

the art of the dialogue question set

part I: basic principles for framing + sequencing

What it is

The series of questions or prompts that will support the main body of your dialogue process, whatever the format or mode.

Why we do it

Questions and prompts guide the **focus + depth + complexity + quality** of the dialogue's content. How they are **framed + sequenced** makes ALL the difference!

How to do it

Consider your topic + purpose. What do you want participants to come away from the entire dialogue process with? What do you want them to *think, know, feel* or *do* as a result?

Consider your objectives for the main body of the dialogue process. What action(s) do you want participants to perform during this part of the process in order to help achieve your purpose? What kind of work do you need them to perform through the dialogue? e.g. *Self-reflect. Perform critique. Apply a theory. Analyze a text. Deconstruct a concept. Generate questions. Solve a problem (etc).*

Craft questions with overall purpose + objectives for this section of the process in mind.

AN EFFECTIVE DIALOGUE QUESTION SET. . .

PROMOTES

DIALOGUE	NOT	DEBATE
Localized and/or personal reflection on the topic	NOT	Depersonalized generalizations, sweeping claims, broad judgments

INCORPORATES

Participants' identities + interests	WITHOUT	Forcing people to speak for their communities or "out" themselves
Facilitator's desired focus for the session	WITHOUT	Coercing participants towards particular answers + viewpoints

BUILDS LOGICALLY

LESS high-stakes + vulnerable	TO	MORE high-stakes + vulnerable
LOWER-level thinking (comprehend, define, identify...)	TO	HIGHER-level thinking (analyze, evaluate, synthesize...)
LOCAL (text, self, classroom, campus)	TO	GLOBAL (community, state, nation, world)

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part II: strategies for achieving basic principles

TO ACHIEVE...

TRY THIS...

Dialogue, not
debate

- 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
- Prompt participants 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?")
- Prompt participants to reflect on + respond to others' comments

Localized +
personal
reflection

- 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

- Refer to Bloom's Taxonomy
- Start with 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
vulnerable
sharing

- Initiate dialogue with a springboard text or piece of media to respond to first
- Ask participants to reflect on their schooling or community environments before/instead of their family/home life
- Ask participants to reflect on personal questions in writing, then make sharing in dialogue voluntary

Local to global
reflection

- Ask participants to respond through this sequence of frameworks: text → self → classroom → campus → community → city → state → regional → national → international (of course, not all in the same conversation!)

Personalized
questions (w/o
targeting)

- Use what you know about participants' interests to select texts and determine focus for questions
- Avoid questions directed to specific individuals or social groups that are apparently represented by students in the class (e.g. race)

Facilitator's
goals (w/o
coercion)

- Refer to your objectives while crafting prompts. Align questions to those action verbs clearly + explicitly (e.g. if the objective is "apply X theory," frame question through theory: "How might a virtue ethicist view this issue?")
- Avoid leading questions that make your own position obvious