

**Excerpted from C. Roland Christensen, David A. Garvin, and Ann Sweet. 1991. *Education for Judgment: The Artistry of Discussion Leadership*. Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School.**

### **Chapter 8. Herman Leonard. “With Open Ears: Listening and the Art of Discussion Teaching”**

“A true discussion is not a question-and-answer session but a connected series of spoken ideas. Listening is the glue that holds together the whole process of questions, answers, and comments.

Developing good listening skills –both your own and your students’ – will release a tremendous potential for creativity and idea development. In the more common one-on-one sequential discussion format, much of the mental energy of the group is unfocused. Good listening directs the power of the participant intellects to the same problem . Just as mental discipline allows an individual to focus energy on thinking through problem alone, effective listening and concentration enable a group to wield its mental energy collectively. Group concentration is difficult to attain, but can be enormously powerful” (145- 146).

The Leonard asserts that we should talk with our classes about the importance of listening before we began discussion process and throughout. Students seem to believe “that their main tasks are to *think* and to *speak*. When students are graded on classroom performance, it is almost always on the basis of what they say. But, if there is to be a true discussion, students will spend most of their time listening actively while others speak, then building on their classmates’ contributions. Explaining the students’ responsibility in this way can help them to understand the importance of listening carefully.” (147).

Leonard suggests using listening exercises:

1. Ask students to rephrase the question after it has been asked.
2. Ask each student to recapitulate the previous speaker’s comment.
3. Require the last speaker to ascertain and agree that the point has been understood before moving on.
4. Ask each speaker to demonstrate understanding of what was said by giving one or more implications.
5. Ask for a short analysis of the point made by the last speaker.
6. In some discussion sessions, require note-taking. Discuss what sort of note taking will be most effective. Ask students to hand in their notes after a discussion.

### **Chapter 9. C. Roland Christensen. “The Discussion Teacher in Action: Questioning, Listening, and Response.”**

“It would be hard to name the more valuable pedagogical accomplishment then the mastery of questioning, listening, and response . . .” (153).

“Mastery of questioning does not begin and end with framing incisive queries about the day’s material. It requires asking the right question of the right student at the right time. By the same

token, true listening involves more than close attention to words: it means trying to grasp the overtones and implications of each participant's contribution with empathy and respect. Response, probably the least understood of the three skills, means taking constructive action – action that benefits each student in the group – based on the understanding that one's listening has produced" (154).

### *Mastery of Questioning Technique*

"On a very fundamental level, questions permit the lecturer or discussion leader to stimulate students to think about and analyze the day's assignment. They also provide means for testing and exploring the validity of students' comments. In discussion classes, however, they have other special properties. They make it possible for the teacher to guide the discussion process along paths that balance the instructor's desire for rigor and thorough coverage of material to the students' need to explore course content freely, in ways meaningful to them" (157).

"To integrate the diverse and sometimes contradictory contributions of the classes of whole, discussion teachers need to move beyond thinking in terms of individual questions. How? By considering patterns of questioning –and this means taking the mental step back to link the question of the instant to upcoming, as well as prior, questions. I have found that patterns do usually emerge when I, as instructor, listen for them. Often, the questions I ponder silently in the heat of discussion give me valuable perspective on the class in progress. I ask myself what the questions of the past few minutes have in common. Are they predominantly informational, analytical, speculative, or something else? What is the emotional tone? As instructors begin to see questions in clusters, we can build a broad frame of inquiry that provides context for contributions to subsequent discussions as well as today's assignment" (157-158).

Questions can influence the intellectual and emotional tone of the dialogue. "For example, the teacher may ask a respondent to refer his or her question to another student in the room – perhaps one who has previously made a point relevant to the question of the moment. Or one might ask to students to give their reactions to a colleague's comment in sequence. The instructor can guide the discussion by specifically asking a speaker to build on the previous comment, by calling for role-playing, or by asking for a devil's advocate rebuttal" (158).

Christensen offers a typology of questions. Refer to pp. 159-160 for examples he gives related to each element of the typology. Develop questions examples more pertinent to your work and context.

#### The Typology

Open-ended questions

Diagnostic questions

Information-seeking questions

Challenge (testing) questions

Action questions

Questions on priority and sequence

Prediction questions

Hypothetical questions  
Questions of extension  
Questions of generalization

“I tend to lower the abstraction level of questions –work with specifics – to increase the personal involvement of participants or emphasize an applied ‘this needs to be done’ line of discussion. Conversely, I tend to raise the abstraction level of questions to encourage students to broaden their perspectives, summarize, generalize, or redirect focus to important areas as yet untouched in this particular discussion” (161).

“Questioning lies at the core of any academic activity, from mastery a field of study to planning a research project to organizing a semester course or a daily teaching plan or working out a relationship with one’s students. . . . To promote a spirit of eager inquiry, the discussion leader should encourage students to question themselves, their peers, the instructor, the organization of the course, and presented facts in general. . . .

A pervasive spirit of inquiry – something far more profound than a predilection for asking numerous questions –can turn the barrenness and ‘endingness’ of answers into the richness and openness of exploring the yet-to-be-known. Answers often simply aren’t! They are merely launching pads for further exploration, places to prepare for the creation of new and more insightful questions. Yet much of our education system reinforces getting the answer as the ultimate goal of learning. Students have so often been trained to memorize and feed answers back to teachers for approval (read ‘grades’). Rarely does an examination ask students to list questions that the course has posed for them. We are, as Paolo Freire noted, working within a pedagogy of answers rather than questions” (163). [Review Rilke’s wonderful comment on page 163 with regard to loving the questions themselves.]

### *Listening*

“The discussion leader needs to listen to each comment with at least two objectives in mind: to gauge the individual student’s command of substantive material and the logic of his or her argument, and to assess the potential contribution of the comment to the group’s continuing dialogue” (164-165).

Christensen continues with further listening guidelines on page 164.

- “I listen for continuity: the relationship of the speaker’s point of the moment to previous and expected dialogue.”
- “I also attempt to gauge the speaker’s involvement.” Detached? Player in the drama?
- Another aspect of dialogue that disciplined listening can detect is certitude of judgment.” Cast in stone? Best current position? “In this context, the instructor can listen for the student’s sensitivity to the strengths and weaknesses of his own presentation.”
- “The instructor can learn a great deal by watching the mechanics of presentation.”
- “Listening to each student and to the whole class simultaneously is artistry of high order. Is the class listening en masse, or, as typically happens, are there pockets of attention and

areas where subgroups appear to have tuned out? What lies on the other side of their silence?”

- “As the dialogue unfolds, I listen not only for the content of students’ comments but for their ability to listen to others and their sensitivity to their own filters. And I try, while listening to others, to listen to my own listening. Where are my barriers? Where do my own firmly held convictions interfere with my understanding?”

### *Response*

“The deceptively simple act of responding to a student’s just stated contribution completes our triad of core skills. . . . This instructor has found responding to be the most demanding of the trio.”

“Many varieties of response are possible. For example, one might ask a further question, restate the speaker’s points, request additional information, or offer a personal analysis.”

To help with the process of response, Christensen offers a three step response regimen (see pp. 167-168).

1. He listens to the student’s comment to “understand and evaluate its academic worth and simultaneously I prepare for what to say and do when the commentary has been complete.” He uses a “decision tree” to help him decide what to say and do: he will either “continue the teacher-to-student discourse or shift to a student-to-student mode.” In teacher-to-student discourse, he can explore the comment (clarifying assumptions, checking quality of analysis, or reasonableness of conclusions); he can extend breadth and depth of comments; he can challenge the comment.

In student-to-student discourse he can turn the question back to the class; re-ask the question or ask a related question; or ask two students to offer two contrasting perspectives.

2. He seeks to discern the effect of the dialogue on the student personally.

3. Christensen offers a number of practical guidelines to move the dialogue forward (see 169-170):

- “I correct, or call into public question, only major errors of fact or judgment, not minor misstatements of content or inconsequential flaws in the logic of an argument. It is an ineffective use of class time to seek perfection in every contribution.”
- “When I do try to clarify a questionable conclusion, I offer the student an immediate opportunity to restate or reformulate his position or conclusion as well as an opportunity to question me.”
- If the student offers, and presents well, a creative comment but one that is far wide of the discussion at hand, he acknowledges the response and says he will return to it later or discuss it after class.

- When the group has missed the importance of a comment he asks the student to restate the comment and suggests to the group that they may not have heard the full import or implications of what was said.
- He minimizes public praise of superior comments in favor of “having her peers recognize that accomplishment through their attentiveness, succeeding questions, and statements of approval.”
- When confronted with an emotional comment, he responds to the affective component first.
- When a previously quiet individual enters the discussion, he most often offers a supportive response.