



The Art of Asking Good Questions

The Role of Questions in Discussion

Questions can be the single most important factor in stimulating and enlivening participation in adult discussions.¹ Everything about them matters: how clear they are, how they make connections between what has gone before and what comes next, how they prompt original thinking, how they elicit application from one situation to another, how they direct a conversation to an ultimate goal, how they accomplish the goal for which the leader intends them, and more. Questions make the difference between lots of responses and one or none, between “yes” and “no” answers and thoughtful critique, between clashing argument about simplistic right and wrong positions and careful examination of the complexity of ways of looking at a controversial issue. They shape the quality of the interaction between participants. Questions exclude by intimidation and fear or invite into conversation in ways that are accessible, indeed comfortable, for everyone. Let’s begin by looking at key roles questions play in discussions:

1. Questions make participants active contributors to the learning community rather than passive recipients of knowledge passed from teacher to learner or leader to listener. When participants engage with the subject and with one another, they become teachers and mentors for one another. They contribute to others’ knowledge and experiences by sharing their own.
2. Questions can elicit and present for examination basic information needed for the discussion. The sum of what participants can offer usually far outweighs what a leader brings, and the very offering of it em-

powers participants to take ownership of the subject and its implications for them.

3. Questions can be used to invite analysis, identify relationships, stimulate critical thinking, imply the existence of a multitude of possible responses, and move the conversation toward conclusions.
4. Questions can invite participants to make learning personal, to disclose their insights and indeed themselves, and to apply new discoveries and wisdom to action and change.
5. Questions determine the flow, pace, and direction of discussions and help group members examine particular material in an orderly way or carry on a freer, more participant-directed conversation.

Three Simple Ways to Categorize Questions

Defining the kinds of questions most useful in discussions is a very helpful way to guide leaders as they prepare to guide a group conversation. Although there are a number of different ways to categorize questions in education circles, a simple three-level system is both adequate and easy to apply. The three kinds of questions elicit very specific kinds of responses and, indeed, serve roles 2, 3, and 4 above. Let’s look at definitions of each kind of question, what they intend to elicit from participants, and some examples of each. As you work with particular content, use these definitions and examples to write your own questions.

1. Informational or Factual Questions

It is often important to review information that will be used in a discussion, to look carefully at a chapter, selection, or story to recall details or remember important points. Informational questions are the way to gather those details and to refresh the memories of participants. An informational or factual question intends to find a particular answer. There is one right answer and no other. The answer can be recalled by a participant or found in a resource. Here are some examples of informational questions:

- Who are the three main characters in the movie?
- What eight spiritual practices are identified?
- How many ways of looking at the issue does the author describe?
- How does the author define *grace*?
- What does the word *eschatology* mean?

You will notice that this type of question is easy to answer if you have access to the information. Note also that an informational question is not helpful for going beyond the content. You will need other kinds of questions to get a discussion going and keep it moving forward.

2. Analytical Questions

In order to engage participants in conversation about a topic, you will need this kind of question. Analytical questions take people beyond recalling facts to analyzing, comparing, contrasting, interpreting, and drawing conclusions from the facts. Some answers may seem more correct than others, but analytical questions have a range of possible answers. These questions cause people to think critically about a subject, even wonder, imagine, reflect, examine, or investigate. Consequently, these questions will stimulate interaction among participants as they hear one another's ideas and respond to and build on those ideas. Here are some examples:

- Which of the characters in the movie do you think takes the best course of action and why?
- What two spiritual practices most closely parallel spiritual practices in the early church?
- How would you compare the author's way of looking at this issue with the way the issue is covered in the news?

- Moving beyond the author's definition of *grace*, what are some ways people sometimes interpret *grace*?
- If *eschatology* refers to the end of the world, or "final things," what are some Christian understandings of the end of the world?

These questions take much more time to answer, and they elicit a variety of responses. They can also lead to the expression of differences of opinion based on viewpoint, previous knowledge of the topic, and the ability to bring a multiplicity of perspectives. Responding to analytical questions requires time to think. After asking an analytical question, it is wise to allow lots of silence while people ponder the possibilities and prepare to articulate a thoughtful response.

Analytical questions help people converse about ideas, concepts, and convictions, but they do not engage people in applying those ideas to their own lives and situations. For that you need personalizing questions.

3. Personalizing Questions

Personalizing questions take the next step in discussion by inviting participants to consider how what has been discussed matters to them individually and collectively. This is where we move information *about* something to information *for* something—reconsideration, action, change, or commitment. For people of faith, this is where we recognize that God's call to discipleship requires something of us, and we apply new understandings to our own particular lives. This is where we express personal understandings, feelings, beliefs, convictions, and values.

There are no right and wrong answers to personalizing questions, because participants are expressing what is true for them and for their experience. It is important to point this out, so participants feel completely free to offer to the group what are genuinely their own ideas and responses. Here are some examples:

- Which of the three movie characters would you choose to be, and what course of action would you take?
- What two spiritual practices best fit your personal choice of ways to be in relationship with God?
- If you were writing a newspaper article about this issue, what would you say?

- How do you define *grace*, and how does God's grace work in your own life?
- What do you believe about the end of the world and the "final things"?

I hope you can see why using personalizing questions in a discussion is so important. Without such questions, participants still might come to understand ideas in new ways and be able to explain what they mean to others in a general sense; however, they might never consider what this means for them. The discussion stays at the level of talking about experiences and ideas. Without personalizing questions, it never becomes a matter of examining one's own self and considering what might be different if those experiences and ideas shaped one's own life.

A Guide for Writing and Asking Good Questions

1. Usually it is helpful to move from information gathering (easiest for participants) to analysis (requires application of critical thinking) to personal response (invites reflection on experience, investment in what one is learning, and commitment to change in response to learning). This helps you direct the flow of the session from encounter with information to analysis of that information to one's reflection on and personal response to the information.
2. Write out your questions. Practice using the examples provided as guides. Then read the question and imagine how you would answer it. Ask yourself, "Does this question elicit the kinds of responses I am looking for?"
3. Silence is your friend. Challenging questions require time to think. Thinking time takes people from their first thought to more complex thoughts. Let them know that you are comfortable with silence and that you know they need time to think about the question. When you know you have asked a particularly difficult question, impose time for thinking to lower anxiety about the expectation that someone speak soon. Say, "This is a tough question that will take some thought," or "Take some time to think about this instead of offering the first thing that comes to your mind."
4. Create opportunities for participants to try out their responses on others before they voice them in the whole group. Suggest they turn to a neighbor and tell their ideas and then select one idea to share with the whole group.
5. Avoid questions that can be answered with a yes or a no. Turn them into questions that require a reason, a suggestion, a description, or a comparison, that is, not "Can you name three ways . . . ?" but "What are three ways . . . ?"
6. Ask one question at a time. Avoid explaining a question by asking it in other ways or responding to silence with different questions you think they might answer more easily. If you wrote the question out and tried it yourself, you will see that the silence is likely thinking time. Wait.
7. If you think the group is not responding because they may not have understood the question, ask any of these: "Is my question clear?" "Do you need more time to think?" "Do you need me to clarify the question?"
8. Be prepared to follow responses to one question with another question that takes the conversation deeper or further or illustrates it in new ways: "What are some examples of . . . ?" "What are some even more challenging ways to look at this?" "Where do these responses lead us?"
9. Invite participants to ask their own questions. This will help bring clarity to parts of the conversation they are puzzled about and lead in directions they are interested in exploring.
10. Imply with your question that more than one response is possible, indeed desirable. Ask, "How many ways . . . ?" instead of "In what way . . . ?" and "What are some things you could do . . . ?" instead of "What is something you could do . . . ?"
11. Control the person who responds first and frequently with kind redirection, such as, "Let's hear from a couple of people we haven't heard from yet, and then I'll come back to you," or "Since you've had a couple of chances to speak, let's hear from some others first."
12. Involve the group in answering their own questions by asking, "How would others of you answer that question?"

13. Build on group responses by asking, “What would others of you add to that idea?” or “What additional ideas would work as well?” or “What are some other ways of thinking about this issue?”
14. Create an atmosphere in which all responses are welcome and appreciated by simply acknowledging a response with a “Thank you” or “That’s helpful.”

About the Writer

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Endnote

1. I am indebted to two teachers who are masters of the art of leading discussions and who shaped my practice of educational ministry in this area. See their excellent, clear writing on this subject in Donald L. Griggs, “The Art of Asking Questions,” chapter 10 of *Teaching Today’s Teachers to Teach* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003) and Richard Robert Osmer, “Teaching for Relationship: Leading a Discussion,” chapter 4 of *Teaching for Faith: A Guide for Teachers of Adult Classes* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992). The former contains a practice exercise in identifying and writing three types of questions, and the latter provides very helpful descriptions of the differences between focused and open-ended discussions and how to lead them. I bear witness to the fact that behind every good teacher lie other very good teachers!