Questions for Class Discussions
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Proficiency in questioning is one of the hallmarks of case method teaching. Harvard Business School professor and preeminent teacher C. Roland Christensen considered the art of questioning so important that he once described case method teaching as "the art of asking the right question, of the right student, at the right time—and in the right way." The "right" questions promote learning and discovery, pique student interest, and yield dynamic discussions.

Questions themselves cannot exist in isolation, but instead form part of the basic triad of questioning, listening, and responding. Asking a question entails active listening and a thoughtful response—often in the form of another question or follow-up probe. Good questions take into account the specific audience (What are the students' needs, interests, and abilities?), the pedagogical goals of the class (What are the key learning objectives? Why should students care?), and the content and class plan (Which case features are relevant, surprising, confusing, etc.? How is the material sequenced?). Whether it calls for analysis, encourages debate, or solicits recommendations for action, a question is most effective when it fits the needs of a specific class context and helps guide students individually and collectively towards discovery and learning.

This resource document provides sample questions that have been found to be particularly effective in various scenarios that commonly occur during a case method discussion. It is organized into four main categories, which mirror the four major ways in which a discussion leader uses questions:

1. **Starting a discussion pasture**: Framing students' approach to the case by asking for an assessment, diagnosis, or recommendation of a course of action.
2. **Following up**: Responding to student comments by probing for more depth (drilling down), opening up the discussion to more participants (moving laterally), or asking for generalization/reflection/synthesis (linking up).
3. **Transitioning**: Bridging the current pasture with the next discussion block, which may include checking for student comprehension before moving on.
4. **Handling special challenges**: Responding to student contributions that have the potential to derail the discussion, as when a comment is tangential, long-winded, incorrect, confusing, inappropriate, or offensive.

1. Starting a Discussion Pasture

At the beginning of a discussion pasture or sub-block, questions involving assessment, diagnosis, or recommendation/action tend to be more effective for stimulating learning than purely descriptive questions such as "what is the situation?" or "what are the issues?"

Assessment
"How serious is the situation?
"How successful is this [firm/protagonist]?"
"How attractive is the business opportunity under consideration?"
"What's at stake here?"

Diagnosis
"What is the most significant problem/challenge faced by the [firm/protagonist]?"
"Who or what is [responsible/to blame] for the crisis faced by the [firm/protagonist]?"
"Why has the [firm/protagonist] performed so well/poorly?
"As [the case protagonist], what keeps you up at night? What are you most worried about?"

Recommendation/Action
"Which of the [three] options presented in the case would you pursue?
"What would you recommend to the [firm/protagonist]?
"What is your plan of action?

2. Following Up

Follow-ups to student comments include probing for more depth, opening up the discussion to more participants, or asking for generalization/reflection/synthesis. Instructors should consider that while follow-ups are necessary to guide the discussion and challenge students, excessive interventions can lead to instructor-focused, hub-and-spoke exchanges.

To encourage greater depth of analysis
Greater depth of analysis can be achieved through general probes and questions exploring underlying assumptions and boundary conditions.

General probes
"Why?"
"Could you say a little more about that?"
"Could you walk us through your logic/thought process?"
"What leads you to that conclusion?"
"How did you come up with that number/estimate?
"Do we have any evidence to support that?"
"How did you interpret that exhibit/quote/data/information?"
"Why is that important?"
"What are the implications?"

Underlying assumptions and boundary conditions
"What indicators/measures/criteria are you using to support your analysis?
"What are you assuming with respect to [x,y,z]?
"Do you have any concerns? How might they be addressed?"
"If we assume [x] instead of [y], does that change your conclusion/recommendation?"
"What would it take for you to change your conclusion/recommendation?"
"Was the outcome inevitable?" "Could it have been prevented?"
"To what extent was the [firm/protagonist] just lucky?"

"Is that consistent with [another student's earlier point]?"
"How does this compare with what we discussed/concluded in yesterday's class?"

To open the discussion to other students
Although the instructor may call on another student without responding at all to the previous comment, it is often helpful to provide some guidance for the subsequent contributor. It is particularly useful to indicate whether the next student should respond directly to the previous comment or not.

<u>Responding to previous comment</u>
The questions may be prefaced by framing statements such as: "Let's stick with this," "on this point," or "[Student X] is arguing [y]."

"Any reactions?" "What about that?" "What do you think?"
"Is that right?" "Any concerns?" "Do you buy that?"
"Any questions for [previous student]?"
"Who would like to build on [previous student]'s point?"
"Does everyone agree?" "Does anyone see it differently?"
"Can someone help us [work through this analysis, resolve this confusion]?"
"Can anyone address [student x]'s concern?"

<u>Broadening the discussion</u>
"Other perspectives?"
"Are we missing anything?"
"Are there other issues we should consider?"
"Who can reconcile these different interpretations/conclusions/points of view?"

To encourage generalization, reflection, or synthesis
Instructors can help students integrate new concepts and internalize takeaways by challenging them to link key learnings to broader managerial issues or experiences from their own lives.

"What do you take away from today's discussion/case?"
"What's the moral of this story?"
"Why should managers care about these issues?"
"In what other industries/countries would the lessons/principles of today's case apply?"
"Has anyone confronted a similar challenge in their own work experience?"

3. Transitioning
Transitions are often preceded by two types of questions: (i) comprehension-checking questions that invite questions or final thoughts, and (ii) framing questions that link the current pasture to the new one.

"Have we missed anything important?"
"Any final comments before we move on?"
"Before we get into [x], are there any questions?"
"Is everyone comfortable moving on to [...]?"

"Now that we've established [x], what about [y]?
"In light of our discussion of [x], what should we do about [y]?"
"What are the implications of [x]?
"So we're clear on [x]—shall we move on to [y]?
"Before getting into the numbers/details, how do we think about how we should approach the analysis?"

4. Handling Special Challenges

There are a variety of student contributions that can create challenges for discussion leadership. Examples include tangential, non-sequitur, long, complex, and/or confusing comments. Instructors also may find it difficult to know how best to respond to incorrect answers or the use of offensive or inappropriate language by a student. In many of these instances, it may be difficult to redirect or refocus the comment without interrupting the student. To reduce the chances of offending, frustrating, or embarrassing the student, it is helpful to begin the response with a neutral-to-complimentary observation such as "that's an interesting perspective," "you're raising some important issues," or "I hear you saying that [. . .]."

Tangential or non-sequitur comments
"How does that relate to what [previous student] was saying?"
"Let's hold off on that for the moment. Can we first resolve the [issue/debate] on the table?"
"We'll get to that a little later in the discussion. Let's stay with [previous student]'s question."
"Let's park that [on the side board], and I'll look for you when we get to [later discussion topic]"
For esoteric contributions: "Why don't we take that off-line."

Long, rambling comments
"You're raising a number of issues. Let's focus on [x]."
"It sounds like you're concerned about [x]. Let's explore that."
"So you basically disagree with [the previous student] because [x, y]. [To previous student]: would you like to respond?"
"I hear you saying [x]. Does everyone agree?"
"What's the headline?"

Complex or confusing comments
"Let's slow this down for a minute." "Let's take it one step at a time."
"How would you explain that to someone unfamiliar with technical language?"
"Let's keep it simple."
"Before digging into the numbers/details, let's make sure we understand the basic intuition."
"You mention [x]. I'm not sure everyone is familiar with that concept. Could you clarify?"
"I just want to make sure I understand your argument. You're saying [. . .]?"

Incorrect answers
Incorrect answers might stem from a lack of preparation, legitimate confusion, or other causes, such as ambiguous questions or lack of clear direction. For factually incorrect comments containing minor inaccuracies not central to the discussion, it is often appropriate for the instructor to respond with a gentle correction. Faulty or incomplete analysis can serve as a learning opportunity for the student and the class. Ideally, the instructor will (i) not abandon the student, (ii) not confuse other students by letting incorrect answers pass unchallenged, and (iii) address the reason for the misperception, not just the misperception itself. When possible, the instructor should guide the student or his/her classmates to correct the error.

"Where in the case did you find that?"
"Could you walk us through how you came up with that?"
"Did anyone come up with a different answer?" "Let's see if we can reconcile these different results."
"This is a particularly complex analysis. Let's make sure the basic assumptions are clear."

Offensive or inappropriate language
["It sounds like you got a reaction."] "Would you like to take another shot at/rephrase that?"
"Hold on just a second. Do you want to try that again?"
"In less colorful language?"