



## Questioning Strategies

Why ask questions in Forest School? Questions are a vital element of two way communication. However, the strategies leaders take can sometimes end being a one way form of communication that can actually hinder learning, rendering the learners inadequate and hating the learning experience. The questions asked can subtly and 'not so subtly' dictate whether the learning is child centred or teacher/leader centred. This depends whether the leader starts from the learners experience or from the leaders experience.

The line of questioning we are trying to encourage in Forest school leaders is based on the Socratic dialogues which were about exploring what is in the learners mind, using questioning to guide discovery – does the learning, in the end, help the learners make their own meaning of the experience.

**Examples of leader based questions and statements** where you are exploring what is in your mind and not necessarily what is in the learners mind. Many of these questions have specific answers that the leader knows and are almost 'testing' questions but it is 'hit and miss' as to whether the learners know the answer. Often these questions are closed. Many people may use these questions to attempt to engage the group or judge what the learner knows but if they don't know the answer it may well disengage the group as they feel threatened by giving the incorrect answer, feel emotional unsafe and retreat into silence.

Examples;

"Today we are looking at how animals are adapted to feed in different habitats. How are birds are adapted to feeding in the trees?" *response*..... "no", *response* again..... "not quite", *response* again..... "almost I can see what you are getting at", another *response*..... "no did you not look at this back at school", *response* again..... "yes correct answer".

The problem with this sort of questioning and response is the incorrect responses are processed by the students who answered incorrectly as language often cements the learning, as propounded by Vygotsky.

*Other examples of leader based questions;*

What animals do you think we have at Bishops Wood?

How many different types of plants grow here and in what way are they different?  
Anybody know what makes bugs that live in the open water different to those that live in the trees?

Can anybody tell me what habitats we might have here at Bishops Wood?

What is the name of this minibeast?

Can you see that brown bird over there? Can anyone tell me what it is??

What lives in the pond?

**Examples of learner centred questions**, where the leader is starting from the learners knowledge and experience base and pulling them along (not pushing), not assuming anything and taking a more *share and do* approach rather than a *show and tell*. In taking this approach the educator needs to see things through the learners eyes, as if they were looking at this for the first time and almost wiping their experience at the start then sharing that experience as the learners

knowledge grows. This questioning strategy will facilitate learners finding the answers themselves through investigation providing the 'scaffolding'/structure for the learners to 'find out for themselves'.

Examples;

(using concrete observations/first hand contact) Hey take a look at this stump Janes looking at, it looks like a bird dinner table, what can you see Jane.....lets see if we can find out what's been eaten here.

(accessing where information came from- building on children's own knowledge) So you think a beetle might live under the stumps, what is it that helped you come to this idea?

(putting the question into context, previewing a question in advance) If you were a bird and you had to feed on little bugs living inside the bark of this tree, I wonder what tool/special body part you might need? Lets takes a look at where the bugs live before coming up with an answer.

Could anyone share anything they might know about small creatures (no bigger than my finger) that may live in the pond?

Today we are going to look at what animals live in the woods and what they eat, would anyone like to say a little bit about this subject?

What would you like to explore at Forest School today?

(offering extra information and then clarifying ideas to explore further) You know the woodpecker, anyone not seen a woodpecker? Well it is a bird about the same length of my forearm often black and white with a little red colouring, here is a picture and has the most amazing long strong beak. It lives in the woods. I wonder what the beak is used for?.....so you think..... or jane seems to be saying, lets have a look at this a bit more closely. How is our mouth different – lets have a look at our mouths can you see what shape they are? Now look at the woodpeckers mouth how might you describe its shape?.....We could design a menu for you and one for the woodpecker.

This could then develop into imagining the types of food a woodpecker eats as opposed to the child.

## **Other strategies that can be useful at Forest School that reflect/accompany learner centred questioning**

Giving learners time to explore and actively find the answers or to just think about the learning/subject being explored.

Accept their answers even if we disapprove or they are wrong and work with this to help the learner explore the concept/understanding further.

Working with their peers in pairs or as a group.

Don't expect answers!

Know they know the answer

Recap on previous experiences

Set a challenge/question you know they can achieve or find the answer, that accommodates their own learning style, schema, stage of development. Use questions that demand action.

Allow for silence

Allow the learners to question and interpret their own thoughts and feelings.

According to Bloom et al (1956) Questioning Strategies should embrace the following thoughts

Good questions are	Avoid
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Thought-provoking</b> (They stimulate thought and response)</li> <li>• <b>Clear and brief</b> (Stated in as few words as possible in a way that students understand what is meant)</li> <li>• <b>Followed by wait time</b> (At least 5-10 seconds of silence after the question)</li> <li>• <b>Purposeful</b> (Asked to achieve a specific purpose)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Yes-no</b> (“Did you go to the woods today?”)</li> <li>• <b>Vague</b> (Doesn’t give students a clear idea of what is asked for: “Tell me about the wildlife in the woods.”)</li> <li>• <b>Tugging</b> (“Come on, can’t you think of any animals in the woods?”)</li> <li>• <b>Guessing</b> (encourages speculation rather than thought: “How far do you think the badger travels at night?”)</li> </ul>

Bloom proposed various ‘levels’ of questioning;

- **Recall (Cognitive Memory, Factual, Input)**  
Questions used to determine students’ knowledge about factual information. Used to reinforce learning and check on student retention.
- **Comprehension (Convergent, Analysis, Interpretation, Process)**  
Questions used to determine students’ understanding of a subject.
- **Analysis (Divergent, Hypothesis/Prediction, Output)**  
Questions that require students to take their knowledge and apply it to new situations. Use to determine whether students are making generalizations.
- **Evaluation (Evaluative, Critical Analysis, Opinion)**  
Questions used to give students an opportunity to make a value judgment, express opinions, provide criticisms, or raise their own questions. There are no right or wrong answers. Use to get a feel for what students are thinking, how they are balancing their new learning with prior beliefs and values.

BLOOM B S (ed.) (1956) *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, the classification of educational goals – Handbook I: Cognitive Domain* New York: McKay