

## **Guide to Coaching**

Teachers are often isolated from their peers. They have limited opportunity to discuss techniques and methods, exchange ideas, and share ways to solve particular problems. They receive little constructive help, advice, or support from their supervisors. We believe that learning to teach *Visual Thinking Strategies* (VTS) can be a setting for serious exchange among teachers about teaching in general. We think that as teachers guide each other in their practice, they will learn from each other's insights into teaching, while sharing what is new to them about VTS.

Part of VTS training involves teachers taking turns leading discussions of images, with their colleagues in the role of viewers. This is followed by an opportunity for all participants—including the *demonstrator* (the person who taught)—to comment on what took place during the process. As each person takes a turn demonstrating, s/he receives coaching from the group. In order to make this coaching process easier and less threatening, we suggest a format that is thoughtful and fair, yet rigorous.

The coaching process requires a *facilitator* (someone other than the demonstrator) who creates a "safe" and inviting environment for discussion to take place. S/he makes sure that everyone has a chance to speak, that all views are taken into account, that opinions and generalities are explained, and that the discussion comes to conclusion with all parties understanding what has been shared. (For more on effectively facilitating discussions, consult the *Guidelines for Facilitating Discussions*)

*A very important task for the facilitator is to see that all opinions are backed up with evidence.* As in VTS itself, providing evidence is a key element in moving a conversation from ungrounded commentary toward a reasoned and comprehensible set of ideas that can be considered and weighed. For example, if the demonstrator says, "Some of the comments were hard to paraphrase," the facilitator/coach should ask, "For example, which comments seemed a challenge?" This allows both the demonstrator and others in the group to think about what makes some comments or ideas hard to follow and rephrase—e.g., a very long thought, one that refers to some unfamiliar source, or an unfocused, incomplete idea. If one of the other teachers in the group asks the demonstrator, "Do you think that you favored some answers over others?" the facilitator would then respond by saying, "What did you see that makes you ask that?" Or, "Can you give us an example of that?" With examples, then, the group as a whole can insightfully reflect on the cause or effect of particular behaviors.

## The Coaching Format

After an image discussion, the facilitator starts the coaching process by asking the demonstrating teacher, **"What did you learn from this and/or how did you feel about teaching this time?"** The purpose of the questions (the two are to be asked in tandem) is to give the demonstrator the chance to reflect on her/his teaching, focusing attention on what can be learned about teaching VTS, given reflection on one's practice. The second half of the question is to remind us all that teaching is about relationships, not just method or subject; it is a loaded exchange replete with feelings. The demonstrator may respond, "I noticed that I repeated comments more often than I wished. I should have taken more time to find new words with which to rephrase them." Or "I was really shaken by one comment." The learning emphasized through this question is self-awareness. The facilitator paraphrases each thought.

Responses from observing teachers are welcome, but should not interrupt the demonstrator's chance to self-critique.

When the demonstrator has had ample chance to reflect on his/her performance, the facilitator then opens the discussion to another line of thinking. The question, posed to the rest of the group, is: **"What made you feel good about \_\_\_\_\_'s teaching?" Or, "What about \_\_\_\_\_'s teaching made you feel good as a student?"** It is phrased to elicit information about what it feels like to have been in the role of a student, as a viewer. It exposes the other side of the relationship, giving light to how a teacher's behavior can create an environment that encourages participation. It also allows the participants to give positive feedback to the demonstrator. For example, "I was happy to see how you encouraged quiet people to speak up." With facilitation, such a comment can examine what kinds of efforts support a desired behavior, such as every student becoming actively involved.

The third question is a little harder to answer: **"Was anyone surprised by anything that happened?"** Anyone, including the demonstrator, might have a comment that could begin with: "I was surprised by..." The surprise could refer to something about the image ("...how many things people saw in this picture."), the discussion ("...how long some of the comments were."), or the teaching ("...how easy it was for me to accept opinions different from my own because of the teacher's openness.") This kind of comment helps us think about the assumptions and expectations we bring to teaching. We expect certain behaviors and predict certain responses, whether we are thinking about our students, fellow teachers, a work of art, or teaching in general. The formulation of the question suggests that we take a position of some skepticism with regard to what we assume, and remain open to various outcomes. We may revise our assumptions based on what actually happens if we keep our eyes and minds open. This is not an easy task.

Next, effective coaching allows an opportunity for peers to help the demonstrating teacher think about her/his teaching. At this point in the discussion, the facilitator asks, **“Does anyone have any questions to ask (the demonstrator)?”** For example, a question might be “Could you tell us why you didn't paraphrase every comment?” Or, “Do you think you could have paid more attention to students who were not in your direct line of vision?” Such comments contain “critique,” but phrasing critical observations as questions gives demonstrators an opportunity to think about their performance and respond to it. This way, they rarely feel attacked, but instead are asked to turn their attention to an area that they previously may not have considered. The questioner should be genuinely interested in the demonstrator's thinking on the matter, not just disguising a criticism. If someone teaches differently from what you think is “right,” asking them why they do it is likely to elicit some important information for all to think about. A declarative criticism can fall flat, neither helping the teacher, nor allowing for consideration of his/her teaching behaviors, how they work and why.

Finally, at the end of the coaching process, ask the demonstrating teacher, **“What do you want to work on?”** followed by: **“How do you think you can do that?”** The purpose of the above questions is to get the demonstrators to reflect on the input from the coaching and to determine what to do from here.

### **Further Thoughts**

Keep in mind that throughout the process, the facilitator paraphrases comments, asks the necessary follow-up questions (asking for examples, say), keeps the discussion focused, and watches the time. At the conclusion of these discussions—in other words, once all of the questions in the coaching format have been asked and discussed—brief summaries of the main issues brought up are useful; unlike in VTS image discussions, such summaries purposefully aim toward more understanding of the teaching practices, and drawing conclusions is germane to making the time feel well spent.

When initiating this process with a group of teachers, it is sometimes helpful to have someone from the group take notes. Reviewing these notes later can determine which aspects of the method may be difficult to learn—thus needing more work—and which aspects easily become routine.

While VTS trainers are learning to coach, it is useful to have various group members take turns acting as facilitator. Afterwards, use the coaching questions to examine both the facilitator's insights and ability, and to reflect on the process of coaching itself.

### **Abstract of the questions**

- After a demonstration of teaching, a facilitator asks the demonstrator: **“What did you learn from this and/or how did you feel about teaching this time?”**
- Addressing the group, the facilitator then asks: **“What made you feel good about \_\_\_\_\_’s teaching?”** Or, **“what about \_\_\_\_\_’s teaching made you feel good as a student?”**
- Addressing both demonstrator and participants, the next question is: **“Was anyone surprised by anything that happened?”**
- Next, the facilitator asks the participants: **“Does anyone have any questions they would like to ask (the demonstrator)?”**
- Finally, the facilitator asks the demonstrator: **“What do you want to work on? How do you think you can do that?”**