Developing Students' Questioning Skills Online

In an online learning environment, asking good questions helps students contribute to interesting and meaningful online discussions and provides instructors with insights into students' understanding of course concepts.

Below are two online discussion forum activities designed to develop students' critical thinking and effective questioning skills. For these or similar activities, it can be helpful to provide students with resources such as question stems and examples of thoughtful questions.

CLOSE-UP Online. This activity provides students with practice asking each other thoughtful questions while also helping students think more deeply about course content.

Instructions to students:

1. Please complete your responses to the discussion questions related to this week's assigned reading.
2. After you post your responses, you will be able to read responses from your peers. Your assignment is to read the responses your peers have posted and ask two of your peers a probing follow-up question. Your goal is not to stump them, but rather to see if you can develop a question that helps them think more deeply or consider their perspective in a new light. Please use the CLOSE-UP handout to help you develop your questions.
3. Complete this assignment by responding to two of the questions your peers posed to you.

Instructor: Monitor the discussion, and post to threads that require clarification or might benefit from deeper probing. At the end of the discussion, summarize main points, clarify concepts as necessary, and comment on the quality of the questions asked, modeling alternative ways to ask particular questions as appropriate.

"Just One Question" Forum. Provide students with a case study or real-world scenario with a challenging problem to solve, and divide the class into small groups of two to four students.

Instructions to students: You have been given a challenging problem to solve with very little information. In your small groups, generate a list of questions you need answered to solve the problem. I will only answer one question from each group; therefore, your group will need to choose the question that you believe, when answered, will be most helpful in solving the problem. Post your question to the full group discussion board.

Instructor: Reply to the posted questions. Ask students to use your responses to any or all of the group's questions in order to come up with a possible solution to the problem, and post it on the full group discussion forum. After students read each other's solutions, have them write a reflection responding to one or more of the prompts below including:

- *How does this activity relate to the real world?*
- *Which question do you think was most useful in solving the problem and why?*
- *In hindsight, what flaws do you see in your group's solution?*
- *What question would have helped you come up with a better solution?*
- *Which questions could have been asked differently to be more effective?*
- *What made a particular question more effective than others?*

Be sure to post your assessment of each group's solution.

Brookfield's CLOSE-UP

Stephen Brookfield developed the mnemonic CLOSE-UP to indicate a variety of questions instructors could ask students during class. A description of each letter, along with sample questions—excerpted from an interview with Brookfield—are included in the table below.

Question Type	Description	Examples
Clarity	Questions that ask students to clarify their thinking. These help to establish good communication skills in students.	"Can you clarify what you've just said?" "What do you mean by that?" "Can you put it in another way?"
Linking	Questions that ask students to link different parts of content. These help students to connect ideas from multiple class sessions or different classmates during a class discussion.	"How does your conclusion relate to our reading?" "What is the connection between Susie and Joe's arguments?"
Open-Ended	Questions that are broad and do not seek a single response.	"What do we mean by…?" "What does it look like to…?"
Synthesis	Questions that ask students to summarize key points.	"What big questions still linger?" "What are the broad lessons we take from…?" "What is the most important overarching concept we've looked at?"
Evidence	Questions that ask students to support their argument or position.	"What evidence can you provide to support your generalization?" "What data can you cite?" "How do you know this?"
Understanding	Questions that ascertain whether or not students have understood the content properly.	"Can you give us an example of A or B?"
Priority	Questions that ask students to prioritize the key concepts or most important points made in a lecture or discussion.	"What are the most important points from our last discussion?"

Source: S. D. Brookfield, personal interview, December 2015.