situation that we're in. Our models might not work. And that twirling, changing, is part of the empowerment?" (128).

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Appendix 1

Transcript of an Introduction Online With an Ice-Breaker Question in the Chat.

12:15:38 From Annie (she/her) | MOCA to Everyone : Hi everyone! Thanks for having us here today - we are thrilled to be in your classroom! We are educators from MOCA, or the Museum of Contemporary Art.

12:15:55 From Charlie to Everyone : Your welcome Hello moca people

12:16:15 From Annie (she/her) | MOCA to Everyone : Agenda: Intros!
Community Agreements! Art! Wrap up!More @ MOCA!

12:16:56 From Charlie to Everyone : Hello Annie

12:17:04 From Annie (she/her) | MOCA to Everyone : Hi Charlie!

12:17:09 From Charlie to Everyone : Hello

12:17:29 From Annie (she/her) | MOCA to Everyone : Let's introduce ourselves! Please share your name, pronouns, and one thing that brought you joy this week !

12:17:44 From Sky to Everyone : Sky he/him

12:17:45 From Sam to Everyone : Sam (he/his)

12:17:48 From Min to Everyone : Min he/him

12:17:51 From Sam to Everyone : him*

12:17:55 From Braden (she/her) | MOCA to Everyone : Braden, she/her, eating a delicious churro brought me joy this week!

12:18:03 From Richie to Everyone : Richie he/him

12:18:07 From Charlie to Everyone : Charlie She/her

12:18:08 From Nel to Everyone : Nel Rivers (he/him)

12:18:08 From Sky to Everyone : helium

12:18:13 From Dylan to Everyone : Dylan (he/him) one thing that brought me joy this week is my bed

12:18:16 From Alice | MOCA (she/ her) to Everyone : Alice, I use she/her pronouns, and going on a lovely walk at sunset brought me joy this week!

12:18:16 From Kris to Everyone : Kris she/her/they

12:18:19 From Jacki to Everyone : Jacki Any pronouns

12:18:20 From Gill to Everyone : Gill he/him, i played with my friend

12:18:22 From Janet | MOCA (she/they) to Everyone : Janet, she/they, drinking in the fresh air at the mountains over the weekend brought me joy!!

12:18:41 From Sam to Everyone : Well something that brought me joy this week is a toy Called pop fidget. Is satisfying

12:18:50 From Quincy (She,Her) to Everyone : Quincy (She, her) What brought joy for me was being with my baby cousin

12:19:00 From Charlie to Everyone : one thing that I loved this week is playing with my bike

12:19:12 From Nel to Everyone : what brought my joy was playing video games with my family and that made me happy 🌟👏

12:19:12 From Dylan to Everyone : and also harry potter :)

12:19:17 From Jacki to Everyone : something that brings me joy was calling and playing with freinds

12:19:21 From Nel to Everyone : yes Dyla

12:19:24 From Nel to Everyone : Dylan

Appendix 2

Transcript of a Conversation with Repeated Comments

12:51:09 From ♥~* MASON*~♥ : it could be anything
12:51:09 From LYLA: mason
12:51:13 From John : ??
12:51:16 From John : you agree
12:51:19 From ATOM : Mason?
12:51:20 From HARPER:
12:51:24 From John : Hi
12:51:31 From John : camara 12:51:37 From ATOM : 12:51:44 From ATOM :
12:51:48 From ATOM :
12:51:56 From Alice | MOCA (she/ her) : Thanks, Ms. F! Maybe, class, if you have an idea that you'd like to share, maybe try letting us know what you see that makes you say that... (can you back up your idea with visual evidence that you see?).
12:56:48 From HUNTER: photograph don't have to be perfect
12:56:48 From HUNTER: photograph don't have to be perfect
12:56:48 From HUNTER: photograph don't have to be perfect
12:56:49 From HUNTER: photograph don't have to be perfect
12:56:49 From HUNTER: photograph don't have to be perfect
12:56:49 From HUNTER: photograph don't have to be perfect
12:56:49 From HUNTER: photograph don't have to be perfect
12:56:51 From John : stuck in a tree
12:56:59 From ATOM : they are as big as treese
12:56:59 From MARISSA: why is there a ferris wheel
12:57:26 From ATOM : :|
12:57:34 From ATOM : I don't know
12:57:36 From MACKENZIE: one building looks like a hotel
12:57:44 From John : which one:
12:57:44 From MACKENZIE: or work office
12:57:54 From HUNTER : photograph don't have to be perfect
12:57:55 From HUNTER: photograph don't have to be perfect
12:57:56 From HUNTER: photograph don't have to be perfect
12:57:56 From HUNTER: photograph don't have to be perfect
12:57:57 From HUNTER: photograph don't have to be perfect
12:57:57 From HUNTER: photograph don't have to be perfect
12:57:57 From HUNTER: photograph don't have to be perfect
12:57:58 From HUNTER: photograph don't have to be perfect
12:58:01 From MACKENZIE: the one near the ferris wheel this
12:58:15 From Alice | MOCA (she/ her) : Thanks Aaron! I see your comment.
12:58:17 From MACKENZIE: and those horses in the back
12:58:40 From LYLA: stop spamming aaron
12:58:42 From ATOM : The animals are as big as the ferris wheel
12:58:43 From Tatiana, MOCA (She/They) : aaron, if you can please limit your comments to just one thought at a time it would be helpful, so we can see everyone else's comments.
12:58:50 From Alice | MOCA (she/ her) : Aaron - You're thinking about how photographs don't need to be perfect. Is that by chance your comment from the last artwork we looked at?
12:59:33 From ATOM : animal
12:59:42 From John : 2. Hanser French?

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