

Towards Insightful Questions in the Classroom and the Boardroom

wayne . smith@csun . edu

[updated: Monday, November 7, 2011]

“He who knows only his side of the case knows little of that. His reasons may have been good, and no one may have been able to refute them. But if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side he has no ground for preferring either opinion.”

---John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)

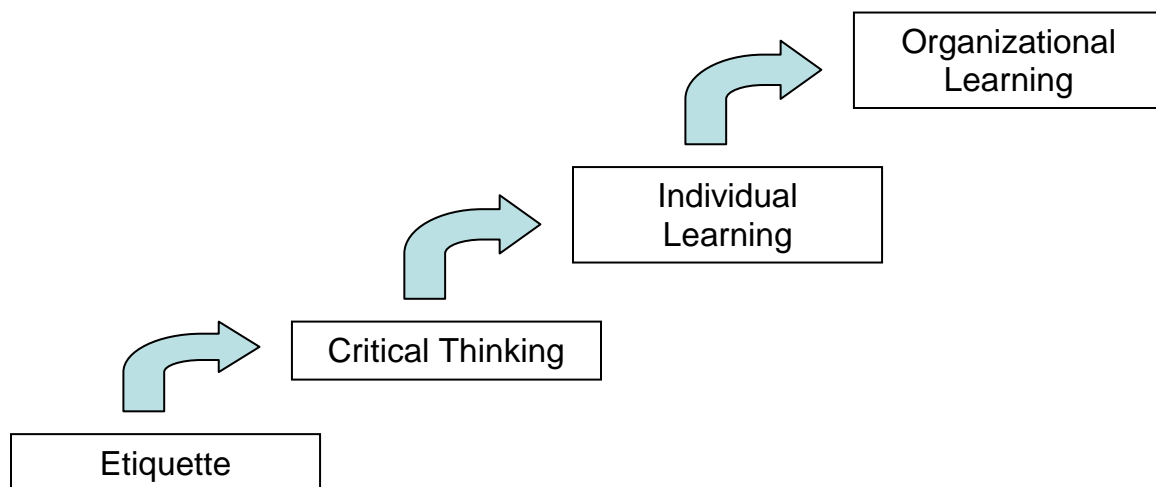
Preface

This document attempts to help students understand the importance of asking insightful questions. In a classroom context, the direct and immediate benefit can be intellectual development. In an organizational context, the direct and immediate benefit can be economic returns and social impact. Good communication has many components, including good writing and oral presentations. But good writing and good oral presentations are often done asynchronously, including adequate time for re-writing and practice. Successful managers also need skills, knowledge, and abilities in synchronous, face-to-face communication. This kind of communication is related to, but different than, good writing and good oral presentations. This is the communication environment of the classroom and the boardroom. Business students know that they need to excel in both environments.

The purpose of this document is to help students understand the importance of asking insightful questions, especially in a classroom context that is a proxy for an organizational context.

An “Insightful Question Maturity Model”

One might envision a “ladder” model for insightful questions.



Insightful Questions through “Emotional Intelligence”

Goleman (1998) identifies 4 key components of “emotional intelligence.” Developing skills in these 4 areas can help student professionals.

1. Self-awareness.
E.g., Do I have something unique and impactful to contribute by asking this question?
2. Self-management.
E.g., Have I reflected upon my question, examined various wording/sentence options, and prepared myself for the ensuing response/discussion?
3. Social Awareness.
E.g., Do I know enough about the others in the room to ensure that my question leads to constructive engagement?
4. Relationship Management.
E.g., Does this question, regardless of nature or response, improve my connections and long-term working *rapport* with others in the room?

The 11 “Right Questions” for Critical Thinking

Browne and Keely (2007) identify 11 key questions that form the basis for critical thinking. While not all 11 “right questions” apply in every classroom or boardroom circumstance, refining a possible question more narrowly to be aligned with one of the following “right questions” can be quite productive for a motivated individual.

1. What are the issues and the conclusions?
2. What are the reasons?
3. Which words or phrases are ambiguous?
4. What are the value conflicts and assumptions?
5. What are the descriptive assumptions?
6. Are there any fallacies in the reasoning?
7. How good is the evidence?
8. Are there rival causes?
9. Are the statistics deceptive?
10. What significant information is omitted?
11. What reasonable conclusions are possible?

Important Lessons from Bus302 (“Gateway”)

The first required class in the College of Business and Economics is Bus302 (“The Gateway Experience”). One component of that course is the role of the “challenge” or “discussion” team after each formal oral presentation. While a lecture by a faculty

member or a discourse by a senior executive may not be precisely the same as a formal oral presentation, similar “rules of engagement” apply. Recall from Bus302 that a “challenge” or “discussion” team employs a specific pattern in its role in the room (note: that the three types of questions are mutually exclusive).

1. First, identify yourself clearly.
This is especially important in large-lecture halls.
E.g., “Hello. My name is Wayne.”
2. Second, always start with a compliment.
This isn’t always necessary, but it helps set a positive tone in the room.
E.g., “I didn’t know much about social networks before. Thanks for presenting this material in class.”
3. Third, state something that you agree with.
Surely there must be at least one concept or idea that you agree with.
E.g., “I concur that developing people is an key management activity.”
4. Ask a “clarification” question.
A clarification question improves understanding and explanation.
E.g., “What do you mean by Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs?”
5. Ask a “difference” question.
A difference question concerns differences in opinion, experience, education, or empirical results.
E.g., “I calculated the annual personnel turnover rate to be 4.2, although I notice that your rate was 3.1. I wonder if you could walk me through your calculations?”
6. Ask an “exploratory” (or “extension”) question.
An exploratory question builds upon a prior statement and stimulates new thinking/discussion on a topic that was not addressed adequately or at all.
E.g., “I think I am finally beginning to understand the nature and role of a strategic mission. How is the strategic vision related to mission, objectives, and goals?”
7. Possibly ask a “follow-up” question.
A “follow-up” question builds upon an immediate response to prior question and is directly related to the topic being discussed.
E.g., “If, as you say, leadership and power are so strongly connected in the real world, how best can I learn the underlying foundations of power?”

The 5 “Don’ts” in the Classroom

Some individuals learn best by avoiding “worst practices.” One might argue that only when “worst practices” have been dissolved can “best practices” be absorbed.

1. Don't speak immediately or at least without formulating an insightful question.
Formulating an insightful question requires reflection and purpose.
2. Don't ask a question for which the answer is readily available elsewhere.
This is unproductive in the classroom and detrimental in the boardroom.
3. Don't ask a question for which you already know the answer.
The most insightful question is about something you don't know.
4. Don't mask a statement (or a personal agenda) with a question.
Put statements, if any, first and then end by asking the question.
5. Don't ask your question softly and shyly.
Speak so every individual in the room can hear you perfectly the first time.

The 6 Steps to Formulating Insightful Questions

Some individuals learn best by following a formal procedure or routine. While a routine might seem overly simplistic in the short run, such a structure can improve one's ability to both reason and develop insightful questions in the long run.

1. Have I been reading, listening, and participating well enough to understand the general parameters of the specific issue that I don't understand?
2. Is this question of enough general interest to others in the classroom to warrant asking and will the question fundamentally improve my relationship with others in the classroom?
3. Have I generated more than one phrasing format for the question in my mind and have I selected the best choice among all of the alternatives?
4. Of all the questions that I might ask, is this question the most insightful?
5. Is my insightful question better asked at a different time or a different place?
6. Have I prepared myself adequately for the eventual response to my question?

References

Browne, M. N., and Keeley, S. M., (2007), *Asking the Right Questions*, Pearson/Prentice-Hall, Upper Saddle River: NJ.

Goleman, D. (1998), "What Makes a Leader?", *Harvard Business Review*, Nov-Dec.