

Ask Me Anything:

The Power of Questions in Learning

Getting information quickly is the learning method of choice these days. But favoring quick hits over asking questions and putting some effort into figuring out the answers is detrimental for the employee and the company.

BY RANDY EMELO

Netflix viewers spend 60 seconds – 90 seconds for those strong-willed enough to keep scrolling – searching for a movie or television show to watch before giving up and moving on to something else. Just one minute, that's all the time people give to searching for entertainment. Now think about how long people would search for information and answers at work so they could do their jobs. It likely won't be much more than 60 seconds.

We have become an impatient society that expects everything to be available with the click of a mouse or the swipe of a finger. We can become quite indignant when this doesn't happen. Worse, our impatience is inhibiting our ability to learn.

Yes, people can quickly click, swipe and search for an answer — and typically they will scrounge up a suitable answer fairly fast. Unfortunately, when people go and find an answer, they don't actually engage their minds in the learning process. When answers are simply given to people, they don't learn how to solve the problem themselves, what factors to consider, what process to follow, or any other number of actions they might need in the future to solve the problem on their own.

“The process of thinking has a huge impact on the decisions we make,” said Phil Antonelli, senior learning strategist at Xerox Learning Solutions. “Testing truth, evaluating how two plus two gets to four, and the recognition that our answers and ideas are held together by individual or group belief systems—there is a lot going on underneath the surface that we hardly ever consider. Unfortunately, there is so much going on around us that can distract us, and the need to produce results causes us to focus more on the outcome than the process.”

Therein lies the biggest roadblock to learning in the modern era. Meaningful learning occurs when people understand how they arrived at the answer or solution, so they can apply that understanding again in other situations. “The flaws in our thinking only become evident when examining our mistakes, so it is important to take the time to explore the assumptions and emotions that govern our thinking,” Antonelli explained.



In order for meaningful learning to take place, people have to focus on process-oriented conversations and learning activities, rather than just outcome-oriented efforts. Put another way, we have to go beyond just getting the answer and put some effort into figuring out how we came about finding the answer. Learning leaders must create an environment for thoughtful reflection and deep thinking so that people can begin to understand how they go about building and applying new knowledge. One way to accomplish this is to shift attention from outcome-oriented conversations to more process-driven conversations that focus more on asking questions.

Channeling Our Inner Child

One of the most common — and vexing — experiences for any parent with a young child is when the child asks why — incessantly. Just thinking about this type of scenario can bring on an eye twitch, but it actually provides a great example of how children embrace a wonderful curiosity for and openness to learning — something people seem to outgrow as they age.

“It is unfortunate, but in most cases, corporate learning is focused on performance related to business outcomes, rather than the thinking skills that underlie the performance. It is so much easier to observe and measure action than reflection. In most cases, questioning skills are only taught when directly related to the business outcome,” Antonelli said.

Companies that want to foster curiosity in their employees should encourage them to become inquisitive learners. “In collaborative and group learning, often it is not the first question where the most profound learning occurs, but the questions that follow that have a deeper impact, when we probe our answers in greater detail. ‘What does it really mean when we say X? What are the implications of Y?’,” said Donald H. Taylor, chairman of The Learning and Performance Institute.

Asking the right questions can drive action, help to influence others, support more meaningful developmental dialogue, and create more consequential learning activity. Understanding why an idea failed or why a hypothesis proved true can help employees address a similar situation in the future. They will have a broader method with which to attack problems, one they can adapt to different situations they may face.

Experimentation plays a profound role in learning through asking questions. This practice thrives in collaborative learning environments such as mentoring groups, where people can bounce ideas off of one another, share their experiences, and provide guidance to their cohorts. Asking questions in the context-rich environment of social and collaborative learning helps to connect learning and thinking skills, according to

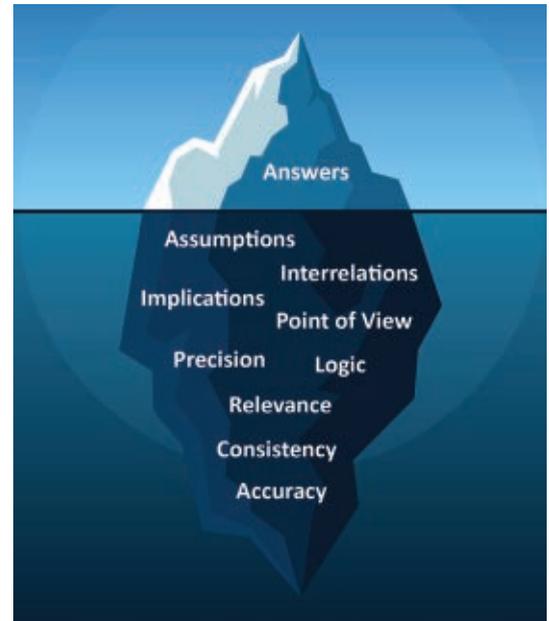


IMAGE COURTESY OF RANDY EMELO

Xerox’s Antonelli.

Questions play a primary part in creating a generative learning environment. Think of it like an iceberg. Answers sit above the surface and account for the little bit of the iceberg that people can see, but underneath the surface is where the bulk of the iceberg — additional insights and skills — sits. Questions drive thinking below the surface and into the biggest part of the iceberg where people gain more complex understanding of the topic or issue at hand (see Figure 1).

Some questions that can help people dive below the surface and into deeper thinking about various topic areas include:

- What are the interrelationships between elements in [fill in the blank with the topic or area being discussed]?
- What core assumptions make up this practice area?
- What are some of the critical implications of applying principles related to this topic?
- What are the various points of view that come into play?
- What are some of the core areas of logic or reason that support this practice or thought area?
- How relevant are these concepts?
- How much consistency, accuracy and precision can be gained from deploying this practice?

Within a collaborative learning or mentoring group, questions play a critical part in leading people to higher levels of thinking. People can begin to move beyond just remembering something they’ve already done or gaining new levels of understanding about a topic. Instead, they can apply new understandings in a practical way, analyze the impact of that application, evaluate the larger implications of the application and

Want Purposeful Learning? Start with a Question

Instructional design isn't a facet of learning and development one would immediately associate with measurement. But when it comes to creating successful programs, it likely should be. Chief Learning Officer spoke with Will Davis, an instructional systems designer for Scitent, an e-learning company based in Virginia. Davis said not only should learning leaders start with measurement in mind, they should ask the right questions to determine what end result they require, essentially what problem are we trying to solve? Only by engaging adult curiosity can one promote active learning.

How do questions form a foundation of learning?

Because "what gets measured gets done." Measurement provides the means to assess success. In designing instructional courses and content, we should begin by establishing our measurement and asking ourselves, "What do I want the learner to be able to do or perform at the end of the course?" This initial questioning is the foundation of all learning. For learning to be purposeful, it must begin with asking the right question.

Which came first, the question or the answer?

Of course, the question. As adults, we consciously seek out information, knowledge or skills to solve problems and to provide the answers to our questions. Questions define our tasks, and answers are the solutions. When we can provide an answer, we consider the problem solved.

It is important to remember this because most on-the-job learning content is either conceptual and/or performance-oriented. However, asking ourselves first not about the concept but rather "What do I know about, or how well can I complete a particular task?" incites the curiosity necessary to learn and remember the answer.

How do we typically formulate questions in e-learning?

Typically, we use pre-assessments to determine what the learner already knows and post-assessments to gauge their growth and the success of the content. These assessments are important; however, the foundational learning via problem solving is absent in this approach. To create really purposeful learning, we must enhance the typical pre- and post-assessments by designing courses around problem solving to promote active learning. Start by designing the content with these questions in mind: "What problem are we try to solve?" and "How will we measure success?"

— Kellye Whitney

analyses that occurred, and create new processes or practices as a result.

Creating the Right Environment

Taylor said the trick to creating this sort of collaborative learning is not so much asking the right questions, but creating the environment in which they can be answered honestly, usefully, and without fear. Real questions and answers — and with them true, deeper learning — come from a workplace where true discussion is valued, individuals are respected, and all are prepared to sacrifice their own opinions to demonstrably better answers. "Those characteristics are what make up a true culture of learning, something essential for any organization today, and something that can only be built from the top of the organization," he explained.

To help set the right environment for collaborative learning, organizational leaders need to demonstrate their openness and be good role models for this type of question-driven learning process. When meeting with a group of learners to begin exploring a new topic area, start by getting everyone to answer the question, "Share a time when you..." This will give everyone a chance to speak and will allow people to share their current common experiences. Afterward, build on that by asking questions like:

- How would you summarize the new things you're hearing?
- What new practices or insights are you gathering from the resources being shared or from the experience of others within the learning group?
- What would result if you applied these new thoughts, practices or concepts?
- What conclusions could you draw from these actions that we've taken?
- What is your opinion of what we've discovered and discussed so far?
- How could you improve this process?
- What new process or practice could you invent that would demonstrate a certain result?

"We learn when someone answers a question we have, such as when an idea or new piece of information fills a latent gap in our understanding," said Taylor. Learning leaders can take advantage of this by using a four-step dialogue model and asking questions at each step to help people reflect, envision, explore, and act.

During the first step, people reflect on what has already occurred to learn lessons from the past. Learning leaders can help spur dialogue in this area by asking:

- What is your current understanding of...?
- What bothers you most about your present situation?

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- What are your current assumptions about...?
- During the second step, people envision what they want the future to look like as a result of their dialogue and collaboration. Questions to ask during this phase include:
- What is the highest result you can hope for?
- What could you accomplish if you had no limitations or restrictions?
- What current trends will likely influence the future of...?
- The third step of the model urges people to explore possibilities, options and solutions. Learning leaders can dig into this area by asking:
- What have others done in similar circumstances that has worked or not worked? Why?
- If you did nothing, what would change regardless? What would get worse?
- What is most important to you or non-

negotiable?

- The last step of the model has people act on a chosen solution or option. To help get people to this point, learning leaders can ask:
 - What are some steps you could take? What should you do first?
 - Can you commit to this course of action? Are you comfortable with it?
 - What elements are controllable versus uncontrollable?
- “Mentoring groups and collaborative learning offer a good opportunity to connect learning and thinking skills, as they encourage dialogue and information exchange while providing a way to teach and learn deeper questioning skills,” Antonelli said. **CLO**

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