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Questioning & Listening



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Snippets on questioning & listening

Questioning and listening are key skills for on-the-job learning, supervision and appraisal.

Questioning can have a number of functions such as testing knowledge, promoting understanding, consolidating learning, encouraging new insights, introducing new viewpoints, and stimulating reflective and critical thinking.

Listening is a skill that is given little thought, yet it is an essential part of verbal communication. A good listener uses a variety of techniques that include paraphrasing, checking perceptions and summarising.

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The problem

Meetings, eg pre/post ward rounds, x-ray meetings are not fully exploited for teaching.

The role of senior trainees as teachers is often under developed.

Poor interviewing skills are a key reason for poor appraisal.

The solution

Acquire good questioning & listening skills. Questioning is a key strategy for effective learning and can be used to maximise on-the-job learning, eg at ward round discussions, snatched opportunities during service delivery. Appropriate questions can trigger reasoning, creativity and other higher level thinking skills. This stretches your learners and makes the most of the many very brief learning opportunities that occur on the job. Together with listening it is also an essential skill for carrying out appraisal.

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Introducing questioning & listening

You use questioning & listening techniques everyday with your patients. Are you using them effectively in your teaching?

By posing certain questions, you can help learners develop a greater degree of understanding. Questioning can also be used to 'prise open' the learner's thinking, and check misunderstandings.

There are two categories of questions:

Closed questions

which can be answered with a yes, no or a simple piece of information that is clearly right or wrong

Open questions

which aim to elicit more expansive replies and encourage further discussion.

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Questions can also have different purposes.



Think for a moment what these purposes might be.

In general closed questions merely check knowledge or understanding whilst open questions can stimulate higher order thinking ie reasoning, judgement, problem solving. It is important to be able to draw upon the full range of question types for both teaching and appraisal.

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Listening skills are also important. A good listener really hears and understands what the trainee or patient is saying and responds to all parts of their conversation or concerns – not just what is obviously apparent.

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Questioning & listening in action

The three sections below will help you become more aware of effective questioning & listening techniques.

*Purpose of
questioning*

*Developing your
trainee through
questioning*

*What makes a
good listener?*



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Purpose of questioning

Developing your trainee through questioning

What makes a good listener?



Questioning is a fundamental method of teaching.



How often do you use questions to help give new insights, consolidate learning and stimulate initial thinking?

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Here are a few ways in which questioning can be used in your teaching:

Arouse interest

'How often do you think you will see a case with...?'

Test knowledge

What is a reliable indicator of the presence of shock?'

Motivate the trainee

through allowing them to demonstrate success or through encouraging them in a difficult situation, eg 'Everyone has problems here, what are yours?'

Promote understanding

through getting the trainee to paraphrase in their own words, link past and present knowledge and experiences etc

Help give new insights

through guiding or challenging questions

Consolidate learning

through encouraging the trainee to review, summarise

Stimulate critical thinking

through encouraging the trainee to make deductions, conclusions.

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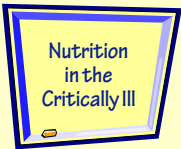
Purpose of questioning

Developing your trainee through questioning

What makes a good listener?



To recognise the types of questions that can encourage different orders of thinking, we have used this topic.



Questioning can be used to test:

Knowledge

'How many grams of protein contain 1 gram of nitrogen?' (recall)

Understanding through paraphrasing

'Can you describe the advantages and disadvantages of enteral and parenteral support?' (giving in own words)

Understanding through interpretation

'These two patients have very different nutritional requirements. Why?' (exploring a relationship between two ideas)

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Application

'Should this patient receive nutritional support?' (applying skills/knowledge already learned)

Analysis

'I agree with your choice of route for administering nutritional support. Why did you choose this route rather than the other?' (reasoning/solving a problem through known facts)

Synthesis

'What is your management plan for this patient?' (like application, but wider, with no specific detailed direction)

Evaluation

'Is continued nutritional support necessary?' (making a judgement)



Note...

Effective questioning is a skill that can be practised and developed.

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Questioning and listening go hand in hand.

How good a listener are you?

You are a good listener if you:

- appear interested in the person and what they are saying
- make an effort not to interrupt the speaker
- ensure the speaker is not made to feel stupid or inadequate
- ensure outside events do not distract you from listening
- use paraphrasing to clarify and check understanding
- accept silence and do not jump in too quickly to fill it up
- use questions to 'open up' the conversation if necessary
- summarise what you hear.



Note...

Good listening skills are important in appraisal sessions and in facilitating communication.

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Examples in practice

Questioning

We have provided some sample questions which might be posed in the following situations. Most commonly used are questions that test knowledge and application. Thinking about questions in terms of on-the-job problem solving can help to lead to more probing questions. For more information click on one of the options.

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Searching for a solution

Discussing the consequences of the proposed plan

Making a decision

Implementing the decision and ensuring it keeps on the right track

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Don't just ask 'What's wrong with this patient?'
[closed question]

Rather probe understanding with open questions, eg:

- What has caused the symptoms?
- What are the reasons for...?

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What are we trying to do? [open question]

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What will prevent X? [closed question]

How will you manage this patient? [bordering on closed]

Can you think of different ways of approaching this?
[open question]

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What will be the effect of drug X? [closed question, knowledge only]

What do you think might happen if you... (trainee's suggestion)? [open question]

What do you think might happen if you... (your suggestion which may be an incorrect or correct one)? [open question]

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What is the correct way to treat this? **[closed question]**

Why have you chosen that option? **[open question]**

What are the pros and cons of the options for treating this patient? **[open question]**

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Have you thought of doing ...X? [closed question]

What's the solution to this problem? [closed question]

Why is that happening? [open question]

How can you get round that difficulty? [open question]

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Do you feel you made the right decision? [closed question]

Can you justify the action you took? [open question]

What would you do differently next time? [open question]

What are the three key things you have learned from that experience? [open question]

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Listening

It is important to make the trainee feel you are listening and interested. As well as minimising any interruptions and using a friendly tone of voice, the following non-verbal behaviours will help:

- Face the trainee squarely
- Maintain eye contact
- Wherever possible try to sit at the same level as the trainee
- Lean slightly forward towards the trainee.



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Paraphrasing is another recommended technique to ensure understanding. Use phrases such as:

- You seem to be saying...
- Am I correct in saying that ...?
- Let me see if I understand the situation correctly...

Summarising helps to gather the key points together. Use phrases such as:

- So your key difficulties are centred around...
- What you really want is...



ractical tips

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- ✓ If you prefix a question with how, what, where, when or who, you are more likely to ask an open-ended question.
- ✓ Practise changing closed questions into open ones eg 'Did you check...?' into 'What is the procedure for checking...?'; 'Should we do an X test?' into 'What tests should we arrange?'
- ✓ Try to ask only one question at a time.
- ✓ Think about the purpose of your questions. This can help to ensure you are using a mixture of questions - ones that stimulate thinking as well as testing knowledge.
- ✓ Use more thought provoking words eg how, why, explain, justify, compare, if.
- ✓ Use 'What if?' questions to help develop understanding of ideas.

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- ✓ Broaden ideas by using questions that involve comparisons or different viewpoints eg 'Why does this patient need X whilst the last needed Y?' or in an appraisal interview 'Would you prefer further practice on the simulator or assisting with actual patients?.'
- ✓ Encourage problem solving 'What could have prevented...'; 'What options have we to stop...?'; 'How might you find that out?'
- ✓ Aid general development - 'What have you learned today/from that experience?'; 'What are you going to do differently next time?'. You will have succeeded in putting learning from reflection on the agenda.
- ✓ Be comfortable with silence. Allow 3-5 seconds wait time at least between asking a question and expecting an answer.

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- ✓ If necessary, give trainees prompts to gain more detailed answers. Always acknowledge their first answer in an encouraging way before doing this.
 - ✓ Use verbal encouragement eg 'Go on... tell me more', as well as non-verbal encouragement eg smiling, nodding head, to get further responses.
 - ✓ Give negative feedback to wrong answers by focusing on the response, not on the trainee.
 - ✓ Don't ask another question before getting a full answer to the first one.

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Other learning opportunities

Here are a few journal articles and other resources if you wish to read more about the topic



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Hargreaves D H (1998) Registrars as trainers: the use of questioning techniques in on-the-job training. *Ann R Coll Surg Eng (Suppl)* 80 10-13
A short paper that describes an attempt to include more teaching in a daily business meeting through training Registrars in the use of 'Higher order' thinking questions. Trainees both benefited from and enjoyed the experience.

Edwards E J (1991) Use of listening skills when advising nursing students in clinical experiences. *Journal of Nursing Education* 30 328-329
A short paper on listening skills which is applicable to anyone involved with the development of others in the healthcare professions.

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Dillon JT (1990) *The practice of questioning*. London; Routledge

A comprehensive book that is written for any professional whose work depends on effective communication. It is more for those who want to explore questioning in depth.

Moon P (1997) *Appraising your staff*. London; Kogan Page

As you would expect books on appraisal have chapters on questioning and listening. This book, which we recommended in the Appraisal unit, gives practical advice and reinforces the messages in this unit.

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The international database TimeLIT (Topics in Medical Education Literature) www.timelit.org gives free access to articles relating to education in medicine, dentistry, nursing, patient health and the professions allied to medicine.

Other useful websites for those interested in Medical Education are that of the Association for the Study of Medical Education www.asme.org.uk and that of the Association for Medical Education in Europe www.amee.org

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The topic of questioning & listening is relevant to many other 'Developing the Teaching Instinct' units.

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Appraisal

Feedback

**Needs
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Group Activity

Select a topic within your group and brainstorm a list of at least 20 questions related to the topic. Analyse each question in terms of its function ie is it testing knowledge, applying knowledge, seeking evaluation? Click [HERE](#) for the taxonomy from lower to higher order questions. Try to convert some of the 'lower order' questions into ones which have a 'higher order' function.



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Questioning is a key strategy for effective learning so remember to use probing questions.

A good listener hears and understands what is being said and responds accordingly.

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