



Eyes-on-Trays: Developing Visual Literacy in Sand Therapists

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Abstract

Sand therapy is a highly visual therapeutic intervention modality. The client uses miniature figures, sand, and perhaps water to create a scene in the tray. As most mental health practitioners are trained in verbal-dependent therapies, how does the new sand therapist make the shift to understanding client-created scenes in the tray? This article suggests that the fields of Visual Literacy (Debes, 1968) and Visual Thinking Strategies (Housen, 1983; Yenawine, 2013) can inform sand therapy educators, trainers, and supervisors in this vital area. *Eyes-on-trays*, an adaptation of Housen's *eyes-on-canvas*, is offered as a new byword for the importance of developing visual literacy in sand therapists.

Sand therapy practice is unique, as mental health practitioners use miniature figures, sand, water, and a tray. Depending on the practitioner's clinical theory or approach, sand therapy may include verbal interactions or be primarily or entirely nonverbal. Sand therapy practitioners highly value the client's intuitive, creative, metaphoric, and symbolic use of miniature figures and their placement, movement of the sand, and addition of water to create scenes in the tray. Client and practitioner are simultaneously visually, emotionally, psychologically, cognitively, and neurologically impacted by the sandtray creation. Supporting the new sand therapist in understanding and competently working with this visual aspect is one of many tasks of the sand therapist supervisor.

This highly visual therapeutic intervention is similar to other creative modalities, such as art therapy, expressive arts therapy, and play therapy. Judy Rubin, a pioneer art therapist, shared that visual art work allows clients to "express themselves in another language" (personal communication May 10, 2024). Play therapists have long stated that *a child's play is his talk, and toys are their words* (Ginott, 1960; Landreth, 1991, 2023). Most mental health professionals are trained in and practice verbally-dependent therapies and therefore this shift to learning a visual

language, or visual literacy, is part of the uniqueness of sand therapy education, training, and supervision. The ability to develop therapists who *listen with their eyes*

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(Landreth, 1991, 2023) and hear what a client *speaks with their hands* (Lowenfeld cited in Sussex Academic Press, 2020) is critical to the effectiveness of sand therapy.

Visual Literacy

Sand therapy sessions typically result in a visual image. This might be simply the result of the movement and shaping of the sand, resulting in a picture, a visual, drawn in the sand tray. More typically, miniature figures are included, creating an arrangement of placed figures that form one or more scenes. Possibly, the addition of water enhances the sand or overall scene. This is all visual. How do we make sense of these images, and essential to this article, how do we teach and develop an understanding of the created visual image to a novice sand therapist? Sand therapy educators, trainers, and supervisors have likely seen hundreds of completed sandtrays and participated in numerous sand therapy sessions. How does the educator, trainer, or supervisor go back to the beginning (before the experience of seeing all the sandtrays), scaffold the teaching, and provide practice experiences for the novice sand therapist?

Perhaps the fields of visual literacy and visual thinking strategies inform us in this basic understanding of the visual work in the sand tray. The multi-disciplinary term *Visual Literacy* was coined by John L. Debes (1968). His definition is,

Visual literacy refers to a group of vision-competencies, a human being can develop by seeing and, at the same time, having and integrating other sensory experiences. The development of these competencies is fundamental to normal human learning. When developed they enable a visually literate person to discriminate and interpret visible actions, objects, and/or symbols, natural or man-made, that he encounters in the environment. Through creative use of these competencies, he is able to comprehend and enjoy the master works of visual communication. (Purvis, 1973, p. 714; Hailey et al., 2015, p. 50)

Thus, it appears that visual literacy can be developed to improve *visual communication*. This relates to sand therapy with the ability to develop the *seeing* and *having and integrating other sensory experiences*. In the client's presence, the sand therapist is *seeing*, observing, the *actions* of the client-artist while the visual image is being created. The sand therapist is aware that sensory input is occurring on many levels and this is the therapeutic experience. Adding insight to the visually-literate sand therapist's ability to *discriminate and interpret visual actions, objects, and/or symbols* is foundational to the sand experience and therefore we need to develop visual literacy.

Let us turn to cognitive psychologist Abigail Housen for further assistance in applying and incorporating visual literacy into the development of the novice sand



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therapist. While studying and working at Harvard University (Hailey et al., 2015; Housen, 1983), Housen was curious about how people process what they see in art, which is identified as a complicated and rich way of thinking. She indicated it is more than what the viewers *know*; it is *how they use* what they know (Yenawine, 2013). This aligns with the development of sand therapists. Sand therapy competencies (Hartwig et al., 2023) identify core knowledge and skills, but how does the supervisor develop *the use* of what they know? Sand therapy educators, trainers, and supervisors acknowledge the importance of hands-in-the-sand, the experience of creating and building their own sandtrays, having these experiences in trainings and witnessed by another (Homeyer & Lyles, 2023; Homeyer & Sweeney, 2023). Another example is the International Society of Sandplay Therapy (ISST), which requires sandplay therapists a complete therapy experience as a client, which they term *process*, as part of their credentialing requirements (ISST, n.d.). The World Association for Sand Therapy Professionals' research additionally notes that hands-in-the-sand is essential (Homeyer & Stone, 2023; Hartwig et al., 2023).

Housen's grounded her research in the works of cognitive developmental theorists including Piaget, Kohlberg, Loevinger, and Vygotsky (Hailey et al., 2015; Housen, 1983). These are names and developmental theories known to most mental health practitioners. After interviewing hundreds of participants of various ages and having differing exposure to art, she found five distinctive, sequential patterns, later labeled as stages, of identifiable behaviors (Appendix). Of the five, the two initial stages inform and are most applicable to the development of novice sand therapists: Accountive and Constructive.

For those in Stage 1, Accountive, the identification of what the art viewer see is linked to their own personal lives. Simple, concrete observations identify Stage 1 (Hailey et al., 2015). However, "(w)ith time spent and experience looking, viewers begin to ground these observations in the logic of the image itself" (Hailey et al., 2015, p. 54). This is what Housen termed as the need for increased experience with *eyes-on-canvas*. This is also observed in novice sand therapists. They initially begin viewing completed sandtrays by identifying familiar and concrete figures, "*I see a tree, house, car, road, river, and a bridge.*" They may express curiosity about novel figures, "*I wonder about the meaning of the phoenix and the huddled, robed figure.*" With more exposure to an increasing number of sandtrays, *eyes-on-trays*, they begin to develop the ability to form an overall gestalt, or comprehensive, view of the completed scene or image in the sandtray. Stage 1 art observers also start to make meaning of the scene, including possible emotional inferences, resulting in a narrative (Hailey et al., 2015). For the new sand tray therapist, it might sound like, "*I think that the car leaves the house, and as it travels down the road, it*



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comes to a bridge over the river. The mysterious hooded-robed figure blocks the bridge, yet a phoenix stands on the other side, anticipating success and new adventures for those in the car."

In Stage 2, Constructive, the viewer begins to build a framework for looking. They use their own perceptions, knowledge of the world, and values of their social, moral, and conventional world. They also begin to look carefully and puzzle. An interest in the artist's intentions and choices develops (Hailey et al., 2015). Again, parallels with the developing sand therapist are seen here. Not only does the sand therapist construct thoughts and meaning of the sandtray creation based on their own lived experience, but they also have the advantage of knowledge and clinical insight of the client-artist's lived experience. The sand therapist knows the presenting therapeutic issue, some life history and lived experience, current living conditions, etc. The puzzling and curiosity of the sand therapist is present throughout the creation process, unlike the art viewer, who sees only the finished image. The *intention* and *choices* of the client-artist to create the resulting visual image in the tray continues to develop in the sand therapist throughout the session. Depending on the clinical theory or approach, these puzzlings can be the basis for verbally exploring the sandtray with the client.

These two stages provide an opportune beginning for the scaffolding experience of the novice sand therapist. They inform the educators, trainers, and supervisors of specific experiences they may develop and execute, building on novice sand therapist's knowledge and skills. The process of how the sand therapist *uses* their knowledge continues to mature. As the novice sand therapist accumulates many more interactions with the sand tray images, eyes-on-trays, the growing literacy develops, deepens, and awakens more and more possibilities.

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS)

Housen extended her work during her collaboration with Philip Yenawine who was director of education at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York City from 1983-1993. The MOMA board challenged him to analyze the effectiveness of his programs for their art patrons. Building on her research, Housen and Yenawine collaborated and co-created Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS; Yenawine, 2013). They realized they could teach "*viewing skills* – observing, interpreting what one sees, probing and reflecting on first and second thoughts, considering alternative meanings, and so on" (Yenawine, 2013, p. 12) Viewing skills are directly applicable to sand therapy work and can be taught and developed. This will be explained in more detail below. While sand therapists of various theoretical approaches will react to the term *interpreting*, perhaps we would use the concept of *making-meaning* for the sand therapy field.



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Various sand therapists may or may not share or verbally interact with clients to develop client insight into the meaning. As sand therapists, however, we continually clinically assess and make meaning-making to understand our clients and thus provide therapeutic movement.

Developing skills to *probe and reflect on first and second thoughts* and the willingness to explore and entertain *alternative meanings* connects with the growing call for sand therapists to develop the ability for reflective functioning (Homeyer & Lyles, 2023; Gomez & Lyles, in press). Reflective functioning, also referred to *mentalizing*, has been defined by Bateman and Fonagy (2003) as the ability to recognize the existence and nature of mental processes taking place in both the self and in others (e.g., thoughts, feelings, desires, intentions, and wishes). This ability guides the individual in forming coherent and integrated mental representations of the self and the other (Homeyer & Lyles, 2022). This leads to the ability to employ reflective practice. Maryanne Peabody and colleagues define reflective practice as the ability “to consciously think about past or present experiences, beliefs, or knowledge with the intention to inform future practice” (Peabody et al., 2022, p. 2). The use of VTS allows sand therapy educators, trainers, and supervisors to develop reflective functioning and reflective practice which are important to the ongoing development of the sand therapist.

VTS is used in a wide variety of settings: creative arts supervision (Gavron & Orkibi, 2021), museum education programs, elementary, middle, and high schools (Shifrin, 2008), medical school and clinical settings (Klugman et al., 2011; Naghshineh et al., 2008), pharmacy education (Brackley, et al., 2023), social work (Lynch, 2023), and other professional settings (Hailey et al., 2015). More details can be found in Albert and colleagues’ in-depth review of the current integration of VTS in diverse settings (Albert et al., 2022).

Ryznar et al. (2022) explore the addition of its use in psychiatry training. They stated that transformational teaching conceptualizes learning as not just the acquiring of core knowledge and skills but also personal growth. They researched the use of VTS because it fosters clinically relevant skills (such as observation and critical thinking), communication and collaboration, and personal growth. Agarwal et al.'s research found that using VTS with first-year medical students increased their total number of words to describe clinical images and increased the number of clinically relevant observations (cited in Ryman et al., 2023, p. 78). Chisolm et al. (also cited in Ryznar, 2022) reported the use of VTS promoted clinical excellence. Ryznar et al.'s research findings included,

VTS can provide a non-clinical environment in which to practice grounding their [psychiatry residents'] theories in observation, exploring their emotional responses, approaching a situation from multiple lenses, and considering the unique position psychiatrists hold. (Ryznar et al., 2022, p. 81)



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Finally, the research participants, psychiatry residents, reported this parallel between VTS and their training,

...having to pay attention to who is in front of you, even if it may be uncomfortable; taking the time to fully appreciate the details and context; and recognizing the inherent subjectivity and how that may relate to diagnosis and treatment of the patient. (Ryznar et al., 2022, p. 79)

Peabody and colleagues are integrating VTS in several graduate school courses (Peabody et al., 2022). Coauthor Susan Noyes employs it in their course on reflective practice in occupational therapy. Maryanne Peabody includes it in courses in creative modalities and play therapy.

VTS (Yenawine, 2013) is based on a group process facilitated by a teacher or instructor while viewing and discussing an art image, implementing three simple yet precisely worded questions:

1. What's going on in the picture?
2. What do you see that makes you say that?
3. What more can we find?

Yenawine states that the impetus for growth comes from curiosity and providing a time to "noodle and think things out" and "permission to wonder" (2013, p. 13). These three questions guide these concepts: curiosity, time to think, and wonder to deeper and more complex levels. Let's take a more detailed look at each question, what Housen and Yenawine found in their research, and how this might be used in sand therapy.

Question 1: What's going on in the picture?

The group experience begins with a moment for everyone to look at the visual image. Then, the first question elicits from the participants what they see in the art image or picture and what is conveyed, resulting in simple narratives (Yenawine, 2013). "While the first instinct might be to make a small number of random observations, the second impulse is to make sense of these observations by way of snippets of story" (Yenawine, 2013, p. 25). Knowing that the visual cortex connects directly to language centers in the brain acknowledges the concurrence of observation, thought, and language (Hailey et al., 2015; Yenawine, 2013), which explains the movement of seeing into narrative. This encompasses the cognitive aspects of other sensory perception, including the eye perceiving, the mind processing these observations (curiosity), attaching meaning to them (meaning making), organizing meanings in the context of all of the viewer's previous experiences, knowledge, memories, and ideas (for the sand therapist, including the client's background, presenting issues, etc., as well as their own), and details of the current physical context (neuroception in the session) (Hailey et al., 2015).



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Additionally, Janneke van Leeuwen, a visual artist and neuropsychologist, with her colleagues discuss *thinking eyes*, grounding VTS in the social brain. They report,

the artistic brain connectome provides a neural ‘roadmap’ by which attentional shifts in perceptual processing can channel the flow of information about artworks through interacting social brain networks. Our findings suggest that exploring artworks or complex images with the VTS method promotes strong engagement of the social brain networks, which can ultimately influence higher cognitive operations and the programming of output behaviors. (van Leeuwen et al., 2023, p. 13)

Yenawine and Housen noted that after several VTS sessions the narratives become longer, more detailed, and more complex including the enhanced development of problem-solving and critical thinking. This informs the tasks of the sand therapy trainer and supervisor: What does the student or supervisee observe? Conversely, what might they be overlooking, and why? What and how are they thinking about the scene in the tray? And what is the resulting verbalization, or narration, to the client (if any)?

Question 2: What do you see that makes you say that?

After the initial round of the group members sharing their initial narratives, the second question returns the viewers to the image. What did they see in the art image that initiated their initial response and narrative? This introduces reasoning while staying anchored in the images (Yenawine, 2013). It also provides the continued experience of connecting perceptions, logical thinking, causality, and language (Albert et al., 2022). The resulting observations become detailed, and the evidence-supported inferences are more clearly constructed. For the sand therapist, this develops the ability to articulate symbols and metaphors as they *reason while anchored in the images*. The ability for case conceptualization deepens: what they see in the tray, linked with their perceptions, and client understanding, *evidenced-based inferences more clearly constructed*. Implications for sand therapy educators, trainers, and supervisors include the benefits of the group members speaking and sharing. This opportunity to hear varied viewpoints expands each person's curiosity and ability to entertain other perspectives, develops tolerance for the opinions of others, nuanced thinking, and scaffolds deep learning (Zimmerman, cited in Yenawine, 2013). Educators, trainers, and supervisors can add a writing component, employing the experience of transferrable skills, from seeing, thinking, and conceptualizing, to writing. This may impact the ability to document more effectively.

Question 3: What more can we find?

This deepens the meaning-making process. This question can be repeated frequently as the group members share. This reinforces the view that further observing and reflecting often



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enlarges or even changes the first thoughts (Yenawine, 2013). Yenawine and Housen found that when the question was repeated, the participants explored the image more thoroughly and displayed the ability to attend for a longer period of time. This longer observation and reflection "often enlarges or changes first thoughts" (Yenawine, 2013, p. 26). It also slows down the thought process, provides time for recursive and iterative decision making, needed for case conceptualization. The capacity for divergent thinking is also expanded as the participants' attention is drawn to additional elements in the visual image, and new possible meanings are proposed. As sand therapist educators, trainers, and supervisors, we desire the emerging sand therapist to have the skills to explore potential meanings, use divergent thinking, and be open to fluid thoughts about the image in the sand. Yenawine reports their data shows that these questions "lead to cognitive habits that stick, and a strategy for making meaning of art and other material unfamiliar to them occurs" (2013, p. 27).

Role of the Sand Tray Educator, Trainer, and Supervisor in VTS Groups

Three skills used by the VTS group facilitator are identified by Housen and Yenawine (2013). These are *pointing*, *paraphrasing*, and *linking*. As the group members share and discuss elements in the visual image, the group facilitator *points* to that in the art image. This draws attention to that part of the image and allows the person speaking to know they are being heard, building confidence. It also provides a focus for all group members, some of whom may not have noticed that item in the image and allows for possible further exploration. It also visually supports what is being stated verbally. *Paraphrasing* is the accurate restating of the comment, indicating the speaker was heard and understood. This may occur while the facilitator is pointing. The speaker in turn feels valued and capable, which are crucial elements for the ability to learn. According to Yenawine (2013), treating each speaker equally provides for perceived in-group safety and encourages various opinions to be shared. Practically, it also allows all group members to hear each comment. *Linking* is the skill of how shared ideas interact with each other. This is accomplished by pointing while also verbally linking similar ideas and images. It also helps the participants make sense of what might otherwise seem to be disparate ideas. Yenawine states that "linking outlines how early thoughts are probed, elaborated, and reconsidered, how details add shades of meaning" (2013, p. 31). Maintaining a neutral stance while linking is also paramount, for it provides the atmosphere of honoring different viewpoints, stimulating alternative thinking, and producing the testing of various hypotheses (Yenawine, 2013). These facilitation skills, particularly paraphrasing and linking, are familiar to mental health professionals, particularly for those who do family and group work. The addition of pointing makes sense when discussing a visual image. Pointing is an added layer of using the visual to support verbalization. These skills are readily employed by sand therapy educators, trainers, and



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supervisors. They may seem intuitive and second nature; however, identifying them as integral to the VTS process is essential as part of their protocol for effective outcomes.

[Note: Readers who may be curious and want to see a VTS session can watch Philip Yenawine in action. He demonstrates these three skills with expected fluidity and expertise at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EnyfHTJVzh8> .]

Conclusion

This article has outlined the possible application of Visual Thinking and Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) as a framework to scaffold novice sand therapists' education, training, and supervision. As a visual-reliant therapeutic intervention, providing multiple experiences of eyes-on-trays is essential for the professional development of the novice sand therapist. Understanding visual literacy also underscores using the brain's pathways, which connect seeing, thinking, and speaking, leading to developing critical thinking skills, among others. Research of VTS in various educational fields, including medical, social work, and particularly in psychiatry, also provides a basis for inclusion in sand therapy.

Declarations

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Appendix

Abigail Housen's Stages of Aesthetic Development

Stage 1 - Accountive

Accountive viewers are storytellers. Using their senses, memories, and personal associations, they make concrete observations about a work of art that are woven into a narrative. Here, judgments are based on what is known and what is liked. Emotions color viewers' comments, as they seem to enter the work of art and become part of its unfolding narrative.

At times, the viewer makes observations and associations, which appear idiosyncratic and imaginative. Likewise, the viewer may incorporate people and objects into an idiosyncratic narrative. Judgments are based on what the viewer knows and likes. Emotions color the comments, as the viewer animates the image with words and becomes part of an unfolding drama. The viewer (the "storyteller") and the image ("the story") are one. The viewer engages in an imaginatively resourceful, autonomous, and aesthetic response.



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Stage 2 - Constructive

Constructive viewers set about building a framework for looking at works of art, using the most logical and accessible tools: their own perceptions, their knowledge of the natural world, and the values of their social, moral and conventional world. If the work does not look the way it is supposed to, if craft, skill, technique, hard work, utility, and function are not evident, or if the subject seems inappropriate, then these viewers judge the work to be weird, lacking, or of no value. Their sense of what is realistic is the standard often applied to determine value. As emotions begin to go underground, these viewers begin to distance themselves from the work of art.

Observations have a concrete, known reference point. If the tree is orange instead of brown, or if the subject seems inappropriate (if, for example, themes of motherhood are transposed into themes about sexuality,) the viewer judges the work to be "weird" or lacking in value. As this viewer strives to map what he sees onto what he knows from his own conventions, values and beliefs, his observations and associations become more linked and detailed. The viewer looks carefully and puzzles. An interest in the artist's intentions develops.

Stage 3 - Classifying

Classifying viewers adopt the analytical and critical stance of the art historian. They want to identify the work as to place, school, style, time and provenance. They decode the work using their library of facts and figures which they are ready and eager to expand. This viewer believes that properly categorized, the work of art's meaning and message can be explained and rationalized.

Studying the conventions and canons of art history, the viewer wants to know all that can be known about the artist's life and times. Her interests range from when and where an artist lived to how the work is viewed in the panoply of artists. The viewer searches the surface of the canvas for clues, using his library of facts, which he is eager to expand. His chain of information becomes increasingly complex and multi-layered.

Stage 4 - Interpretive

Interpretive viewers seek a personal encounter with a work of art. Exploring the work, letting its meaning slowly unfold, they appreciate subtleties of line and shape and color. Now critical skills are put in the service of feelings and intuitions as these viewers let underlying meanings of the work what it symbolizes emerge. Each new encounter with a work of art presents a chance for



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new comparisons, insights, and experiences. Knowing that the work of art's identity and value are subject to reinterpretation, these viewers see their own processes subject to chance and change.

Stage 4 viewers seek an encounter that is interactive and spontaneous. Exploring the canvas, the viewer unwraps methods and processes in a new way. She discovers new themes in a familiar composition and distinguishes subtle comparisons and contradictions.

Critical skills are put in service of feelings and intuitions, as the viewer lets the meaning of the work — its symbols — emerge, and with each new 'A-Ha' comes a new engagement.

Stage 5 - Re-Creative

Re-creative viewers, having a long history of viewing and reflecting about works of art, now willingly suspend disbelief. A familiar painting is like an old friend who is known intimately, yet full of surprise, deserving attention on a daily level but also existing on an elevated plane. As in all important friendships, time is a key ingredient, allowing Stage 5 viewers to know the ecology of a work — its time, its history, its questions, its travels, its intricacies. Drawing on their own history with one work in particular, and with viewing in general, these viewers combine personal contemplation with views that broadly encompass universal concerns. Here, memory infuses the landscape of the painting, intricately combining the personal and the universal.

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