

Palloff & Pratt  
Collaborating Online: Learning Together  
in Community

## Questioning Techniques for Collaborative Discussions

We cannot forget that discussion of course material on the discussion board of an online course constitutes collaborative activity. As learners interact with one another to explore the territory that comprises the course, they engage in a constructivist process of collaborative knowledge generation that can result in community building, the development of critical thinking skills, and deeper understanding of the material being studied. The instructor can assist in this process by providing good discussion questions that guide students' thinking and interaction with one another. In *Discussion as a Way of Teaching*, Brookfield and Preskill (1999) offer several categories of questions to stimulate and maintain discussion. We offered these previously in *The Virtual Student* (2003), but offer them again here as a means of stimulating thinking about the types of questions that can foster collaboration. The following is a summary and digest of the categories and questions along with suggestions for their use to assist instructors in creating discussion questions for an online course:

*Questions that ask for more evidence.* This category of questions can assist learners in developing higher levels of critical thinking and in taking a position, as is needed in the completion of role-play activities.

They can also be used to guide the feedback that learners give one another as they complete their collaborative work on assignments.

- How do you know that?
- What data is that claim based on?
- What do others say that support your argument?
- Where did you find that view expressed in the materials?
- What evidence would you give to someone who doubted your interpretation?

*Questions that ask for clarification.* This category of questions is especially useful as feedback questions for learners to use with one another as they complete collaborative assignments. These questions assist learners in getting clear on their thinking and presenting their ideas in a cogent manner.

- Can you put that another way?
- What's a good example of what you are talking about?
- What do you mean by that?
- Can you explain the term you just used?
- Could you give a different illustration of your point?

*Open-ended questions.* The use of open-ended questions can stimulate interaction in an online discussion. They encourage learners to dig deeper when responding to material and to go beyond answers that are comprised of just a few words. The responses to these questions can provide the "meat" of a course as the questions encourage learners to bring in resources beyond what might be assigned reading in order to respond fully.

- Sauvage says that when facing moral crises, people who agonize don't act, and people who act don't agonize. What does this mean? (Follow-up question: Can you think of an example that is consistent with Sauvage's maxim and another that conflicts with it?)

- Racism pervaded American society throughout the twentieth century. What are some signs that racial discrimination still exists in hiring? What are other signs that racism has abated significantly?
- Why do you think many people devote their lives to education despite the often low pay and poor working conditions?

*Linking or extension questions.* Linking and extension questions help to develop the themes that are emerging in an online discussion. They can be used to help learners see connections they might otherwise be missing and to move the discussion to a deeper level as those connections are explored more fully.

- How does your comment fit in with Neng's earlier comment?
- How does your observation relate to what the group decided last week?
- Does your idea challenge or support what we seem to be saying?
- How does that contribution add to what has already been said?

*Hypothetical questions.* Hypothetical questions form the foundation of role play, simulation, and case study activities. In order to engage with these activities fully, learners should wrestle with "what if" types of questions that are designed to stimulate reflection and possibilities.

- If you were presented with the following question in an interview, how would you respond: "Was your previous job full of purposeful play or drudgery and work?"
- You have only two years to live and will do so with your usual energy and vitality. What will you do with your last two years?
- You just won a \$100 million lottery jackpot. What will you do with the rest of your life?

*Cause-and-effect questions.* Cause-and-effect questions, if designed well, can be very useful in exploring case studies. They push learners to look at potential scenarios and possible solutions.

- What is likely to be the effect of changing from a one-to-one mode of working to a group mode?
- How might delivering our courses using the Internet affect our students' learning process?

*Summary and synthesis questions.* Summary and synthesis questions are particularly important when reflecting on and evaluating a collaborative activity. They not only allow learners to look at what they have accomplished through their work together, but also assist them in determining where there may be some gaps in their learning and what more they might need to pursue in order to grasp the material fully.

- What are the one or two most important ideas that emerged from this discussion?
- What remains unresolved or contentious about this topic?
- What do you understand better as a result of today's discussion?
- Based on our discussion today, what do we need to talk about next time if we're to understand this issue better?

#### **ASSESSMENT TIPS**

- Contributions to online discussions can be assessed using the following basic guidelines:

Synthesis and Integration = A

Analysis = B

Summary = C

- Assessment of discussions should include the student's contribution through their initial response to the discussion questions as well as their substantive responses to other students. Substantive responses can be defined as follows:

Comments critically or analytically to another post

Begins a new topic

Asks another question