

Question Types That Kill Conversations

Following are some of the question types that discourage discussion and should be avoided when a teacher is attempting to engage students in dynamic conversations online.

Factual Questions

Factual questions have just one “right” answer, which must be supported by evidence, so they do not invite further discussion once a student answers the question correctly.

Information-Retrieval Questions

Information-retrieval questions ask students to find a particular piece of information from a source (e.g., textbook, online resource). Like factual questions, these types of questions do not encourage students to engage in discussions; once the correct answer is presented, there is nothing left to discuss.

Tips for Designing Strong Questions

Begin With an Eye-Catching Title

An eye-catching title helps to capture student interest. Instead of titling a discussion topic “Chapter 3 Question,” begin with a catchy title such as “Should We Clone Human Beings?” or “Bizarre Photo: What Happened Here?” This draws students in and intrigues them. Use alliteration in your titles to create a poetic quality, and incorporate interesting vocabulary to excite curiosity.

Embed Media

Embedded media engages students. Have fun with photos and videos! Students love all things visual. Include pictures and video clips to present information, explain concepts, inspire debate, and stimulate creative writing. Embed Word documents with directions, lecture notes, vocabulary, and assignment descriptions to support student work online as well.

Layer Your Questions

Layer your questions to increase participation and differentiate instruction. A tiered question consists of multiple questions that build on one another and vary in complexity, thus giving students freedom to answer questions they understand or feel confident responding to.

Begin with a general question that leads to specific questions that narrow the scope of the conversation and encourage students to examine the issue/topic more closely. The broad “hook” question draws students in, but the more specific follow-up questions gives them the freedom to focus on the aspect of the topic they find most interesting. If the questions are more specific, then the responses are likely to be more specific.

Another approach to layering your questions is to begin with a content-specific question, then follow it with more general reflective questions that encourage students to connect the topic to their own lives. This strategy is particularly helpful in differentiating instruction online to engage a variety of skill levels.

The plethora of online tools available to educators can help make the seemingly impossible task of individualizing instruction more manageable. Teachers can use online discussion tools to present questions that are tiered, encouraging stronger students to answer the more complex nuances of the questions asked, while allowing struggling students to answer the simpler, more reflective questions and learn from the responses of their peers.

Example of a layered question:

Read the article “Spilled Oil” from the June 28, 2010, issue of the *New Yorker*, then identify and evaluate the bias. What bias is present? Where does this bias come from? How does this bias impact the way the content is presented? Is it possible to avoid bias in writing? Do you have a bias that influences your thoughts on the oil spill?

Questions that are layered offer students a variety of angles from which to answer questions. Students who are advanced might focus

on the larger implications of the bias in this article in relation to society and government, while other students might discuss whether they believe bias in writing can be avoided. The trick is to give students the freedom to choose how they respond to a question by layering more complex questions on top of more reflective questions.

Ask Controversial or Polarizing Questions

Ask controversial or polarizing questions to draw students into a conversation or debate. If you have established a safe space online, then presenting controversial questions will allow students to engage in constructive discussions about topics they are passionate about. As a facilitator, you will need to follow the conversations closely to ensure students maintain a respectful tone when expressing opposing viewpoints. In Chapter 5 we discuss how you can successfully create a virtual safe space to ensure that communication in your online space is respectful and supportive.

Encourage Students to Make Connections

Encourage connections between your topic of discussion and students' life experiences. If students are able to connect the discussion to their families, friends, classes, books, music, interests, hobbies, and points of reference, then the information being discussed will be more meaningful and they will retain the information longer. Incorporating these connections into the conversations will also personalize the discussion and lead to more meaningful student interactions.

Be Flexible

Be flexible during discussions. Sometimes the conversation will head in a direction you did not anticipate. These tangential conversations can be just as valuable as the initial topics presented. It is important to evaluate each individual discussion and ask follow-up questions that keep students on track but do not pigeonhole their responses. Do not get locked into your agenda as a facilitator; instead be open to the organic evolution of conversations.

Focus on Topics of Interest to All Grade Levels

Focus on topics of interest to all grade levels by asking questions that appeal to all students, regardless of age. Questions on sports, music, television, current technology products, and fads in clothing

styles, for example, pique the interest of students from upper elementary through high school. Those are subjects they discuss by choice on a daily basis. Incorporating those topics into your online discussions can encourage participation and increase interest.

What Does a Good Online Question Look Like?

Title: Does reading cure racism?

← **Start with a catchy title**

Description: Do you agree with Angelou's statement that the only way we as a society will be free of the "blight of ignorance" is if we read and learn about African Heritage? Do you agree that reading, knowledge, and education are essential to respecting differences and forming cross-racial friendships? If so, why do you agree? If not, what do you think is crucial to eliminating ignorance between racial groups?

↖ **Layer questions**

Type: Yes/No

Attach: Embed the video, "[Maya Angelou: My Greatest Achievement.](#)"

↖ **Design different types of questions**



→ **Incorporate multimedia**

Attachments

Maya Angelou Discusses Her Son



Chapter Summary

Designing curriculum is one of the most important aspects of the teaching presence in both the traditional class and in the work done online. Discussion questions and topics must be dynamic and able to drive meaningful discussions. When designing discussion questions, teachers should begin with an interesting title, include clear

expectations for participation, embed media whenever possible, and layer their questions to invite a variety of responses. This is an art form that requires the teacher to capture student interest, inspire meaningful contributions, differentiate instruction, and foster discussions that will invite a variety of perspectives.

1. In your current practice, what type of question do you most commonly ask—factual, information retrieval, subjective, evaluative, reflective, problem solving, brainstorming, or debate? Why do you gravitate to this particular question type? What are your objectives in asking this type of question? Does asking this type of question effectively engage your students?
2. When designing questions, do you think it is important to use different question structures (e.g., debate, multiple choice, forum)? How might structuring your conversations help to drive interesting discussions and retain student interest? If you have a learning platform or learning management system that does not offer a variety of question types, how can you design questions to create variety in your conversations to maintain student interest?
3. Are there any tips you would add to the section “Tips for Designing Strong Questions”? What additional strategies will you use to design questions that effectively engage your students?