

VTS FACILITATION STANDARDS

Last updated by Tara Geer October, 2025

Visual Thinking Strategies These standards define advanced Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) facilitation. Grounded in research and informed by expert practice, they set a shared benchmark for effective, inclusive, and adaptive facilitation. The goal is consistent use of these skills to support group learning and include as many voices as possible—not perfection in every session.

SETTING UP EXPECTATIONS

□ Communicates expectations clearly and succinctly □ Marks separation from other kinds of learning at start and end (e.g., "We'll now do something different. We're going to discuss what's going on in a picture together. There are no right or wrong answers. This is an opportunity for us to listen to each other.") □ May briefly note that the aim is student-centered discussion (e.g., "This is a group exploration — the ideas come from you; my role is to listen and ask questions.") □ May briefly note participation is a goal (e.g., "more voices make for a richer conversation.") □ Clarifies logistics: seating, visibility, hearing, technology, lighting (e.g., "Can you see in the back? Feel free to step up closer." "Please use the raise-hand feature on Zoom, since we're a large group." "Make sure to speak up so everyone can hear; this room is a little loud.") □ Follows through on stated expectations			
QUIET MOMENT			
 □ Uses QM correctly: Let's take a quiet moment to look a t this picture □ Reads the room – silence long enough to prompt close looking, without losing the group. □ Allows silence throughout the discussion as needed 			
CORE QUESTIONS: Q1			
 ☐ Uses Q1 correctly to open conversation: What's going on in this picture? ☐ Does not ask for your thinking, or precise observation, or others veers away from Q1 that narrow the goal to a specific stage 			
CORE QUESTIONS: Q2			
☐ Uses Q2 correctly: What do you see that makes you say that?			
1. □ W. D. Y. See 2. □ T. M. Y. Say			
 □ Uses Q2 frequently and consistently □ Selects a meaningful part of each comment to probe with Q2 □ Places Q2 inside a paraphrase ("sandwiched") □ Limits to one Q2 per comment □ Uses Q2 to surface assumptions, richness, complexity, bias, or discomfort appropriately 			
(especially with known groups)			
 □ Can use Q2 for concrete, seemingly "obvious" comments □ Demonstrates precise flexibility with Q2 endings, adapting wording to match participants' language or stage of thinking (e.g., replacing 'say' with 'feel,' 'focus on,' 'compare,' or 'question') 			

CORE QUESTIONS: Q3

☐ Uses Q3 with correct wording (more not else): What more can we find?
☐ Uses Q3 frequently and consistently

LANGUAGE SUBSTITUTIONS	
\square Uses conditional language (CL) (e.g., could be, might be, possibly, to you)	
\square Inserts relevant or useful vocabulary as needed:	
☐ Levels up to more advanced, technical, specific or precise when needed (e.g., "that building	
for the boats" → "lighthouse")	
☐ Makes vocabulary more accessible when needed (e.g., "what you called a palette, or plate	
for paints" "the skin rash, or dermatitis,")	
 □ Broadens to encompass more possibilities (e.g., "mom" → "parent") □ Pinpoints location or detail clearly when necessary (e.g., "over there" → "on the lower left") □ Allows or provides translations into other languages, or time for peers to translate □ Demonstrates flexibility in all the above — shifting amount of conditional language, vocabulary (up/down, broad/more precise) and length of PP as the discussion requires 	
POINTING:	
☐ Uses pointing both while listening and while paraphrasing	
\square Uses physical space, body and gestures to direct attention	
ENVIRONMENT (EN):	
Structure Control of the Control of	
☐ Communicates expectations clearly and succinctly (when needed)	
☐ Follows through consistently on expectations (e.g., avoids saying "all answers are okay" and then rejecting some)	
rejecting some	
Conditions	
\square Manages technical, logistical, and lighting challenges effectively and graciously	
☐ Ensures participants can see and hear clearly	
☐ Maintains appropriate eye contact and connection with the group	
Participation & Classroom Management	
☐ Sustains an energy level that feels appropriate, useful and dynamic	
☐ Uses participants' names when applicable	
☐ Expands participation actively and consistently, drawing in as many voices as possible	
☐ Manages dominant talkers and creates space for others (e.g., "Let me jump in here	
[paraphrase] I want to make sure everyone has a chance to contribute. What more can we find?")	
☐ Draws out quieter students consistently (e.g., "Who have we not heard from?")	
☐ Maintains group focus (e.g., sustaining group attention through volume, movement, names,	
linked ideas, sense of drama or humor, knowledge of students; one speaker at a time, tracking raised hands, and balancing airtime)	
☐ Student behavior reflects effective classroom management-where applicable (e.g., few side	
conversations, hands raised, listening to each other, limited disruption)	
Discomfort	
☐ Handles uncomfortable moments with steadiness, respect and no judgment	
☐ Allows silence during discussion (see also Quiet Moment and Paraphrasing)	
 ☐ Manages laughter, silliness, or disruption by returning to the method and refocusing the group ☐ Models learning by acknowledging mistakes and self-correcting 	
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	Facilitator Stance ☐ De-centers self, keeping focus on the group rather than the facilitator ☐ Affirms the participant's process without judgment: uses questions, paraphrasing and non-judgement evenly and consistently (see Paraphrasing section)
LIN	KING (LK): ☐ Uses basic linking words (e.g., "also," "too") ☐ Notes new ideas or changes in focus ☐ Links agreements ☐ Notes and links disagreements without judgement ☐ Highlights when students build on others' ideas or have listened to each other ☐ Summarizes links, agreements, and disagreements ☐ Refers to past comments by participant name (when applicable) ☐ Refers back to specific ideas, themes, or differences of opinion ☐ Summarizes the scope or trajectory of linked ideas
FRA	MING- REFLECTING COGNITION & LEARNING:
	Frames what participants are doing cognitively, not just what they said Labels observing (e.g., "You are noticing," "You are bringing our attention to") Highlights when participants use more detail, adjectives, specificity or focus in on something Labels thinking (e.g., "You are wondering," "You are considering," "You are trying to give a name to") Acknowledges when participants bring in their outside knowledge or experience Frames participant questions as part of the process of figuring out Recognizes and reflects surprising milestones in aesthetic development: Unknowing Unfinished comments Laughter/emotions Animated obs/storytelling Responding with emotion Frames the work in unfinished comments, uncertainty, or "unknowing" Frames emotions, facial expressions, body movements, gestures, or laughter neutrally Reflects the cognitive work happenig in silence, confusion, or struggle without skipping or treating them as mistakes (e.g., "You're pausing to consider," "You're working to describe") Frames re-evaluations, multiple possibilities, or flexible/changed interpretations Frames repeating practices of participants (e.g., "You are really interested in the animals in this picture," "You are zeroing in on the materials again") Demonstrates range in uses of framing
VIS	IBLE STUDENT LEARNING (SL) in multi-visit sites: ☐ Shows evidence of developmental stage change ☐ Demonstrates increased engagement and participation ☐ Sustains longer, more focused consideration of the work ☐ Uses richer descriptive language (more adjectives, details, specificity) ☐ Demonstrates more spatial precision (e.g., "in the background," "at the bottom") ☐ Revises ideas, incorporates multiple points of view, or offers more than one interpretation

	 □ Listens more attentively to peers □ Anticipates Q2 independently by supporting ideas with evidence (e.g., using "because" unprompted) □ Links their own ideas to others' comments without facilitator prompt □ Shows greater comfort and respect with disagreement, discussion, and sharing
	 Metrics for researchers (not checklist items): Aesthetic Development Critical Thinking Skills Social & Emotional Learning Group Learning/Scaffolding Cultural Responsiveness of Facilitators Inclusion/Participation
PRA	ACTICES TO AVOID (or Unlearn) □ Avoids praising individuals or specific comments □ Avoids showing judgment toward particular participants or ideas □ Avoids giving direct answers □ Avoids adding outside content □ Avoids altering the developmental level of a participant's comment □ Avoids stepping back into the expert role rather than staying in the facilitator role □ Avoids "limelight" paraphrasing (paraphrasing at excessive length or drawing focus away from participants)
CON	ICLUSION & TRANSITION OUT ☐ Thanks participants collectively ☐ Reflects on the discussion as a whole rather than singling out individuals ☐ Clearly marks the transition back into other kinds of learning (when applicable) ☐ Provides a smooth closure and moves the group into the next activity or lesson