

Questioning Techniques

In the fall training, the importance of creating rapport and trust in the mentor relationship is covered in detail. Rapport can be built through listening and attending to the other person. For the mentor, one way to establish rapport is to paraphrase the concerns of the new teachers as Lisa did. This validates the concern and ensures that the issues have been communicated clearly. Like rapport, trust is built up over time between the new teacher and the mentor. Trust can be built through confidentiality, mutual interest, respect, withholding judgment, and accepting. Trust and rapport allow for open and honest communication. It is in this environment that the reflective questions can be asked.

Reflective questions are open-ended, promote a nonjudgmental process, and encourage self-directed learning and problem solving on the part of the new teacher. Here are some ways to begin a reflective question:

- What's another way you might...?
- What might you see happening in your classroom if...?
- What options might you consider when...?
- How was...different from or similar to...?
- What criteria do you use to...?

The TxBESS program provides tips when asking questions.

1. Have a specific intention for the question. The mentor should have an idea of where the questioning is headed to guide the new teacher effectively.
2. Use the context to shape the question. Focus on the situation at hand. Many times the intern has a specific issue, so stick to the issue. If there are areas of teaching the mentor wants to elaborate on, it is best if he/she applies those ideas through questioning to the conversation.
3. Use exploratory language. Basically, the mentor and intern are involved in an exploration of ideas. There is no right or wrong answer in the coaching conversation. There are only different possibilities for approaching classroom situations. The conversation is designed to help the intern generate possibilities to test and explore in the classroom.
4. Use introductory language. The mentor should refer to the list of reflective stems as a resource for generating reflective questions. Below are different question stems to achieve different thinking and reflective responses from the intern.
5. Use plural nouns. Using plural nouns helps the new teacher generalize about situations, rather than being limited to one specific situation or occurrence. For example, if a teacher has a concern about a student who sleeps in class, he might say, "Johnny sleeps all the time." The mentor might ask, "What are some of the procedures you have in place to deal with sleeping **students**?"
6. Eliminate "Why?" These questions tend to put the new teacher on the defensive by forcing them to justify themselves. Despite the best intentions of the mentor, "why" questions eventually lead to judgments and evaluation that can damage the trust and rapport built in the mentor relationship.
7. Avoid these stems: Do you...? Will you...? Can you...? Have you...? are questionable in the coaching conversation. They do not assist new teachers in developing their own solutions.

Examples of Reflection Conversations

Beginning Teachers will:

- **Summarize their impressions of the lesson.**

“As you reflect back on the lesson, how do you feel it went?”

“As you recall the lesson, how did it go?”

“As you review your reflection form and recall the lesson from that day, what are your impressions about it?”

- **Share data supporting their impressions.**

“What did you see students doing/hear them saying that made you feel that way?”

“What specifically comes to mind that support those impressions?”

“What do you recall about your own thoughts (behaviors) during the lesson?”

- **Compare planned with performed teaching decisions and student learning.**

“How did what you observed compare with what you had planned?”

“As you think about your goals for the lesson and what happened, what do you notice?”

“As you consider your intentions for what students would learn and compare them to your assessment of student learning that day, what do you recall?”

- **Analyze, infer, see cause and effect relationships.**

“What did you do to produce the results you wanted?”

“What were you aware of that students were doing that signaled you to continue with (or change) the format of the lesson?”

“What hunches do you have to explain why some students performed as you had hoped while others did not?”

- **Evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies.**

“As you recall the strategies you employed to teach the lesson, how effective were they?”

- **Describe the construction of new learning.**

“As you continue to reflect on the lesson, what big ideas or insights are you discovering?”

“As a result of this teaching experience, what are new applications and concepts?”

“As you plan for future lessons, what ideas have you developed that might be carried forth to the next lesson or lessons?”

- **Identify additional factors that might enhance the success of the lesson.**

“As you consider teaching this lesson again, what might you change to increase the impact on student learning (enhance the success of the lesson)?”

- **Identify means of support that your mentor might provide.**

“As you identify professional goals for yourself, how might your mentor support you?”

“As you consider ways your mentor might provide support for you in the future, what occurs to you?”

Shared Conversations Guidelines

Many beginning teachers come to a school campus with little background knowledge of the culture of the school and the underlying methods or rules for behavior in the profession. In most cases, the beginning teachers gather information through observation of the implicit behaviors of their peers and through trial and error. Research has shown that conversations with a mentor about specific topics reduce anxiety and stress for new teachers. With so many demands on the new teacher, the mentor becomes a guide and valuable source of knowledge.

As part of the Austin Community College's Teacher Induction Program, mentors will be expected to share their knowledge and guidance with the teaching interns. New teachers, especially at the beginning of school, sometimes feel overwhelmed by too much information at once. They need pertinent information at the right moment. To facilitate these conversations, see below the list of topics with specific questions for the mentor to use.

Shared Conversations with Interns

The first-year teacher has many needs ranging from where the bathrooms are located in the building to how to setup the classroom or dealing with parents. Sandra Odell reported that many beginning teachers feel they need help in these categories:

- Ideas about instruction
- Personal and emotional support
- Advice on locating and accessing materials and resources
- Information on school and district procedures
- Additional techniques for management of the classroom

The mentor can assist the new teacher is answering critical questions and brainstorming ways to teach and handle children in the classroom. However, the way in which a mentor helps the new teacher can have a tremendous effect on how the new teacher sees him/herself and on the development of their relationship. Conversations that occur between the mentor and the beginning teacher that are one-sided do not promote a healthy relationship based on mutual sharing and growth. Instead, mentoring is beneficial to both individuals involved.

The Voices of Mentoring

Many issues related to mentoring and coaching address the role of the coaching conversation as opposed to other types of dialog that might occur in the mentor relationship. The TxBESS program has identified five different roles that the mentor plays in the relationship with the beginning teacher.

Parent Expert Friend Boss Coach

Each role contains a certain method or "voice" in the conversation with a new teacher. Suppose, for example, a new sixth-grade teacher Elena walks into her mentor's classroom at the end of the day on a Friday afternoon. "I can't believe how hard it is to get them to settle down at the end of the day before the bell rings. I tell them to sit down and be quiet, but no one pays attention." Her mentor, Lisa, can respond in a variety of ways, depending on which role she takes at this time. She might say, "Well, you just tell them to be quiet and you give out detentions to those who can't keep their little mouths shut." Here she has taken the role/voice of the Boss. Or she might say, "Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that. Why don't we go to happy hour? After all, it is Friday." Here Lisa has taken the role/voice of the Friend. The role that the mentor takes can have a great impact on the development and growth of the mentoring relationship. Consider the following voices and their possible impact for this situation.

Role/Voice	Statement	Impact on Teaching
Parent	"I'm sorry to hear that. Are you getting enough sleep? You might need to rest up this weekend."	Although the parent voice may be smoothing to the new teacher, it does not really allow the new teacher to develop needed classroom skills.
Expert	"Well, establishing procedures and routines at the end of the day very important. I have some that really work for me. For example, I let the children leave the room one row at a time, based on how quiet and ready each row is..."	The expert voice provides a good reference point for the new teacher; however, it promotes one-sided conversations. Here the mentor becomes responsible for developing the classroom skills of the new teacher instead of fostering reflective, problem-solving skills.
Friend	"Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that. Why don't we go to happy hour? After all, it is Friday."	This is great for having a good time but doesn't necessarily address the developing need for classroom skills.
Boss	"Well, you just tell them to be quiet and you give out detentions to those who can't keep their little mouths shut."	Very few people like to be bossed around. The boss voice is the least supportive voices and may lead to a breakdown in rapport and trust.
Coach	"Let me see. You're having trouble getting them to settle down at the end of class. What procedures and routines have you tried so far at the end of class?"	The coach voice is designed to get new teachers thinking for themselves about what they can do. The purpose of the coaching voice is to have the new teachers generate their own problem-solving. It supports reflective conversations and future independence of the teacher.

What It Means to Be "Coachable"

Being "coachable" is a quality that does not develop overnight for many new teachers. Instead, a new teacher may be very upset about an incident that just happened in the room and will not be ready or willing to engage in a coaching conversation. Sometimes the new teacher becomes impatient and enters into the conversation with a "just-tell-me-what-to-do" attitude. Although conversations that use the other roles/voices can offer a quick-fix or console the new teacher, which might be necessary at the time, they are less effective for improving the teaching.

A person who is "coachable" comes to the conversation with an open-mind and readiness to explore the various possibilities. Below are the qualities of a beginning teacher who is ready to be coached.

- The beginning teacher is calm, relaxed, at ease.
- The beginning teacher is willing to explore new ideas.
- The beginning teacher has committed the time necessary to have a coaching conversation.
- The beginning teacher has an issue or area in teaching that he/she wants to improve.
- The beginning teacher has established a trusting relationship with the mentor.

If a first-year teacher storms into the mentor's classroom in a rage about what a student has done in the class, the mentor might assume the role of friend until the teacher has calmed down. Later the mentor might adopt the role of the coach.

Only through a quality relationship, built on trust and rapport, can a mentor determine which role/voice to use to best assist the new teacher.