3 Kinds of Questions

In coming up with a list of questions, it might be useful to consider three *kinds* of questions:

1. Questions of **clarification**—What does it say? What is going on here?
2. Questions of **interpretation**—What does it mean? What do you think of what is going on here?
3. Questions of **implication**—So what? How does what you think of what is going on here impact your work?

You may want to start with **questions of clarification**: *What does it say?* In the case of a story, it might help to find a point in the plot that seems to have a deeper meaning or makes a significant impact on one of the characters. For a poem, it might be a specific image or metaphor that jumps out at you. For an essay, it might be some statement that genuinely catches or puzzles you. In each case, you can ask, what is going on here? Can one *literally* make sense of what is being said or done here?

Good questions of clarification are open to an answer from anyone who pays attention to the reading. In other words, they do not require any special expertise or experience in order to be answered.

Just as there are good questions, there are also opening questions that are best avoided.

**Avoid questions that:**

- Invite opinion without interpretation of the text (e.g., Do you like this story?)
- Assert debatable propositions (Why is the concept of social capital so useful?)
- Put people on the defensive (What percentage of your income do you give to charity?).

After you have helped participants clarify what the text says, you will soon be ready to move on to a **question of interpretation**: *What does it mean?*

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**CHALLENGE AND SOLUTION**

**A Challenge:**
You have chosen to use Gwendolyn Brooks’ poem “The Lovers of the Poor” with a group of aspiring young teachers. You are concerned that these young people will look at the members of Brooks’ Ladies Betterment League and condemn them too quickly for their well-appointed suburban homes, their dated understanding of service. You suspect that your participants will dismiss these characters and distance themselves from the complexities of service Brooks’ poem exposes.

**A Solution:**
Ask participants, during the opening exercise, to think about a time when they engaged in an act of service that did not feel right. Then, once the whole group has turned to Brooks’ poem, push participants to consider why the Ladies from the Betterment League are in the home—encourage them to think about the Ladies’ motives rather than simply their flawed execution. Both of these steps—in the opening exercise and in the whole-group discussion—will help participants see themselves in the Ladies from whom they might otherwise have felt quite distant.
For instance, in Bertolt Brecht’s poem “A Bed for the Night,” several participants in the room seem to think that the man on the corner is asking passersby to take homeless folks into their houses for the night. Now the question is, what do you make of the cornerman’s request? And why does the poem move from a description of this man’s action to the announcement that “it will not change the world”?

These questions of interpretation encourage participants to evaluate the reading, to praise or blame characters, and to talk about values—but to do so using the shared terms provided by the reading everyone has in front of them. At this point, the discussion consists in an exchange of personal opinions, but these opinions are filtered through the shared object of the text, which keeps the discussion from turning personal in a way that might shut some participants out.

As participants get more involved in answering questions of interpretation, there will most likely be a natural push from the reading to the activity they share. That is, participants will move from talking about Brooks’ Ladies Betterment League to their service experience in City Year, or from Bambara’s Miss Moore to their own kind of teaching, or from Neruda’s lamb to the gift they try to pass on.

This motion—from the reading back to civic life—characterizes the best civic reflection discussions, especially when participants have come to see their work anew by looking carefully at the reading before them and thinking patiently about their opinions and beliefs.

In closing, then, you will almost certainly want to move toward questions of implication: So what?

What do we take away from this reading or discussion as we leave, what do we think about our own activity, our own work, in light of what we have heard or said? These questions simply try to help connect the reading to the experiences of people in the group. Often participants make these connections themselves, but you should still have these kinds of questions ready.

**Examples**

Here are a few examples of effective “connecting” questions:

- Is Tocqueville describing the kinds of associations in which you participate?
- Do you recognize these characters/dilemmas? Have you experienced them in your own life?
- Is this the kind of leadership your organization has been called upon to provide?
- Are these the kinds of choices we are confronted with in our community?
- Why do these ideas matter? What are some implications of what we have said for your work, organization or community?