

Posing Questions

Tools for Inquiring and Probing



Professional communities that produce gains in student learning are by nature learning communities. For the adults involved this learning is both personal and collective. Learning at its foundations is a process of wondering and discovering meaning in social contexts. Learning is supported through curiosity and sound questions. Sound questions offer high challenge with low risk: the conditions for the *relaxed alertness* that the brain must experience for effective learning. Such questions include specific

communication strategies that we employ when inquiring to explore perceptions, assumptions, and interpretations, and when probing for increasing specificity of awareness and thinking.

Thinking is a biochemical process that engages emotion as well as cognition. We are wired to detect threat in the communication of others; this is the evolutionary history of the brain. To support openness to explore diverse perspectives as well as focus on significant detail, it is essential that we attend to how we pose questions just as carefully as we attend to the topic of the questions. We use several communication tools to pose effective questions in support of exploration and specificity.

Intention to Understand

Inquiry has as its purpose the development of understanding. It is most effective when all elements – how we listen, acknowledge, paraphrase, and pose questions – clearly express this purpose of understanding.

Attending Fully

The invitation to construct understanding begins with full attention to another or others, signaling that we are fully present in this conversation, that we presume positive intentions, and that we intend no harm. This attitudinal message aligns with several important languaging tools that create an invitational tone as we inquire and probe.

Approachable Voice

Using an approachable voice supports the brain's openness to new thinking. This voice includes notable modulation, and tends to rise at the end of a statement or question. This tonal pattern "carries" our comments and questions in a way that indicates the intention to invite and to explore thinking, not to challenge or interrogate.

Framing

When we pose questions of another, we seek to understand the person's thinking. We demonstrate respect for the person's thinking by explicitly connecting our question to it as we "set the stage" for the question. For example, in the question "*Considering your thinking about the progress of the school improvement team, what might be some next steps?*" the opening clause is designed to alert the respondent to how the question that is coming will connect to prior thoughts or remarks. The opening clause is intended to create a "frame" for the question in the mind of the respondent. This strategy supports the brain's work, by connecting the new question to prior thinking. A simple frame might sound like, "Given your observations of this student's work..." A complex frame may require a sentence or two.

Exploratory Language

Collaborative inquiry calls for new perspectives and detailed understandings about a topic. Exploratory phrasing in statements and questions is one syntactical tool with which we can signal openness to exploring new understandings as well as specific detail about existing ones. Words such as "some," "might," "seems," "possible," and "hunches" tend to widen the range of possible responses and reduce a respondent's need for certainty and confidence. They tend to support *relaxed alertness*. The question "why," on the other hand, can cause a respondent's confidence to waver, and may suggest the need to defend ideas and specifics before one is fully prepared to do so.

Plural Forms

A second syntactical tool with which we can signal openness is the use of plural forms: "observations" instead of "observation;" "ideas" instead of "idea;" "specifics" instead of "specific." The use of plural forms welcomes a range of possible responses, rather than insisting on one acceptable response. We often need to hear our ideas aloud before we can determine which might be most valuable.

Positive Presuppositions

All language carries embedded presuppositions. These are not always apparent in words; they are found instead in the underlying assumptions that are communicated to the listener. Positive presuppositions tend to communicate belief in a listener's capacity and willingness to engage in the exchange of ideas and development of understanding. A concerned educator might say, "My students just can't get this," to which a response based on positive presupposition would be, "So, you're concerned about supporting the success of all the students."

Open-ended Questions

Members of learning communities demonstrate their commitment to collaborative inquiry by making extensive use of questions which cannot be answered by yes or no, or other one-word responses. Questions such as "Did you see...?" "Can you imagine...?" "Have you...?" are replaced with such questions as "What did you see...?" "What are you imagining...?" "What are you seeing...?" and "What specifics might you...?"