



7 MISSTEPS TO AVOID

A QUESTION DESIGN GUIDE



PURPOSE:

To highlight some common challenges people face when crafting dialogic questions.

TOPIC:

Designing Questions

NOTES ON THIS RESOURCE:

Designing effective dialogic questions is a skill that takes time and practice. This guide is intended to highlight a few common challenges that the members of our community of practice have encountered over the years.



7 QUESTION MISSTEPS TO AVOID

1. **The question asks for analysis (or a question that has a “right” answer)**

Dialogic questions do not have a “right answer” or an answer that people are supposed to give. Students should not be guessing what the faculty member is thinking or wants them to say. They also should draw students away from “what does the evidence say...” or “the top three reasons for...” which all ask for analysis rather than a personal story. There is nothing wrong with those questions for an examination or other kinds of classroom discussions, but they don’t support dialogue.

2. **The question includes terminology that is obscure, jargon, ill-defined or too broad**

Questions need to be readily understandable by all the students. The choice of the words in a question should not be the focus of the discussion. It is also helpful to keep the language focused enough that students are all talking about the same thing rather than leaving things open to interpretation—unless you deliberately want to keep a topic wide open.

3. **The question contains assumptions or biases embedded in the language**

Because dialogue is meant to be open to people with a diversity of opinion and worldview, it is necessary to be careful of asking questions that imply a moral judgement on one side or the other. Watch out for terms that are used predominantly by one side of a divisive issue.

4. **The question has a yes or no answer**

Sometimes this is as simple as changing the form of a question from “Have you ever had a conversation...” to “What was the impact of a conversation...” or from “Do you have hopes or concerns about...” to “What are your hopes and concerns...” Shift the framing to encourage specificity and personal stories.

5. **The question is too narrow or requires a certain kind of experience to answer**

It is important that everybody can answer a dialogue question. You cannot ask everybody about their experience of being married unless you know that everybody has been married. Likewise, certain experiences will be much easier for certain groups to access than others. You may have to open the question up to include a diverse range of experiences and backgrounds.

6. **The question is too broad**

Questions should be narrow enough that we all have the same conversation, but broad enough for everyone to find their way into it. “Talk about a time when you felt insecure?” might be too broad of a question for a conversation about food insecurity. Asking for an experience of food insecurity, though, might be too narrow to elicit personal stories. Instead, you might ask about a time when someone felt insecure about accessing a resource they needed, or were not sure how to get something that felt important to them. Bridge the gap between a more common personal experience and the intention of the dialogue.

7. **The question is rhetorical**

Aren’t rhetorical questions really just statements posing as questions? (Yes.)