

Insightful questions for mentors



Practical prompts to help mentors support reflection, insight and action

Part of the AUSMASA Trainer and Assessor VET Career Framework

Why is it so important for mentors to ask questions that count?

The organisations in which we find ourselves as educators are complex. There are no simple, direct answers. Our colleagues, students and workplace contacts are increasingly diverse. Asking a range of insightful and thoughtful questions offers an opportunity to understand others, gain insight into their experiences, and reflect on the realities of teaching in our vocational settings.

Working with hundreds of vocational educators, I have seen firsthand the impact of well-placed, intentional questions. I often used the adage, "Think of the type of answer you want, then write your question."

Another thing for you to think about is the waiting time after you ask your mentee a question. The average pause time educators take after a question is 0.9 seconds. That is very fast and clearly the mentee has no time to think. Research has shown that pausing for 3-5 seconds shows a noticeable, positive impact on the quality of answers. If we are considering wait time, this also applies to you as the mentor. It is fine for you to wait a few seconds to formulate the question you want to ask. It does not need to be immediate. So, slow down a little for the best responses! (Mary Budd Rowe (1972), Robert Stahl (1994), Dylan Wiliam (2000))

Let's move on to three key areas for constructing great questions to use with your mentee.

1. Be curious rather than giving statements

When we ask questions inspired by genuine curiosity, we want to know the answer, rather than just putting forward our opinion or statement. Interesting to note is the idea of William Isaacs (1999), [A]n estimated forty per cent of all questions that people utter are really statements in disguise. Another forty per cent are really judgment in disguise "p. 49). This approach won't yield authentic responses from your mentee.

An example of the latter might be, "Do you think that cutting devices are really the best tool for the job?" The question carries a good dose of judgment, and the mentee would be clearly thinking, "This tool is not the best one for this job," without considering the reasons.

2. Use open-ended questions that inspire thoughtful answers

An open-ended question invites more than a simple yes-or-no answer. These questions give mentees the chance to explain their thinking, share their experiences, and reflect more deeply on their practice.

Closed questions often lead to short, limited answers. For example, if you ask, "What is the new drill we are using?", the mentee may only give you the drill's name. An open-ended question invites them to think more deeply. For example, "What do you think about the new drill we are using?" gives the mentee a chance to share their observations, experiences and ideas.

Warren Berger (2014) explains that "open questions...tend to encourage creative thinking more than closed yes or no questions." (p.18)

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He suggests that three useful question starters are "Why", "What if" and "How". These types of questions can help mentees think more deeply, explore possibilities and consider different ways of approaching a situation.

For example:

"Why do you think that approach worked well?"

"What if you tried a different way of explaining the task?"

"How could you help students connect this activity to current industry practice?"

Berger also demonstrates that these question starters are at the heart of many well-known inventions such as the microwave oven, Gatorade, Netflix, windshield wipers and the World Wide Web. (Knight, 2016. p 97)

3. Being non-judgemental when we ask questions

If we want our mentees to answer our questions honestly, we need to put on the judgment-free hat. Listening to your mentee's answers without assumptions or prejudging is important. This can be hard to do, as the voices in our heads are often already busy before the mentee has even finished speaking.

Try to be listening in the moment, rather than making a judgement about what you are hearing. Your mentee will quickly learn to tell you what you want to hear if you go down the judgement path.

Useful questions to start your first mentoring session

Getting started in your first session with your mentee can be a little daunting. Here are some conversation starters you might like to consider.

Introduction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is one interesting thing you could share about yourself? • What are the most exciting things about your job? • What have you learnt so far about good teaching? • What is something you are proud of in your teaching? • How can I best help you when we meet?
Reflection
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are 2 things you learned today because of our discussion? • What is an action or change you will try? • What is 1 thing you will remember?

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Additional questions to consider

Why
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why do you think your students enjoy the group discussions? • Why are your students learning under your watch?
What if
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What if you planned some of your group discussions using different types of questions? • What if you observed your colleague teaching the same unit?
How
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you manage the time in your classes? • How do you give your students instructions to ensure they land? (Knight. 2016. p 96)

Questions with a specific focus

Let's investigate some questions with a particular purpose. These types of questions can be used in your mentoring sessions. Consider what you are asking, then select the type of question that best serves that purpose.

Focus questions
Questions to explore ideas
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What current industry practices are your students not yet exposed to? • Which emerging technologies would be well placed in your future lessons? • How might your students benefit from increased exposure to industry professionals? • Where in your program could you incorporate more problem-based or scenario-based learning? • In what ways do you teach communication and teamwork to reflect a mining context?
Questions to focus thinking
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where do you currently get your best industry insights? • How can online programs or videos support skill development outside the workshop? • What impact will autonomous and connected vehicle technologies have on future training? • What knowledge do you see in your students integrating electric vehicles (EVs), hybrids, and alternative fuels into your program?

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Focus questions
Questions to move towards action
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based on our discussion today, what will be your next teaching focus? • What is one thing you will keep doing and one thing you will change in your teaching? • What might you try in the coming week to improve learner engagement? • What is one change you could make that would have a big impact?
Questions to deepen self-awareness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What strengths do you rely on most in your teaching? • If you zoomed out, what would seem less important? • What feedback have you received that surprised you? • What matters most to you in your teaching right now? • If you had to challenge your own thinking, what would you question?

Final reflection

Remember that we all start mentoring for the first time at some point. Do your best, improve each time and reflect on your questions as you go. We need great mentors in the automotive and mining sectors. I wish you success.

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Useful references

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Berger, W. (2014) *A more beautiful question: The power of Inquiry to spark breakthrough ideas*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury USA

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