

Short guide to...



16 ways to use questioning

QUESTIONING: Eliciting evidence of learning and improvement

Techniques requiring very little preparation or resources:

1: Thinking Questions:

Coaches often resort to questioning as a method of working out what the athletes know and stretching them further. However it's harder to ask the right question than people often assume. The quality, not the quantity, of questions is paramount to the success of this technique. The question needs to achieve two things; one, to cause thinking and two, to provide information to the coach about what to do next. It is often said that open questions are better for causing thinking, however this is a misconception. Closed questions can provoke thinking if they are the right question for the circumstances. For example, does a starboard tack boat always have right of way? or can the tide cause the wind to shift? are both closed questions but would cause most athletes to do some worthwhile thinking in the right circumstances. Statements rather than questions can also be an excellent way of achieving thinking. For example, asking "What's the key thing to do in a windy, windward mark rounding?" invites the athlete to plump for one option. If, instead, the coach makes a statement, such as "Rolling the boat to windward is the key to successful windy, windward mark rounding." should require the athlete to consider if this statement is correct. True or False statement games are good ways of taking this technique further. The amount of time a coach gives the athletes to think following a thinking question or statement is critical, thinking takes time so give them time to think – practice counting to 30 in your head while you wait, if the question or statement is a good one then silence is golden.

2: No hands up: except to ask a question:

If questioning is used in group situations then the coach needs to be very careful that all athletes are engaged in the questioning and are not given opportunities to opt-out. By opting out athletes are essentially widening the performance gap between them and their colleagues – something that is not desirable. A simple method for avoiding opt-out is to adopt the "no hands up: except to ask a question" rule. The coach then chooses athletes at random to answer questions; there are randomization tools available on the Internet and apps for I-Pads and I-Phones that make this appear fairer and add an element of excitement to the process. If an athlete says "I don't know" then don't let them off the hook say "OK, I'll come back to you", try, asking a few others then going back to the one that didn't know and asking their opinion of the answers given or try fun options like phone a friend, 50:50 or ask the audience.

3: Pose-Pause-Pounce-Bounce:

A good question elicits thinking and thinking is difficult, therefore it demands time. Pose a question and then count under your breath, "one, two, three, four, got to wait a little more", before choosing an athlete to answer the question, and then bounce the answer to another athlete "what do you think of that answer?" The deeper the thought processes required to answer the question, then the longer you should wait – see technique 1: Thinking Questions.

4: Think-Pair-Share:

A good question is an opportunity for quality discussion which is usually enhanced further when athletes are given the opportunity to discuss their responses in pairs or small groups before responding to the coach – hence Think-Pair-Share.

5: Evaluative and Interpretive Listening:

Many coaches ask a question and then fall into the trap of evaluating the answer for the response they are expecting – the right answer. If this doesn't come then it is usually followed by "Almost", "Close" or "Nearly". However, coaches that listen carefully to the answer and try to interpret how the athlete is thinking get to the heart of the matter and really understand their athletes. Instead of listening and asking yourself "Did they get it?" try "What can I learn about the athlete's thinking by listening carefully to what they say?"

6: Discussion Questions and Diagnostic Questions:

Coaches can consider what type of question to ask based on whether they want to hold a discussion or to assess the level of understanding. A discussion question often doesn't have a right or wrong answer but a number of choices and should therefore evoke a good discussion or debate; see technique 14: ABCD Cards for an example of a discussion question. Clearly time is a factor and discussion questions need time planned in for the discussion – otherwise what's the point in asking them? A discussion question does not however give the coach a good indication of understanding as there is no right or wrong answer, whereas, a diagnostic question is designed to assess understanding and therefore generally has a right or wrong answer. Diagnostic questions are great for a quick check-in during a session to see where the athlete is at and whether the next part of the session needs amending accordingly. However there is a caveat with diagnostic questions. It is entirely possible for the athlete to answer the question correctly but not understand why that is the correct answer. For example the coach asks "If we have a parallel shoreline on the left of the race course in the northern hemisphere, does the wind typically increase or decrease along the shoreline?" athlete answers correctly 'Increase.' But the coach doesn't actually know if the athlete just took a 50:50 chance or really knows why this is the case. Therefore, time permitting, the coach should follow this question with "Why?" If the athlete then answers with something like 'Because the water is shallower here.' Then they know they are not ready to move on.

7: Hot-Seat Questioning:

Instead of asking an athlete one question then moving on to another athlete, which tends to lead to a flat discussion, use the Hot-Seat method to create a deeper discussion. Ask an athlete a question, then follow up with a series of probing questions. If you feel the others are getting off lightly then ask them to summarise what has been said. Used in the right way this method will give the group a far more in-depth conversation and the coach a better understanding of what the athletes know and think.

8: Poker Face:

A fundamental element of effective questioning in group situations is a high participation rate. If the coach asks a question, and invites a response, before moving to the next question then participation is very low and there is no way of knowing if the others in the group understand or are even listening. Some of the techniques in this section of the guide fall into the bracket of having a high participation rate and are marked '(All Athlete Response)'. Poker Face is a skill that can be applied to any group questioning technique. When using Poker Face, get a number of answers to your question, ideally from every athlete, time permitting. As each athlete answers the question then do not evaluate their answer in any way and certainly don't smile if they have the right answer – it takes more practice than most people give credit to, as these photos suggest:



Once all the questions are in then either give the correct answer/your opinion or host a discussion with the group where they debate the answers before coming to a group consensus, then give them feedback on the answer they reached.

9: Thinking Thumbs (All Athlete Response):

Asking one question per athlete it can become very time consuming and momentum can easily be lost. A simple solution is to use an All-Athlete Response system such as Thinking Thumbs where the coach asks a question of the whole group and gets responses from everyone at once. Thinking Thumbs is simple;

- Pointing up = Confident
- Horizontal = Not sure
- Down = Still confused

The major problem with this is that it is a self-reporting technique and research has found these to be very unreliable. To counter-act this problem the question needs to be changed slightly. Simply make sure that the question being asked is cognitive rather than affective – in other words, asking about thinking not feeling. For example, a coach gives the athletes a rules scenario and invites athletes to decide who is right and who is wrong in the situation. The coach then asks the group "Is this correct?" and every athlete responds using Thinking

Thumbs. The coach gets instant feedback on who does and doesn't understand the rule, keeps everyone involved and knows whether to move on or keep going.

10: Fist to Five (All Athlete Response):

This is basically the same as technique 9: Thinking Thumbs, except that the athletes hold up a fist to equal zero or the appropriate number of fingers to represent their confidence level.

11: Corners (All Athlete Response):

This is an adaptation of technique 14: ABCD Cards where instead of issuing cards with ABCD on, the coach nominates each corner of the room to represent ABCD. The coach asks the question and athletes stand in the corner that represents their decision/response. This then allows the coach to steer a debate across the room where the opposing corners debate why they are correct. If an athlete wants to or tries to move corners then this should be celebrated as an indication that the athletes have learnt something through discussion with peers.

12: End-of-Session Questions:

It is quite common for a coach to reach the end of a session and ask "Any questions?" Of course, few athletes are willing to ask meaningful questions for the fear of looking foolish in front of their peers. To overcome this, the coach can say, "In your groups, decide if you have any questions." Just the chance to talk through the matter with their peers can make athletes more confident about asking questions in front of the group – after all, if no one in the group has a solution, then it's clearly not a dumb question. Some coaches have taken this a step further and insist that each group comes up with at least one question. The coach then quickly gathers all the questions and deals with the answers at the same time, sometimes getting the other athletes in the group to answer the questions. Gathering all the questions before answering them is particularly useful because it allows the coach to make connections between different issues that athletes may not realise are connected.

13: Bridging:

Reuven Feuerstein is a cognitive psychologist, renowned for his theory of intelligence which states "it is not 'fixed', but rather modifiable". He developed 'Bridging' as a central plank of his learning methodology and is considered one of the most effective techniques known. Feuerstein thought that the main reason athletes didn't learn or develop skills was that their brains are so swamped by the immediacy of the experience that they fail to abstract general principles from the experience. So if an athlete has just completed a drill or an exercise, their focus both during and in reviewing it afterwards is the detailed facts about the drill or exercise. This focus on the detail of immediate experience, and on the outcome rather than the process, obscures the general principles of how to improve performance. The focus needs to shift from outcome to process. To achieve this Bridging takes place after the athlete has completed a drill or exercise **successfully**. The coach asks two questions, which Feuerstein called 'killer questions':

1. 'How did you do that?' is used to focus the athlete's attention on the process used to achieve the success. That is the strategies, skills and general principles they used.
2. 'Where else could you use this process?' Subsequent discussion encourages the athlete to see the widest possible application of these skills. The discussion ends with the athlete committing to improving their use of the skills in a future task.

This technique can be used to good effect in tactics and strategy training by refocusing on general rules and MET principles following a specific drill or exercise, i.e. "where else can we use this rule or MET knowledge?", and with boat handling training as many boat handling skills use common principles in their process such as heel, trim and flow.

Techniques requiring resources such as video or handouts and a bit more preparation:

14: ABCD Cards (All Athlete Response):

An issue with Thinking Thumbs or Fist to Five is that they only work with single response questions. With ABCD Cards the coach can ask questions where there is more than one correct answer or where there is no correct answer, just opinions. For example, a coach gives the group a typical strategic scenario, say the tide favours going right on the beat with a port biased line and 4 options for executing the scenario, say A: start at the committee boat on starboard tack, B: start at the pin on port tack, C: start above the port group on starboard tack or D: start at the pin on starboard tack. The athletes consider their response and then reveal their decision, using ABCD Cards. This then evokes a discussion as to which option is best and why. The coach should steer the discussion so that athletes are drawn into justifying why they chose that option, before the coach gives their opinion. Some coaches now use A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, and T for up to 9 responses, and to cover true and false answers. Another use of ABCD Cards is to link one session into the next. For example, towards the end of a session, perhaps at the Review part, the coach asks 6 questions, 4 of which are linked to the topic/focus of the session and 2 about the topic/focus of the next session. As the athletes respond, the coach can be pleased that most of them get the first 4 questions right. Then most get the next 2 questions wrong, indicating that the topic/focus for the next session is appropriate. A major difficulty with ABCD Cards is that they generally require questions to be planned ahead of time and are less useful for spontaneous discussion, which is where Mini Whiteboards come in, see technique 15.

15: Mini Whiteboards (All Athlete Response):

Mini Whiteboards aren't a new invention, just a reincarnation of the slates used in the 19th century, hands up who remembers those! Whiteboards are a powerful tool that allow coaches to quickly frame a question and get an answer from the whole group.

16: Exit Passes (All Athlete Response):

When questions require longer responses the coach can ask a question, to which the athletes write their response on a card and hand it to the coach on leaving the session (works well when there is a natural break in the session). The coach can then read the response to gauge their understanding, where to go next or just to group them differently when they return.

Questioning and the Coaching Process (PLAN-DO-REVIEW):

Plan-Do-Review provides an excellent framework or process for coaches and athletes to follow when planning sessions and working together to improve performance, and is now well known amongst coaches. However, its limitations are exactly this, it's only a framework, and doesn't give much guidance to what needs to be achieved. The aim of this guide is to give coaches techniques that they can use for questioning.

	PLAN	DO	REVIEW
Coach	Clarifying and sharing challenging goals and criteria for success	Eliciting evidence of learning and improvement	Providing feedback that moves performance forward
Peer	Understanding and sharing challenging goals and criteria for success	Activating athletes as instructional resources for one another	
Athlete	Understanding and accepting challenging goals and criteria for success	Activating athletes as the owners of their own learning	

Figure 1

QUESTIONING: In more detail:

Setting challenging goals has one of the biggest effects on learning, and is the first step in the direction of improved performance. They do have limitations however, they are only ambitions, powerful at that, but limited by the realities of human nature, if you could give athletes a set of exercises and they follow them leading to improved performance, life would be simple! It is for this very reason that we don't coach sailing, we coach people.

As athletes are working towards achieving their goals, the coaches' attention shifts to working out where the athletes are at in that journey and making decisions as to whether it is going to plan or if adjustments need to be made. Clearly the athlete has a responsibility here too, and the techniques described require the athlete to think and feedback where they are at with their learning and to avoid passive learning situations, where the coach attempts to do all the learning! Coaches don't create learning, athletes create learning, and the skill of the coach is working with the athlete to find the best environment in which the athlete can attempt that learning. Put this way it does seem obvious, the athlete does the learning and the coach does the coaching. However, thinking that this is the **end point** rather than a **means to an end** is a trap many coaches fall into.

Some coaches work with their athletes to set up a session, the athletes start training and then the coach goes into a passive mode, sort of hanging around hoping learning will take place! The coach becomes a 'facilitator', a word that has become increasingly more common in coaching circles over recent years, where they are just running the session and athletes are doing all the work. The solution is, there needs to be a **balance** in the workload. This workload is best viewed as a spectrum where facilitation is one extreme and complete 'coach led' learning is at the other end. Teachers have a joke that sums this style up "schools are places where children go to watch teachers work". If you are more tired at the end of a session than your athletes then the balance of work has tilted the wrong way. Coaches need to reflect on their coaching so that they can work out where they sit on the spectrum, hopefully not at either end.

Eliciting evidence of learning and improvement is often, but not exclusively, done through questioning and observation. Coaches and athletes often spend considerable time planning sessions but rarely plan in detail how they are going to find out where they are in their learning. The guidance given supports the coach with practical techniques that make a good question, that is;

1. it causes thinking or a focus of attention
2. it gives feedback

This then puts the coach and athlete in a more informed place to make the decisions about what to do next – carry on or adapt the plan. Once the coach knows where athletes are in their learning, they are in a position to provide feedback to the athletes about what to do next – see Figure 1 and a Short guide to Feedback.

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