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Engaging Dance Audiences Through VTS and Critical Response

By cwalthall

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Member Blogger of the Week - Caroline Walthall

How can we teach children--and audiences of all ages--to think through dance? And what is "[audience engagement](#)" anyway? We learn and process primarily through visual, auditory, and kinesthetic systems. Visual arts learning privileges one of them, music, another. Dance--ta-da--combines them both. Research shows that learning concepts and content through more than one system provides greater educational benefits than simply learning through one of them. Contrary to a lot of popular literature, you are not a visual learner or an auditory learner. [You are both](#). And you process *kinesthetically*. (You are a dancer, aren't you?!!) While Liz Lerman's well known Critical Response Process for safe and open discussion of theater/dance work provides an interesting frame to deepen one's understanding of and appreciation for dance, we need a way to encourage the early development of dance appreciation in youth and other newcomers. Even if VTS privileges one mode of learning (visual thinking) over auditory and kinesthetic processing, Abigail Housen's [Stage Theory of Aesthetic Development](#) offers an empowering model for the lifelong process of relating to art. And perhaps when applied to dance, the facilitating strategies of VTS could be extended to accommodate kinesthetic and auditory processing.

For those who are unfamiliar with the method, "Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) is an educational curriculum and teaching method which enables students to develop aesthetic and language literacy and critical thinking skills, while giving teachers a powerful new technique they can utilize throughout their career. By using VTS, students learn to make meaning from the world around them, to gain confidence in their own ideas while respecting those of others, and to contribute to a thoughtful debate amongst a group of peers."

[youtube=http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aVzcknOWpaE]

I am excited about the idea of developing a VTS for dance. MTS? Shall we say? It would encourage a richer dance vocabulary for audience members and dancers, alike and it would provide the safe space to come to your first dance performance at age 45, without prior experience. Under Dance/USA's *Engaging Dance Audiences* project, I was thrilled to see that San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts gave it a go and piloted a program called [Dance Savvy](#) using VTS methods to "convert 'crossover' fans from the visual arts field." I would love to hear more from YBCA about the success of the program--it appears that it is not among their programming for 2011-2012.

Let's talk about the opportunities here. On November 15th at Forum bar in Union Square, JComm is hosting its second *Monthly Mix Up* with members of ELNYA and Columbia University's Student Advocates for the Arts. The invitation is open to all who are interested in mingling with dance and arts folks and we are extending a special invitation to all of the arts educators out there. RSVP [here](#).

Have you used Liz Lerman's [Critical Response Process](#) to discuss the work of others, elicit feedback about your own work, or make dance more open and accessible to audiences? Are you a teaching artist who uses similar critical thinking methods to VTS? I am very curious about the flexible structures of both methods and I guess if these methods fail, there is always [humor](#) (but I think you have to be in the 'in crowd' to fully access that one). But then again, you're a dancer, aren't you? ;)

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