



Probing Questions Exercise

Developed by JoAnne Dowd and John D'Anieri.

Probing Questions are part of several protocols for Looking at Student Work. They are tricky questions as people tend to ask more detailed clarifying questions or questions that pertain to what the speaker wishes to say or know, rather than questions clearly for the benefit of the presenter. This exercise was designed by JoAnne Dowd and John D'Anieri of Poland High School, Poland, ME, in order to help people become skillful at this important aspect of the Protocols.

Steps

1. The facilitator introduces the concept of probing questions. Probing Questions are meant to help the presenter think more deeply, challenge his or her assumptions or consider ways to rethink some aspect of their practice. Probing Questions are for the presenter, not the one asking the question. They should be genuine questions, not judgments or advice, though sometimes ideas to consider are either implicit or explicit in the question.
2. Give everyone in the group (usually groups of 12 or less) an index card and ask them to write a dilemma they are faced with on one side only.
3. The first person (volunteer) reads their card only.
4. Anyone on the group asks a clarifying question — only two total. The reader answers. *This is to help the difference between clarifying and probing questions.*
5. Anyone in the group asks a probing question. The reader writes it on the back of the card but does not respond. Four more people ask a probing question and the reader writes them down, for a total of five probing questions.
6. The reader considers them and tells the group which one caused him/her to think the most deeply, was the most “probing.” *It is possible to tease out the attribute(s) of that question and begin a list of “the attributes of a probing question.” This is not necessary.*
7. The next person reads his/her dilemma and the process is repeated. This can be repeated as many times as necessary for the group to improve their ability to ask good probing questions, or as long as time allows.
8. Debrief the process by talking about what people now understand about probing questions, and/or by reviewing the “attributes of a probing question” if that step was done.