

Using the PEAR Approach to Develop Stronger Discussion Questions

Many faculty have either sent students home with discussion questions to prepare for a future class period or posted discussion questions online only to receive answers that miss the mark or don't elicit quite the response that was desired. Thanks to Jim Berger at WKU, I have learned a better way to write discussion questions that not only uses a "pilot tested" process for development but that also leads to stronger, more reflective questions that help my students to connect with course content.

When developing questions for students, most of us tend to simply write the questions that we think will gain us the answer we want and hope that students will dig deeper. The problem is that many students won't do anything more than a question asks them to do: asking them to "list" gets us bullet points, or asking them to "describe" may only gain a sentence when we wanted a paragraph. The PEAR approach to develop better discussion questions encourages critical thinking skills and more in-depth answers. What is the PEAR approach?

- **Personal** – having a personal connection
- **Experiential** – related to their experience (feelings)
- **Active** – they must do something
- **Reflective** – and think about how it impacted them

The PEAR approach responds to Kolb's experiential learning style theory and helps students to better process and retain information via a four stage learning cycle (McLeod, 2013). PEAR questions ask students to analyze the concepts in the readings and make connections between theory or practice and their personal lives and can have students experiment with the ideas in the readings, share what they would have done differently as a result of their reflections in light of their new knowledge, or argue the opposite of a classmate's position.

Throughout this course, we have practiced varying skills that lead to the creation of a successful research project. First, list three types of writing we have covered this term, and then argue how each one will or will not be beneficial to you in your future career and everyday life.

Good PEAR questions utilize action verbs that can be mapped to a skill level on Bloom's taxonomy (see Resources for a good listing of such verbs), too, and are developed using a careful and deliberate process:

1. *Identify what needs to be learned.*
2. *Develop a question that assesses that knowledge using the PEAR approach.*
3. *Administer the question to small group of students or colleagues.* This step is often skipped, but this "peer review" or "piloting" often yields good feedback that can be used to more precisely shape the question. If your department has graduate students or student workers, they can be your best hope for this "test run," as they are more likely to answer as your students will, unlike your colleagues.

4. *Analyze the results and make modifications.* Note here that if #3 does not gain you the answers or types of answers you wanted to your question from most of your test subjects, this is a sign that you're not asking what you think you might be asking. You may even want to repeat 3 and 4 a couple of times before moving to 5.
5. *Give question to students.* Don't be shy about asking students how they would have refined the question once they've answered it. This gives you a chance to hear how they think and gives them a chance to feel greater investment in the course (which leads to better course evaluations!).
6. *Analyze the results to determine if material was learned.*
7. *Make modifications for next time.*
8. *Repeat as needed to refine the question.*

In a face-to-face course, you can send your students home with PEAR questions to write out their answers and bring to class. These can be used as jump starters for a traditional discussion or as part of a "silent discussion" where students are paired or put in small groups to exchange papers and respond to one another's (and subsequent) answers before coming back together as a class for a fuller discussion. In an online course, PEAR questions should yield richer, more meaningful discussions on the discussion boards, in blogs, or however you choose to use them.

Resources:

249 Bloom's taxonomy verbs for critical thinking. (2013). Retrieved from

<http://www.teachthought.com/learning/249-blooms-taxonomy-verbs-for-critical-thinking>

McLeod, S. (2013). Kolb – learning styles. Retrieved from <http://www.simplypsychology.org/learning-kolb.html>

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