

Enhancing Questioning Skills

**Instructor Refresher Workshop
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Reasons for Reflection

Some Assumptions

1. Holding conversations about experiences is essential to understanding and application of new information. Talking about how things are going is a critical aspect of learning.
2. Insights (complex learning) results only from reflecting on experience. Only as I reflect on experiences, analyzing what seems to be working well and what's not working, will I gain increasing and deepening insight and skill.
3. Reflecting on experience is amplified when done with others. While I can reflect on my experience by myself, my thinking and learning will be extended when I reflect with others who are working on similar things.
4. Reflective conversations are enhanced when they are focused and structured. Reflecting about something I have done is different than reflecting about what I will do. Reflecting about something I have recently done suggests that I think about: How did it go? “Why did it go that way? What caused it to go well or not so well? What might I have done differently? Given a similar situation, what will I do next time? Reflecting about something I'm thinking of doing in the future suggests that I think about: What I want to do or accomplish? How I will go about doing it? How I will know whether I've done it well?”
5. Reflective conversations are enriched when all members of the learning community consciously use the tools of inquiry and nonjudgmental response behaviors. I can close off or invite further reflection by the way I interact with my colleagues; how I respond, how I ask questions, how I use my body. I can be instrumental in encouraging or discouraging the reflection of colleagues.
6. Professional growth is enhanced when each member of the learning community takes an active role in the conversations, a stance of exploration and experimentation, and control of her/his learning. “I am an integral member of the learning community. I need to take control and be active in my learning, recognizing that none of us has all the answers. I must continually explore and test-out things to find solutions to the problems that face my students and me.”

Baker, William (Bill). Group Dynamics Associates, Berkeley, CA. Also, Institute for Intelligent Behavior, Cameron Park, CA

Enhancing Questioning Skills

Introduction

Think of questions as tools in your toolbox. You would not pull out a screwdriver to saw a board. Jobs require a choice of tool. Promoting reflection (thinking) requires you to have a choice of questions. If you have never thought consciously about asking questions, your thinking stimulus tools lie unsorted, unlabeled and unidentifiable in the bottom of your tool box. You might tend to reach into the box and pull out the first tool (question) that comes to hand (or mind). This leads to hammering instead of sawing or drilling.

Skilled questioning requires knowledge of different types and levels of questions; awareness of the kinds of questions you routinely ask; understanding of the person you are talking with; and sensitivity to the other's needs. Questioning is a skill that requires a great deal of flexibility. Proficient questioning involves planning and practice as well as spontaneous but careful responsiveness (Collins, 2002).

The Three Parts of a Question (Collins, 2002)

Questions are generally composed of three parts:

- *Question stems* which frame your questions by the use of questioning words - usually the interrogatory pronouns - who, what, when, where, why, how.
- *The verbs you choose* - which indicate the thinking task you are asking about (i.e., compare, contrast, imagine, describe, etc.)
- *The content* - you wish the student to think about is usually presented as the subject of your question.

Weak Questions (Collins, 2002)

Descriptions of four types of poor quality questions are outlined below.

- *Yes-and-no or single correct answer* questions usually fail to challenge. These questions ask for factual recall.
- Questions that are *vague* leave students unsure of what they are to focus on "How did you feel about that exercise?" is a vague question often employed by coaches as an opening. Just as vague is the answer we often get - "Fine."
- *Trick* questions designed to lead students to foregone, incorrect response will surely break trust and rapport.
- Does the above make sense? Do you understand? Do you get it? These kinds of questions are usually asked for the purpose of assessing student progress; however, they usually do not provide any progress information. They simply result in bobbing heads. We could call them "bobble-head" questions.

Question Enhancing Techniques

The development of your questioning skill takes study, time and practice. Five specific techniques that I have found to be most helpful are described in the next paragraphs. These skills relate to (1) the why question (2) positive presuppositions (3) the multi-purpose tool (4) precision or specificity (5) plural forms (6) scenario based questions and (7) take-a-way questions.

The Why Question

The short course is: stop asking "why?" Most people grew up with some adult asking why they did something when the adult really meant "Don't ever do that again." As a result, most of us view the "why" question as a negative. If your questioning goal is to have the student share with you their reasons for making a choice or taking an action, simply substitute the phrase "Please (can, will you) share with me the reasons for....?" For example:

- *Stop Asking:* "Why did you mount the motorcycle from the right side?"
- *Substitute:* "Please share with me the reasons you have for choosing to mount the motorcycle from the right?"

Presuppositions (Costa & Garmston)

A presupposition is something imbedded in the sentence structure that a native speaker of the language knows is part of the meaning, even if it is not overtly present in the sequence. We usually hear *negative presuppositions*. For example, every native speaker of English knows that the statement "Even Bill could get an A in that class," means (a) that Bill is no great shakes as a student; and (b) that the class is not difficult in any way. But notice that neither one of those pieces of information is present on the surface structure of the sentence; in its overt wording. Here are some others:

- If you had only listened ...
- My objective is more practical.
- Even a beginning rider should know that.

Beginning questions with *positive presuppositions* is an excellent way to set the stage for thinking and reflection. You (the questioner) assume that the student is (has) done what is imbedded in your positive presupposition. Characteristics of positive presuppositions include:

- Assumes:
 - Nobility of purpose
 - Positive intentionality
 - Prior and ongoing thought
 - Resourcefulness rather than lack of capacity
- Asks questions framed from an artfully naïve or curious perspective

- Seeks multiple perspectives rather than single causes
- Is accepting rather than blaming
- Uses variety of introductory phrases and thinking words
 - As you...(analyze, categorize, compare, contrast, dissect, infer, predict)
 - When you...(combine, connect, create, envision, imagine, modify)
 - While you...(appraise, assess, evaluate, judge, rate, select, test)

For example:

- "When you compared your simulated practice experience with the actual riding experience, what differences did you note?"
- "As you thought about practicing this skill in the future, what adjustments, if any, did you think about?"

Multi-purpose tool

Two great multi-purpose questions end with the phrases (1) "what comes to mind?" and (2) "what did you notice?" When used with a lead-in positive presupposition, they form powerful general inquiries. For example:

When you think about the need to stop quickly while riding on the street, what comes to mind?

When you analyzed the braking chart on page 23, what do you notice?

Precision and Specificity (Costa & Garmston)

There is a clear linkage between a person's language and their thought. We can, therefore, inquire to cause greater precision in language, which results in refined thinking. Below are five categories of imprecise language along with examples and possible questions for refinement.

UNIVERSAL QUANTIFIERS ("all" words)	all, everyone, never, always	"Has there ever been a time...? "Forever?" "Is there anyone who is not...?"
MODAL OPERATORS (modes of operation/rules)	should, must, can't, ought	"What stops you?" "Who made that rule?" "What would happen if...?"
UNSPECIFIED VERBS (vague action words)	prepare, know, learn, grow	"Know.? How specifically?"
UNSPECIFIED REFERENCES (vague nouns & pronouns)	students, women, they, result	"What men?" "Which students?"
COMPARATORS ("bigger words")	better, larger, sweeter, less intense	"Slower than what?" "Better than what?"

Plural Forms

By asking questions in the plural form we tell the other person that there is not a single answer and that the student is invited to explore in more depth. For example, “What are some alternatives you have thought about regarding...?” or “What factors did you consider when thinking about ...?”

Scenario Based Questioning

This technique is designed to help the person answering the questions examine their thoughts and ideas from a different perspective. The technique is for the coach to formulate and share a changed or different point of view and ask the other person to think from that new context. Ask the other person to answer the question from the perspective of ... and you make the context. For example, as if it were interviewing to be a rider instructor or as if explaining it to someone who has never ridden a motorcycle.

Bonus – Take-a-way Question

An excellent way to end a teaching/learning segment is with a take-a-way question. Label the question as one that needs thinking time. Some questions deserve a few seconds of thoughts while others require days. Label your take-a-way questions as one that requires multiple days of thought. Tell the student(s) that this question is not a question that takes one minute, five minute or even ten minute to think through. This is not an “off the top of your head question.” Use a metaphor such as a tree trunk and roots to help the student(s) visualize a complex process. Ending teaching/learning segments with a “take-a-way question” aids in continuing the reflection (thinking) beyond your immediate time together and gives you a good reason to check back with the students at a later time – “What thoughts do you have about our take-a-way question?”

Evaluating your questions

The answer you receive is your evaluation tool for the quality of the question. If the student looks up, pauses for several seconds or more, and says, for example, "I hadn't thought about that before" you know you are on the right track.

Summary

Thinking about and verbalizing answers to quality questions enhances student reflection. Reflective participants (students) are more likely to positively change overt behavior. Positively changed behavior is the link to risk reduction. Help facilitate reflection by:

1. Knowing the basics of question structure and avoid weak questions
3. Finding alternatives to asking “why”

4. Imbedding positive presuppositions into your questions
6. When in doubt, use the “multi-purpose tool”
7. Stay alert to lack of specificity in language and inquire for more precision
8. Asking questions in the plural form when possible
9. Helping others broaden their perspective by providing a new context for your question
8. Planning a bonus take-a-way question
9. Evaluate your questions, revise and plan for enhancement

Practice - Constructing Quality Questions

Directions: For each of the questions below, identify the question weakness. Be prepared to talk about the weakness and what technique(s) could be used to improve the question. Write an improved question.

1. Which brake provides the greatest stopping power?

2. How did it feel riding clockwise as opposed to counterclockwise?

3. Counter-steering is a complex concept, but does it make sense now that I have explained it?

4. Why didn't you use the clutch when you upshifted?

5. What pattern do you see in this data?

6. What was the cause for skidding the rear tire?

7. This is an easy exercise. You all understand what you are supposed to do, right?

8. How did you feel about that exercise?