

## Activity

### Effective questioning – reflecting on practice

#### Purpose.

To develop your skills in asking questions.

#### Description

An exploration of how to avoid potential pitfalls in asking questions.

#### Instructions

For each of the examples:

- consider the context described;
- reflect on the questions that follow and write down your answers;
- invite your colleagues to do the same, if possible, and compare your responses.

#### Example 1

##### Javed is thinking about a work placement

Javed has been reluctant to consider anything that would take him away from the comfort and safety of the course. When his tutor does finally manage to get Javed to talk about a work placement, the conversation goes like this:

**Tutor:** What do you think you might get out of a work placement?

**Javed:** (*Silence.*)

**Tutor:** It would improve your English, wouldn't it?

What do you think is happening here?

What are the likely consequences of the tutor's response to Javed's silence?

What would you have liked the tutor to have said instead?

## Example 2

**“I want to be a hairdresser.”**

Kayleigh’s tutor wants to find out what plans Kayleigh has made for her future in hairdressing.

The conversation goes like this.

**Tutor:** What sort of career route have you planned out?

**Kayleigh:** My best friend’s mum has got a hairdresser’s. I’ve been doing Saturdays there.

**Tutor:** What are three big things you’ve learnt doing your Saturday job?

**Kayleigh:** (*hesitatingly* ) Being friendly... Neat and tidy... Helpful. That’s the main one really, because I’ve not had a lot of responsibility yet.

**Tutor:** Why haven’t you had a lot of responsibility?

**Kayleigh:** Because I’m not trained.

**Tutor:** How much training do you think you’ll need?

**Kayleigh:** Quite a lot for hairdressing, because there’s cutting and styling and I want to do, like, beauty as well.

**Tutor:** What options have people discussed with you so far?

**Kayleigh:** I know eventually that there’s City and Guilds.

How do you think Kayleigh experienced this conversation?

What might the tutor have done differently, to build rapport with Kayleigh?

The way you ask questions, and the types of questions you ask, will have a big impact on the degree of trust that learners have in you and the information they are prepared to give.

## Activity 1- Feedback sheet

### Javed is thinking about a work placement

The tutor starts well with an inviting open question intended to encourage Javed to think. However, Javed does not answer it immediately. The tutor feels uneasy with the silence and comes in with a suggestion that gives Javed the message that someone else will do his thinking for him.

The tutor could have paused for several seconds to give Javed time to think. If he continued to be unresponsive, the tutor could ask his open question again in a slightly different form, as a prompt. For example:

**Tutor:** What do you think you might get out of a work placement?

**Javed:** (*Silence.*)

**Tutor:** (*Pause, then speaking quietly to allow Javed to continue thinking*) How might a work placement help you?

### “I want to be a hairdresser.”

Kayleigh is likely to have experienced this as an interrogation because the tutor went from one question to another, giving no sign that he had heard her answer.

In quizzing her so strongly, he was putting her on the spot, and possibly giving her the impression that she had to give the ‘right’ answers.

He was also putting pressure on himself to ask new questions.

He would have established more rapport with Kayleigh if he had started by saying, “Tell me about what you’ve been doing in your Saturday job”. Kayleigh could have volunteered information that the tutor could have invited her to think more deeply about. This would have shown her that he was interested in her experiences.

## Activity 2

### Reflections on your questioning technique.

#### Purpose

To heighten your awareness of your own questioning techniques.

#### Description

A structured approach to keeping a reflective diary relating to your questioning techniques.

#### Instructions

As soon as possible after the next significant conversation you have with learner, take a copy of this page and record your answers to the questions.

As a way of heightening your awareness of your questioning techniques, write down your reflections after conversations with other learners.

You might find it revealing to reflect on your conversations with colleagues or members of your family.

The types of questions you ask can influence the way people respond and the quality of the relationship you have with them.

When you use open questions, interspersed with reflective listening statements and summaries, you will encourage learners to take their share of responsibility for the content of the conversation. (See information sheets on reflective listening and summaries.)

There is a tendency for us to revert to closed questions in this kind of work. We do this because sometimes, when we feel that the learner is embarrassed or unwilling to talk to us, or just struggling with the one-to-one situation, we want to feed them easy questions. We want to let them off the hook.

If you feel that a learner is struggling with an open question, particularly at the start of a conversation, find an easier question about which they are bound to have an opinion rather than move to closed questions.

A series of closed questions at the beginning of a dialogue will lead to an interrogative atmosphere that fails to encourage the other person to see themselves as an equal partner.

**Paul Lalgee**

## **Reflections on your questioning technique**

1 What open questions did you ask?

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

What was your purpose?

.....

What response did you have?

.....

2 What closed questions did you ask?

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

What was your purpose?

.....

What response did you have?

.....

3 What did you learn about your habitual ways of asking questions?

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

4 What would you like to have done differently?

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....