Questioning

The purpose of questions is to draw out information and to gain clarity. It is important that the learner doesn’t feel interrogated or that he is being judged. If he feels that he has to justify himself, he may block communication which could prevent him considering alternatives.

Different purposes of questioning:

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| Questioning can help individuals to learn by:* prompting them to recall what they have learned and experienced previously
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| * engaging interest
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| * challenging them to think independently
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| * encouraging them to explore consequences
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| * stimulating their ability to think creatively
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| * deepening and broadening thinking, moving from concrete and factual to more analytical and evaluative
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| * helping to make their own assessments and evaluations of what’s been said or done
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| * raising awareness of learning as a process
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| * helping to make connections between different aspects of knowledge and experience
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| * generating hypotheses
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| * bringing attention back to the task
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| * encouraging responsibility for their own learning.
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When to ask questions

At the start of a session

* Encourage the learner to relax and feel comfortable with the session
* Establish changes since last session
* Identify preparation for the meeting
* Check understanding and retention from previous sessions
* Engage attention by inviting learner to share relevant experiences

**During the session**

* Encourage further examination of experiences and scenarios
* Hypothesise about “what if scenarios”.
* To clarify and challenge assumptions and perceptions
* Help to make connections between what is known and what to learn
* Encourage self reflection and analysis

At the end of a session

* To reflect on the session and what has been learned
* To identify what future actions as a consequence of the session
* To confirm progress made

Exercise

Consider the following questions and which stage of the session you would use them

* What surprised you about what you have just learned?
* What do you know now that you didn’t know before?
* Can you write on your mini whiteboard one example of what you have learned from the session?
* What were the benefits and drawbacks of working in the group format chosen?
* What did you do in your groups that helped you learn?
* What got in the way of your learning?
* If you were to do that activity again, what would you do the same and what would you do differently?
* Where else could you use the skills that you have used in your groups?

How to ask questions

Open and closed questions

Questions are often described as either open or closed. But this ‘either/or’ approach is not always helpful because definitions vary and questions do not necessarily fit neatly into either category.

You may find it more useful to think of questions as being somewhere along a continuum according to the response they are likely to elicit. Your choice depends on the purpose of your question.

Open

Closed

Question invites a particular answer

Question is highly focused but gives learner some choice about how to respond

Question gives maximum choice about how to respond

How did you set up your project team?

What is Newton’s second law of motion?

What would you like to focus on today?

Have you signed up for the workshop yet?

Question invites ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer

It goes without saying that you want to use questions to make learners think more broadly and deeply. What does this mean in practice?

A useful starting point is Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, published in 1956, in which he described among other things different levels of thinking. He arranged these levels into a hierarchy ranging from ‘Knowledge’ at the lowest level to ‘Synthesis’ and ‘Evaluation’ at the highest levels.

He worked on the principle that learning can be organised in a way that takes learners systematically up the hierarchy.

 Using Bloom’s Taxonomy

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| **Knowledge or factual recall** If you want to find out how well learners can recall information, you could ask questions like: | How many…?Can you name the…?Describe what happened at… Is it true that…?Make a list of…What is the function of that component?Give a definition of…  |
| **Comprehension or understanding**If you want to know how well learners understand things, you could ask questions like: | How would you describe it in your own words?Why do you think it happened like that? What are the differences between…?Can you give me an example of what you mean…?What do you think will happen if you…?How does X compare with Y? |
| **Application**If you want to find out how well learners can use their knowledge in different contexts, you could ask questions like: | How would you solve this problem with the knowledge you have?How would you apply that knowledge in this situation?Do you know another instance where…? From the information given, can you develop a set of instructions about…?How would this information be useful if you had a…? |
| **Analysis**When you want to see underlying principles and the relationships between different aspects of a concept or topic, you could ask questions like: | Which events could have happened when…? Why did these changes occur?What will happen if you change this part of the process?Can you explain what must have happened when…?How is X similar to Y?Can you distinguish between…?What is the problem with…? |
| Synthesis | Can you design an X to Y?Can you see a possible solution to…?What would be your way of dealing with…?What would happen if…?How many ways can you…?Can you create new and unusual uses for…?Can you develop a proposal that would…? |
| Evaluation | Is there a better solution to…?How would you judge the value of…?How would you justify your decision to…?How could you have done that more efficiently?What changes to X would you suggest?How would you feel if…?How effective are…?What do you think about…? |

Paraphrasing

A paraphrase is a restatement of the meaning of a text or passage using other words. A paraphrase explains or clarifies the text that is being paraphrased. For example, *“the signal was red”* might be paraphrased as *“the train was not allowed to proceed”*. Paraphrase may attempt to preserve the essential meaning of the material being paraphrased and it is a more detailed restatement than a summary.

Paraphrasing might be simply “say it in your own words”.

During a discussion paraphrasing shows that both parties understand each other.

**Exercise**

**Describe it**

This is an activity which demonstrates the importance of feedback in communication.

Ask a volunteer to sit with back to the rest of the group and to describe a drawing that has a number of touching rectangles.

1 - The group members attempt to draw the arrangement of rectangles without giving any feedback or asking any questions.

2 - Repeat the exercise with another drawing.

3 - This time the class is allowed to ask questions and to give feedback. Discuss feelings, emotions, results and effects.