

TECHNIQUES FOR OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

Time:
30 minutes

Audience:
new
Learning Fellows

Overview:

There are different ways that teachers can ask questions of their students. Two ways of categorizing questions are “close-ended” and “open-ended.” Many students are familiar with close-ended questions; these are questions to which the answer is definite. There is one, right answer (or very few right answers). Closed-ended questions tend to end conversations. Conversely, open-questions invite many different kinds of answers. They tend to facilitate conversations. Both questions can be powerful tools for teaching and learning.

Learning Objectives:

- Recognize the structure of close-ended and open-ended questions.
- Learn to convert a close-ended question to an open-ended question.
- Practice situations that lend themselves to close-ended or open-ended questions.

Activity:

- Pass out a piece of chocolate to each student and instruct them not to eat it yet. (Any object will do in place of chocolate, or one object may be used for the whole group).
- Ask the Learning Fellows to spend two minutes writing down as many questions as they can about the chocolate. (You can also do this in pairs or small groups.)
- Ask the students how many questions they wrote. Ask them to share some examples.

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Activity adapted from:

“Week 0. LA Orientation - Open and Closed Questions” from the Implementation Guide of the Learning Assistants Program, University of Colorado Boulder.
www.learningassistantsalliance.org



Activity, continued:

- Conduct a skit showing how close-ended questions sometimes operate in class.
Ask students a closed-ended question about the chocolate. After the first few answers (even if they are plausible), just say, “Hmmm...interesting. What else?” After the fourth or fifth answer, say “Yes, yes, that’s exactly right! Did everybody hear that? Great job!”
- Debrief this skit with the Learning Fellows. Ask them what they thought you valued, as the teacher (i.e., you valued the correct answer). Ask them what you could have valued instead (i.e., taking risks, practicing new ideas, showing creativity, etc.).
- Provide a mini-lecture about closed-ended and open-ended questions. Examples of closed-ended and open-ended questions are below. After the lecture, ask the Learning Fellows to label each question they wrote down as either “C” for a closed-ended question or “O” for an open-ended question.
- Ask the Learning Fellows to spend a few minutes converting their closed-ended questions to open-ended questions. Then, ask the Learning Fellows to share some examples of their conversions. **What strategies did they use to convert the questions? What strategies might they use in class?**

Examples of closed-ended and open-ended questions:

Closed-ended questions	Open-ended questions
What is a redox reaction?	What chemical reactions do you observe everyday?
What is the circumference of the earth?	How do you think scientists figured out the circumference of the earth?
Who formulated the theory of evolution?	What similarities do you see in the theories of evolution posited by Alfred Wallace and Charles Darwin?
What is the output of this computer program?	In what situations would you use this computer program?
Are you taking this course to fill a requirement?	Why are you interested in this course?
What’s the next step in this problem?	How would you go about approaching this problem?
Is your group working together?	What are some of the pros and cons you’re experiencing with group work?