

Trainer Essentials: Effective Questioning and Think Time

“Good teaching is more a giving of right questions than a giving of right answers”

Josef Albers (1888-1976)

A great way to get participants thinking about content is to ask them questions. Skilled trainers use questions to check for understanding, generate curiosity, encourage critical thinking and motivate participants. Good questions are not just well phrased. They are also well timed, and asked in a way that generates interest and accountability. To ask questions effectively, you should do the following:

- Reflect on the type of questions you are asking
- Allow time for participants to think of their responses
- Actively listen to participant’s responses

An explanation of these recommendations is provided below.

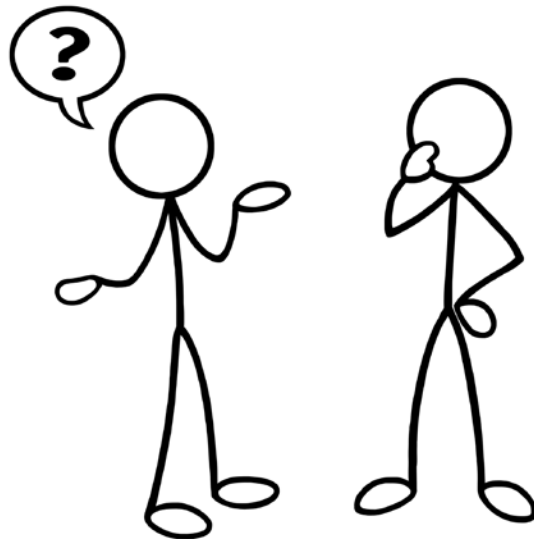
Types of Questions

Questions have different levels of complexity, as do their responses (Elliot, 2013). Depending on the question that you ask, participants will engage in deep analysis or simple recall. You can use closed or open questions depending on the type and level of responses for which you are looking.

Closed Questions

Closed questions can be used when looking for a specific answer. They often begin with “do”, “where”, “when” and “who”. Most closed questions are answered with short one-to-two word responses (Stanley & Presser, 1979).

Closed questions can be useful to recall simple information, check for understanding, get participants to contribute to a lesson, or as a way to move the lesson in a specific direction. The answers to closed questions are usually chosen from a restricted or limited set of options.



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Examples of closed questions:

- What are the 3 steps for treating your drinking water?
- Who is the person in the household treating the water?
- Where do you get your water?

Open Questions

Open questions do not restrict or influence a participant's response. They can be used to encourage critical thinking and allow participants to demonstrate understanding, practice with content, share personal anecdotes and opinions, or elaborate on simple answers (Stanley & Presser, 1979).

Open questions often begin with “what” or “how” or with a phrase such as “tell me about...” or “describe...”

One thing to consider – open questions that begin with “why” can often make people feel defensive. If you choose to start a question by asking “why”, then consider the potential connotations of your question. To avoid this you may want to phrase your question differently.

Examples of open questions:

- What are some of the barriers you face when trying to use your biosand filter?
- How does drinking contaminated water contribute to the poverty cycle?
- Tell me about a time when you were sick from drinking contaminated water.
- Describe the worst latrine you have ever used.

Think Time

Studies have shown that participants need a minimum of **3 seconds** to think before answering a question or elaborating on the response of another participant (Stalh, 1994). When you facilitate a workshop, you prepare the lesson beforehand and know the types of questions you will ask. Participants, on the other hand, are not prepared. When you ask a question, participants must actively listen to it, process the information, connect it to past experiences, figure out an answer, and then respond to the question verbally; all within a fraction of a second.

Participants need time to recall and process information in their brains. The time we give participants to do this is called “think time”. Think time affects the ability of participants to respond, their motivation and the quality of their response (Rowe, 1986).

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Trainer Tip

When you ask a question, count to five in your head before asking a participant to respond.

Think, Pair, Share

A technique known as “Think, Pair, Share” is often used in combination with think time. It involves asking participants a question, giving them time to think individually about their answer, asking them to share their answer with a partner, and then sharing it with the whole group.

This technique builds participants’ confidence because it gives them time to check their response with a partner before sharing it with the whole group. The technique also engages all participants in thinking about a specific question, although only a few may share their answer in the whole group.



Trainer Tip

1. Ask your question to the whole group.
2. Wait 5 seconds.
3. Ask the participants to discuss their response with a partner. Tell them that they have a specific amount of time to discuss, like 1 minute.
4. Ask a few participants to share their response with the whole group. The number of participants to share depends on the time available and the size of the group.

Active Listening and Probing Questions

Active listening is an integral part of effective questioning and creating a safe learning environment. When people are being listened to they feel understood. Active listening encourages participation and an open communication of experiences, thoughts and feelings, while building a sense of trust (Mineyama, Tsutsumi, Takao, Nishiuchi, & Kawakami, 2007).

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You can show a participant that you are actively listening by looking at them, nodding where appropriate, and by paraphrasing their response in your own words. You can also use probing questions. These types of questions help to clarify meaning and encourage participants to elaborate on their thoughts.

Examples of probing questions include the following:

- Could you expand/elaborate on...?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?
- What makes you think that?
- What are the reasons for that?
- What do you think the solution is?
- In what ways does this relate to...?
- What kind of things might you...?

We can check for understanding, encourage critical thinking, create meaningful practice opportunities and increase learning by using effective questions, think time, and techniques like Pair Share. When we actively listen to participants' responses, we contribute to a safe learning environment and deepen participants' understanding.

References

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