

Effective questioning

Tutorial

Guides to questioning techniques often recommend the 5WH approach. This stands for: What? Why? When? Where? Who? How?

This is a useful starting point for thinking about the sort of questions you might ask, but there is more to questioning in motivational dialogue than the 5WH model suggests.

You are not a detective in search of the truth. Yours is a partnership role with your learners, so questioning is a two-way process – for the learner’s benefit as well as yours. You ask questions to:

- elicit information that will feed into planning the next step;
- help learners reflect on their experiences and to reinforce their motivation for change.

Motivational dialogue encourages a questioning approach that:

- is collaborative rather than prescriptive;
- respects the learner’s autonomy and encourages self-direction;
- explores what the learner is able and willing to do;
- demonstrates a genuine interest in the learner’s experience and points of view.

Closed questions – questions that can be answered with ‘yes’ or ‘no’ or with a very specific piece of information – have their place. But learners usually talk more willingly and freely in response to open questions because these convey the message that you are genuinely interested in the way learners see things.

Effective questioning means:

- choosing questions that suit your purpose;
- including reflective listening statements and summaries to keep the flow of the conversation going.

A tutor's experience

Saying 'tell me about...' strictly speaking, is not a question ... but it extracted a lot of information. Then I followed up with 'How did you feel about that?'

The learner's reaction

It felt like someone was finally listening to me. I wasn't hitting my head against a brick wall. I felt they were interested in me. They weren't telling me what I should do. They were asking me what I thought.

Quotes from a questioning role-play activity



Closed questions

Imagine putting questions like these to your learners.

- **Do** you know how to use e-mail?
- **Is** it time for your review?
- **Can** you drive a car?
- **Could** you answer the questions in that test?
- **Will** you be staying on here next month?
- **Would** you consider a placement in a supermarket?
- **When** will you be 18?

- **Shall** we put you down for the next course?
- **Should** I send a letter to your parents about this?
- **Are** you going to study at college?

What are they likely to answer? Assuming that they are reasonably cooperative, they will most probably answer 'yes' or 'no', or give you a specific piece of information because these are all closed questions.

Closed questions are useful when you want:

- a 'yes' or 'no' answer;
- very specific information;
- to establish agreement;
- to check something before going any further.

They are **not** helpful when you want to invite learners to talk about themselves and their experiences. In fact, they have the potential to stifle the free flow of a conversation. They can set up a balance of power where you pose the questions and the learner has to search for the 'right' answer.

Watch out for ...

If you start a conversation with a series of closed questions, you could be setting expectations that you will do all the thinking and talking. So, once you have welcomed the learner, established the purpose of the meeting and set a time limit, ask an inviting open question as soon as you can.

If this does not move things in the way you had hoped, follow up with a slightly more focused open question.

Open questions

If you want a learner to talk more widely, use open questions.

- When you think about doing another work placement, **how** do you feel?
- **What** happened?
- **Why** do you think he made that suggestion?
- **What's** going on here right now?

Open questions can be answered in many different ways. They encourage learners to:

- clarify their thinking;
 - “When you say ‘...’, what do you mean?”
 - “You say he’s got something against you. What would be an example of that?”
- look at the assumptions they might be making;
 - “Why might someone say that?”
 - “What might be a reason for her doing that?”
- look for the evidence behind the judgements they are making;
 - “You say it’s rubbish. What is the basis for saying that?”
- think about the implications of what they think, say and do;
 - “If you say that to your friend, how do you think she might react?”
 - “If you go out with your mates tonight, what might be the effects on your work tomorrow?”
- consider other viewpoints or perspectives;
 - “How is what you’ve just said different from what your supervisor said?”
 - “How do you think your tutor might describe what you’ve done?”

Watch out for ...

‘Why?’ is a tricky question to ask: it can sound confrontational and aggressive. Guard against this by using a gentle tone of voice. Soften the question with extra words that involve the learner directly.

For example, it is easier to ask “Why do you think that happened?” with genuine interest than “Why did that happen?”

When a learner is reluctant to talk



Sometimes a learner is disinclined to open up and answers with 'Don't know' or 'Nothing'. Do not give up. Try giving a little more context or explanation, or asking another, easier open question.

For example:

"I want to make sure that we get a placement that really suits you, so tell me what made the last one so unsatisfactory for you."

(Silence.)

"What was it about it that you didn't like?"

Note the use of the words '**tell me**'. This is one of the most effective ways of encouraging someone to open up. Strictly speaking, it is not a question. It could be described as an order. In practice, it can be made to sound like an invitation to talk

Similar invitations begin with '**Explain...**' or '**Describe...**'

These are powerful ways of moving a conversation in a particular direction while still giving learners room to say what is on their mind.

Watch out for ...

Sometimes a learner might talk at length about things that seem irrelevant to the question you have asked. If this happens, you may feel uneasy, and want to re-focus the conversation. But if the learner has previously been reluctant to say much at all, you will build rapport and gain their trust if you listen attentively and let them lead the conversation for a few minutes. You can return to your question later.

What to avoid when asking questions

- Multiple questions that leave the learner wondering what to answer first.
 - "How are you doing on your placement? Is it going as you expected? And are you getting on OK with your supervisor?"
- Forced choice.
 - "When that happened, was it because the supervisor hadn't told you what to do, or because you had forgotten?"

(NB: You might choose a forced choice question if you want to focus attention on particular options. For example: "Which time suits you better, 2pm or 4pm?")

- Asking questions to which you already know the answers. The learner will sense that you are manipulating them.
- Leading questions that convey that you expect the learner to agree with you or that indicate the answer you expect.
 - “The reason you got into a mess was because you forgot the rules, wasn’t it?”
 - “Don’t you think you ought to complete your placement?”

What to do when you do not get the answers you are looking for

- Wait! Some people think as they talk; others think and then speak. So allow for both. By waiting, you are allowing a silence to emerge. This signals that you really want to hear what the learner has to say.
- Repeat the question softly, so as not to interrupt what the learner might be thinking. Gentle persistence is another way of showing that you genuinely want the learner to answer.
- If your learner is struggling to answer an open question, perhaps your question lacked focus. Try rephrasing it to make it a little more specific but keep it open. Avoid rephrasing it as a leading question because this would signal that you are looking for confirmation of your own point of view, rather than hearing from the learner.

Watch out for ...

When a learner does not answer your open question, it is tempting to provide the answer yourself.

Resist the temptation. Rephrase your question instead.

Activity: Coaching on pitfalls

Purpose

To develop your skills in asking questions.

Description

An exploration of how to avoid potential pitfalls in asking questions.

Instructions

For each of the examples:

- consider the context described;
- reflect on the questions that follow and write down your answers;
- invite your colleagues to do the same, if possible, and compare your responses.



Javed is thinking about a work placement

Javed has been reluctant to consider anything that would take him away from the comfort and safety of the E2E Centre. When his tutor does finally manage to get Javed to talk about a work placement, the conversation goes like this:

Tutor: What do you think you might get out of a work placement?

Javed: (*Silence.*)

Tutor: It would improve your English, wouldn't it?

What do you think is happening here?

What are the likely consequences of the tutor's response to Javed's silence?

What would you like the tutor to have said instead?



"I just want to play football."

Trevor is talking to his tutor about still wanting to be a professional football player, even though he has been asked to leave his Apprenticeship at a football club.

The conversation goes like this.

Trevor: I just want to play football.

Tutor: Well, something we could help you with would be to see if there are any football clubs offering Apprenticeships around here. Would that be OK for you?



What assumptions do you think the tutor might be making about her role in this part of the conversation?

What trap is the tutor falling into?

What might be a possible consequence of what she says?

What could she say instead?

“I want to be a hairdresser.”

Kayleigh’s tutor wants to find out what plans Kayleigh has made for her future in hairdressing.

The conversation goes like this.

Tutor: What sort of career route have you planned out?

Kayleigh: My best friend’s mum has got a hairdresser’s. I’ve been doing Saturdays there.

Tutor: What are three big things you’ve learnt doing your Saturday job?

Kayleigh: (*hesitatingly*) Being friendly... Neat and tidy... Helpful. That’s the main one really, because I’ve not had a lot of responsibility yet.

Tutor: Why haven’t you had a lot of responsibility?

Kayleigh: Because I’m not trained.

Tutor: How much training do you think you’ll need?

Kayleigh: Quite a lot for hairdressing, because there’s cutting and styling and I want to do, like, beauty as well.

Tutor: What options have people discussed with you so far?

Kayleigh: I know eventually that there’s City and Guilds.

How do you think Kayleigh experienced this conversation?

What might the tutor have done differently, to build rapport with Kayleigh?

Learning points

The way you ask questions, and the types of questions you ask, will have a big impact on the degree of trust that learners have in you and the information they are prepared to give.

Activity: Coaching on pitfalls – feedback



Javed is thinking about a work placement

The tutor starts well with an inviting open question intended to encourage Javed to think.

However, Javed does not answer it immediately. The tutor feels uneasy with the silence and comes in with a suggestion that gives Javed the message that someone else will do his thinking for him.

The tutor could have paused for several seconds to give Javed time to think. If he continued to be unresponsive, the tutor could ask his open question again in a slightly different form, as a prompt. For example:

Tutor: What do you think you might get out of a work placement?

Javed: *(Silence.)*

Tutor: *(Pause, then speaking quietly to allow Javed to continue thinking)* How might a work placement help you?



“I just want to play football.”

Trevor’s tutor wants to say something helpful – her attitude is that it is her responsibility to offer Trevor some suggestions.

This leads to a closed question to which Trevor is likely to answer “Yes”.

As a consequence the tutor does not obtain information she can trust. She also signals to Trevor that she takes what he says at face value, without examining it closely. This is unlikely to help him understand himself any better.

She is likely to get more useful information, and at the same time help Trevor to think things through for himself, if she asks an open question. For example:

Trevor: I just want to play football.

Tutor: What is it about playing football that is so attractive to you? Or: What do **you** think you need to do to be able to be a professional football player?

The more helpful question will depend on what has gone before, and at what stage Trevor is on the Wheel of Change. But whatever the circumstances, an open question is likely to help Trevor to do some thinking for himself.



“I want to be a hairdresser.”

Kayleigh is likely to have experienced this as an interrogation because the tutor went from one question to another, giving no sign that he had heard her answer.

In quizzing her so strongly, he was putting her on the spot, and possibly giving her the impression that she had to give the ‘right’ answers.

He was also putting pressure on himself to ask new questions.

He would have established more rapport with Kayleigh if he had started by saying, “Tell me about what you’ve been doing in your Saturday job”. Kayleigh could have volunteered information that the tutor could have invited her to think more deeply about. This would have shown her that he was interested in her experiences.

Activity: Analysing a broadcast interview

Purpose

To raise your awareness of different types of questions and the effect they have.

Description

An analysis of the way questions are used in a radio or television interview.

Instructions

Choose a TV programme (such as a chat show or *Newsnight*) where an interview is being conducted.

Keep a tally of the number of times open, closed, leading and multiple questions are asked. Use the space provided for your notes. At the end, reflect on the tone of the interview and how the questioning style contributed to this.

Learning points

The outcome of an interview will be affected by:

- the expectations of the interviewer and interviewee;
- the relationship between the two;
- the types of questions asked.

Analysing a broadcast interview

Open questions starting with:

Where?

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What?

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Why?

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Who?

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How?

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Closed questions.

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Multiple questions (two or more questions strung together).

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Leading questions (questions that reveal the answer the questioner is expecting).

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How did the interviewee cope with the different types of question?

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What was the tone of the interview?

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How did the questioning style contribute to this?

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Activity: Taking things forward



Before you go any further, please make at least four copies of p. 15, **Reflections on your questioning technique.**

Purpose

To heighten your awareness of your own questioning techniques.

Description

A structured approach to keeping a reflective diary relating to your questioning techniques.

Instructions

As soon as possible after the next significant conversation you have with a learner, take a copy of this page and record your answers to the questions.

As a way of heightening your awareness of your questioning techniques, write down your reflections after conversations with other learners.

You might find it revealing to reflect on your conversations with colleagues or members of your family.

Learning points

The types of questions you ask can influence the way people respond and the quality of the relationship you have with them.

When you use open questions, interspersed with reflective listening statements and summaries, you will encourage learners to take their share of responsibility for the content of the conversation. We will be practising these two skills in sections **1.5 Reflective listening** and **1.7 Non-verbal communication**.

There is a tendency for us to revert to closed questions in this kind of work. We do this because sometimes, when we feel that the learner is embarrassed or unwilling to talk to us, or just struggling with the one-to-one situation, we want to feed them easy questions. We want to let them off the hook.

If you feel that a learner is struggling with an open question, particularly at the start of a conversation, find an easier question about which they are bound to have an opinion rather than move to closed questions.

A series of closed questions at the beginning of a dialogue will lead to an interrogative atmosphere that fails to encourage the other person to see themselves as an equal partner.

Paul Lalgee

Reflections on your questioning technique

1 What open questions did you ask?

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What was your purpose?

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What response did you have?

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2 What closed questions did you ask?

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What was your purpose?

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What response did you have?

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3 What did you learn about your habitual ways of asking questions?

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4 What would you like to have done differently?

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Notes