

Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) suggest that human systems grow in the direction of that about which they persistently ask questions.¹ Questions are powerful tools.² Asked inappropriately they can stifle learning (What is this text saying . . .?). Asked differently they can take persons to higher levels of thinking (How would you assess the position of this author in relation to . . .?). Questions can escalate conflict (Why do you do that?), or point toward resolution (What has brought us to this point and what can we do about it?).³

The Plenary Session:

After three rounds of conversation, the group gathers for a plenary session where the participants share their findings, key insights, and also what the conversations meant to them. At this time the facilitator asks them to identify the most essential findings from the previous conversations. One table begins then other tables are invited to enter the discussion as they have a question or insight that relates. At the end of the plenary session determine if there is one overarching question that can take the group to a deeper level, or identify a researchable task, or a possibility for action.⁴

Follow Up Considerations:

Following the plenary participants imagine an agenda and focus for continued work on the issue. Participants may be asked to share an idea that they intend to take back to their own context. Participants are asked to consider any necessary follow up activities. The following questions may assist this phase of the process: Who else do we need in the conversation? What additional perspectives might bring needed insight? Who would benefit from being part of a continuing conversation? What ideas for research and action have emerged? What steps do we need to clarify here in order for these ideas to develop? What examples should we learn more about? How can we learn more about what they are doing?

¹ See David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney. 2005. *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers; and Diana Whitney and Amanda Trosten-Bloom. 2003. *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry: A Practical Guide to Positive Change*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers

²To improve question construction see such resources as Walter Bateman. 1990. *Open to Question: The Art of Teaching and Learning by Inquiry*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; Norah Morgan and Juliana Saxton. 1991. *Teaching, Questioning and Learning*. Routledge, Chapman, Hall Inc.; Neil Browne and Stuart Keeley. 2001. *Asking the Right Questions: A Guide to Critical Thinking* (sixth edition). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall; Chet Meyers. 1986. *Teaching Students to Think Critically*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; Stephen Brookfield. 1995. *Becoming a Critical Reflective Teacher*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; Jane Vella. 2002. *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach* (revised edition). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; C. Ronald Christensen, David Garvin and Ann Sweet (eds). 1991. *Education for judgment*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

³ Juanita Brown (*The World Café*, 91) tells the story of two different approaches to asking questions in a community development effort: The less dynamic question was “Have you thought about cleaning up the river?” Apart from being in the generally unproductive yes/no form, the question would not take the people to useful thinking that leads to action. In this case, the more useful questions were, “What do you see when you look at the river? How do you feel about the condition of the river? How do you explain the situation with the river to your children?” This approach is more risky for the community development specialist because it leaves open the possibility that the people will see the problem (and hence possible solutions) differently. But, the reality is that it is most often the people who live with the situation who can see the way through the problem more clearly. The advantage of an outsider’s perspective, of course, is when the insider has been blindsided by bias, tradition, or familiarity.

⁴ Brown and Isaacs suggest the following questions as a way to help the group assess the significance, clarity, and worthiness of their 2-3 questions:

What question(s) if explored thoroughly, could provide the breakthrough possibilities we are seeking?

Is the question relevant to the real life or real work of the people who will be exploring it?

Is this a genuine question—a question to which I/we really don’t know the answer?

What assumptions or beliefs are embedded in the way this question is constructed?

Is this question likely to generate hope, imagination, engagement, new thinking, and creative action, or is it likely to increase a focus on past problems and obstacles?

Does this question leave room for new and different questions to be raised as the initial question is explored? (*The World Café*, 93)