

The Art of the Dialogue Question Set

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An effective discussion question set...		
PROMOTES		
Dialogue	NOT	Debate
Localized and/or personal reflection related to the topic	NOT	Depersonalized generalizations, sweeping claims, and broad judgments
BUILDS LOGICALLY		
Lower-level thinking (comprehend, define, identify...)	TO	Higher-level thinking (analyze, evaluate, synthesize...)
Less high-stakes and vulnerable	TO	More high-stakes and vulnerable
Local (text, classroom, campus, personal)	TO	Global (community, state, nation, world)
INCORPORATES		
Participants identities and interests	WITHOUT	Forcing people to speak for their communities or "out" themselves
Facilitator's goals for the lesson	WITHOUT	Coercing participants towards prescribed answers and viewpoints

Strategies for Crafting Effective Question Sets

To achieve...	Try this...
Dialogue, not debate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Consult (and share) this dialogue vs. debate handout * Avoid questions that promote binary or absolutist ways of thinking (e.g. “Do you think x or y?” “What’s the best/worst...?”) * Avoid “Do you agree/disagree” and “Should...?” question stems * Use questions that prompt students to speak from a position of not-knowing rather than (only) authority (e.g. “What are you unsure about regarding x?” “What do you wonder about x?”) * Use questions that prompt students to reflect on and respond to others’ comments
Localized response and personal reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Ask “What have you observed about x?” to emphasize personal perspective vs. essential(ized) truth * Direct questions to “you” as a pronoun instead of “we” or “one” * Ask “Who do you mean by ‘we’?” as a follow-up to comments * In text-based questions, ask “What stands out?” or “How do you understand x?” rather than “What does x mean?”
Lower-to-higher-level thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Refer to Bloom’s taxonomy * Start w/ comprehension, identification, comparing/contrasting (more concrete, more “objective,” more problems-oriented) * Build to analysis, application, and synthesis (more abstract, more judgment-based, more solutions-oriented)
Less to more high-stakes/vulnerable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Begin with a text, and read/review an excerpt in class before initiating dialogue (so everyone begins w/ exact same reference) * Ask students to reflect on their schooling or community environments before/instead of their family/home life * Ask students to reflect on personal questions in writing, then make sharing in dialogue voluntary
Local to global	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Ask students to respond through this sequence of frameworks (more or less, and not all in a single discussion!): text → self → classroom → campus → community → city → state → regional → national → international
Response to student identity & interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Incorporate content from student papers and previous class contributions in questions (plan for this; don’t rely on memory!) * Use first-day-of-class questionnaires to learn majors/regions of origin/etc and ask students to respond from these frameworks * Avoid questions directed to specific students or social groups that are apparently represented by students in the class (e.g. race)
Facilitator’s goals for the dialogue without prescribing answers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Craft questions to guide students towards your objectives; e.g., use the same verbs in key words in the question as the objective * Avoid leading questions that make your own position obvious