

# Strategic questioning techniques for discussion

## WHAT IS THIS RESOURCE?

A guide on how to use the strategic questioning process and strategic questions, with sample questions for each step of the process, for class discussions that may become challenging because they touch on personal or social change.

## HOW DO I USE IT?

Well before holding a class discussion that touches on personal or social change, part of the planning process may include how best to incorporate the outlined process for strategic questioning and choosing which of the sample questions might be appropriate for the topic or purpose of your class discussion. For assistance, please [contact CET](http://cet.usc.edu/).

Strategic questioning can be used to help facilitate classroom discussions, particularly challenging discussions, when a student becomes emotionally upset. In this case, strategic questions can open listeners to other points of view as new information and/or possibilities are taken into account. Strategic questioning represents both a process and types of questions as outlined below. Instructors may use the recommended questions for discussions that may become challenging because they touch on personal or social change or provide them to student leaders of such a class discussion.

### Key features of strategic questions

A strategic question has the following 7 characteristics.

* Creates motion--asking dynamic rather than static questions can help students explore how they can move on an issue, or get unstuck when discussing a particularly challenging topic
* Creates options--moving away from binary thinking and instead questioning, considering, or including all options, which may also lead to students creating new options
* Digs deeper--using long-lever rather than short-lever questions to stir students’ creative solutions
* Avoids “whys”--including “why” questions often force students into defensiveness of an existing decision, rationalization of the present, or resistance to change
* Avoids “yes” or “no” answers--using closed questions are dead ends for conversations, and encourage passive and uncreative states
* Is empowering--creating confidence that motion, or change, can actually happen and confidence in the students that they have a contribution to make and can create a path for change
* Asks the unaskable--leveraging the power of taboo to challenge the values and assumptions that the whole issue of the challenging discussion rests upon, in a non-partisan and non-embarrassing way to probe for more suitable answers for the future

### Process

The process of strategic questioning has two levels to be covered in a specific sequence, and each has its own types of questions.

#### **Level 1: Describing the issue or problem**

Purpose: Gain the facts and points of view of all the main players before framing strategic questions

Question Types:

1. Focus questions
   1. What aspects of X concern you?
   2. What do you think about X?
   3. How has the X impacted you?
   4. What are you most concerned about for X?
2. Observation questions
   1. What do you see?
   2. What do you hear?
   3. What have you heard and read about this situation?
   4. Which sources do you trust and why?
   5. What effects of this situation have you noticed in people, in the earth?
   6. What do you know for sure and what are you not certain about?
3. Analysis questions
   1. What do you think about?
   2. What are the reasons for X?
   3. What is the relationship of X to Y?
4. Feeling questions
   1. What sensations do you have in your body when you think or talk about this situation? (examples: muscle tension, racing heart, stomach upset, clenched jaw, euphoria, lightness, sense of peace)
   2. How do you feel about the situation?
   3. How has the situation affected your own physical or emotional health?

#### **Level 2: Strategic questions that dig deeper**

Purpose: Synthesize and create new information. Move on from what is known into what could be.

Question Types:

1. Visioning questions
   1. How would you like it to be?
   2. What is the meaning of this situation in your own life?
2. Change questions
   1. How could the situation be changed for it to be as you would like it?
   2. What will it take to bring the current situation towards the ideal?
   3. What exactly needs to change here?
   4. How might these changes come about? Name as many as possible.
   5. Who can make a difference?
   6. What changes have you seen or read about?
   7. How did those changes come about?
3. Considering alternatives
   1. What are all the ways you can think of that would accomplish these changes?
   2. How could you reach that goal? What are other ways?
   3. Be sure to tell me if other ideas come up...
4. Considering consequences
   1. How would your first alternative affect the others in your group?
   2. What would be the effect of using X?
   3. How would you feel doing (name each alternative)?
   4. What would be the political effect if you did X?
5. Considering obstacles
   1. What would need to change in order for alternative X to be done?
   2. What keeps you from doing X?
   3. What prevents you from getting involved?
6. Personal inventory and support questions
   1. How can I support you?
   2. What would it take for you to participate in the change?
   3. What do you like to do that might be useful in bringing about these changes?
   4. Tell me what is special about you.
   5. What aspects of the situation interest you the most?
   6. What support would you need to work for this change?
7. Personal action questions
   1. Who do you need to talk to?
   2. How can you join a group that is working on this?
   3. How can you get others together to work on this?

Adapted from: [Fran Peavey, Strategic Questioning: An Approach to Creating Personal and Social Change,](http://www.jobsletter.org.nz/pdf/stratq97.pdf) 1997