**How to Craft Exploratory Discussion Questions**

**Technique: Move Beyond Technical Questions**

Technical questions tend to encourage technical solutions. Technical solutions and problem-solving techniques, in general, are not bad processes to implement. It is important, however, to know when to ask technical questions (looking for a specific answer or course of action) and when to ask exploratory questions (looking for deeper meaning, shared understanding, divergent thinking, and a willingness to disrupt the master narrative).

If you think about it terms of the research process, exploratory discussions are most helpful when defining the research problem and framing the research question. This discussion approach could be used within the research team or used when collecting information from research communities.

For example, let’s take the topic of autism. Without guidance, undergraduate research students might approach the topic of autism from a very technical, problem-solving approach. They might craft overly ambitious discussion questions that sink the research team before they even get started, for example:

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| **Technical Discussion Questions**  | **Limitation or shortcoming** |
| What is autism?  | Most student discussants are not experts in cognitive development. This question asks for a level of expertise that may not engage the group; it may lead to debates over technicalities or definitions.  |
| Why is autism on the rise? | Leading question; is it on the rise? Again, asking discussants to speculate on something they have no real knowledge about is unhelpful for team building.  |
| How do we cure autism?  | Assumes autism is a disease in need of curing. Limited understanding of the big picture and limits the discussion.  |
| Is autism caused by vaccines?  | Again, invites speculation. Invites debate over questionable science. Will lead discussion off track.  |

In terms of the research process, technical questions tend to spend less time on framing the topic and invites immediate interpretation of data and speculation on desired interventions. And what is wrong with this? Maybe nothing but oftentimes technical questions/solutions foreclose imagination and imaginative approaches to research. If we spend more time asking questions that get at the culture, context, and history of an issue then we tend to be better situated to interpret the area of concern and better enabled to craft a good research design.

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| **Exploratory Discussion Questions** | **Strength** |
| What do we know about autism? Where does our knowledge come from? | Allows us to reflect on our information flow, assumptions, and epistemologies.  |
| What does our common knowledge about autism reveal about our society’s values? | Allows us to shift the conversation from research subjects in need of fixing or curing and affords the opportunity to explore alternative descriptions of the problem. |
| How might society embrace neurological differences or neuro-diversity? What would be gained by doing so? | Allows us to explore multiple pathways for research and imagine the strengths of each approach that has consequences beyond the specific area of concern. |

**Area of concern: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**I. Big Questions (Shake the Foundation)**

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| **Exploratory Discussion Prompts** | **Rationale. What will this question do or make possible?**  |
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**II. Surround the Topic. Follow-Up Questions.**

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| **Dimensions** | **Question** | **Rationale. What will this question do?** |
| Politic  |  |  |
| Society or Culture |  |  |
| Psychology |  |  |
| Emotions or Feelings |  |  |
| Economy |  |  |
| Ethics or Morals |  |  |
| Spirituality or Religion |  |  |
| Technology |  |  |
| Environment  |  |  |
| Science  |  |  |
| Other:  |  |  |
| Other:  |  |  |
| Other:  |  |  |
| Other:  |  |  |