

Many teachers avoid using closed questions in the classroom, for the simple reason that they inhibit discussion and restrict higher-order thinking ... or do they? **Peter Worley** introduces a simple technique which he hopes will rehabilitate the closed question and help stimulate powerful enquiries.



When asked what kind of question is best for engendering enquiry among a group of people, the usual response is 'an open question'. When asked 'why?' most will say something to the effect that it invites the speaker to say more on the topic.

The closed question is the most commonly used type of question however, and teachers are told that by asking more closed questions than open ones, they can stifle good discussions and enquiry opportunities, impacting on their students' learning. Look at a random selection of internet resources about questioning, and you'll find the general consensus is that (following Bloom's taxonomy) higher-order thinking results from open questions, and lower-order, information-based thinking results from closed questions.

But there is a good reason why teachers ask many closed questions – closed questions pinpoint responses to a specific area. So, if you ask 'What is the capital of France?' the task for the student is specific, whereas if you ask 'What can you tell me about the capital of France?' it is not. Which question is better is

entirely dependent on the context. If you specifically want or need to know that the student knows the name of the capital of France then the first is better, but if you are testing the student's general knowledge of the capital of France, then the second might be better.

It so happens that the majority of questions a teacher asks require a specific response to a specific area and so the closed question is best.

A rich and successful discussion

As part of my job, I conduct philosophy sessions with classes of children and adults. After having engaged teachers in a philosophical enquiry, I always ask them what kind of question did I, the majority of the time, ask – open or closed?

Most people quickly say 'open'. When asked why, it turns out that they assume that the questions must have been open because they had a successful and rich discussion and, as I mentioned above, it is thought that only open questions can produce such results. They are often surprised when I tell them that actually most (and in some cases, all) of the questions I asked were closed.

Below are examples of questions I asked during a discussion with teachers I ran at a conference in Antwerp recently. They have been chosen randomly.

1. 'So, is what you said dependent on J's point – that we don't know whether it is true or not?'
2. 'Would you turn the page?'
3. 'If you turned the page, what would you expect to find?'
4. 'If you turned the page and [the book] was written to the end, then would this mean that you know whether it is true or not?'

All of the above – except for number three – are closed questions and require a yes or no response. Even number three, the only technically open question, may be answered with a one-word response such as 'nothing'.

So why didn't the enquiry in which these questions were asked dry up or simply consist of yeses, noes and other one-word answers? One reason comes from the group members themselves. If they have a reason for what they said, then they will often, quite unprompted, add a 'because' after their one-word answer – 'Would you turn the page?' 'No, because life would hold no surprises anymore and...'

However, one cannot expect this alone to circumvent the problem of enquiries drying up, especially with young children who are used to answering closed questions with one word. Yet teachers who observe my sessions with children also witness rich and self-sustaining discussions, so what do I do to ensure that this occurs despite the fact that I ask mainly closed questions?

The enemy of a good enquiry

Before I answer this, I would like to put it to you that, not only is it acceptable to use closed questions when running enquiries with groups of people, it is to be preferred and – perhaps more controversially – I think that open questions can be the enemy of a good enquiry. Let me explain what I mean through an example.

The context for this particular discussion with some Year 4 children was a story about a little girl whose birthday it is. She is ten and ten is her favourite number, so she has decided that she wants to try to find a 'real number ten

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so she can keep it for herself forever'. All she has to do is find one. The issue being introduced through this story is the nature of numbers or, in question form, 'What is a number?'. The question that we are discussing is 'Where can she find a real number ten?' One child begins the enquiry by saying, 'All she has to do is find the first ever number ten written down.'

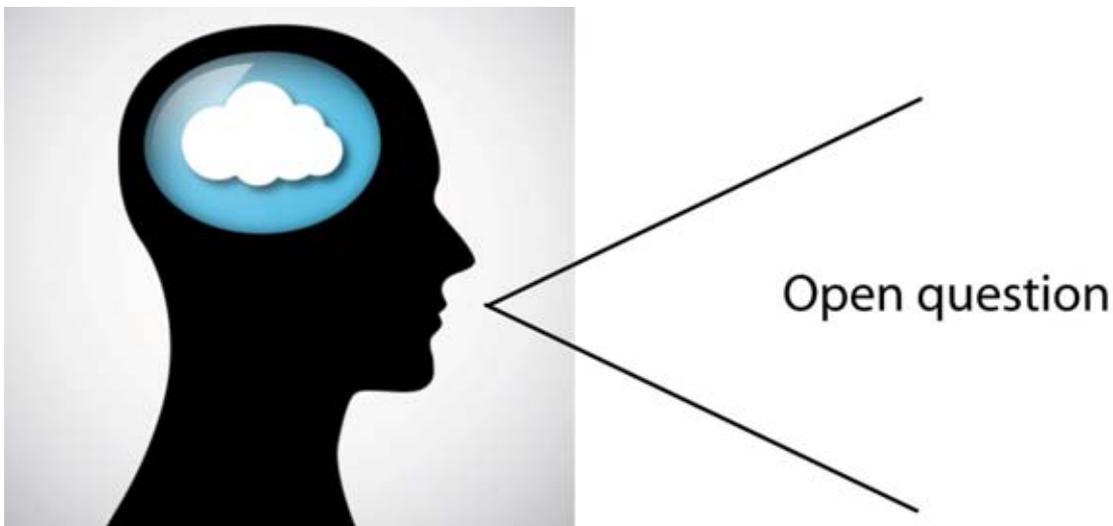
I often give this example to teachers during training on questioning and then I stop here and ask them, 'What would your next question be?' Very often teachers think that it has to be an open question because it is an enquiry. Here is a typical example of the sort of question suggested – 'How would you go about doing that?' This, of course, is an open question. Before reading on, I would like to ask you what you think about this question, can you see any possible problems with this question, in terms of progressing the enquiry? Just take a moment to consider.

Let me give you a plausible pupil's response, exaggerated to make a point. 'I would make a packed lunch, then I would tell my parents where I'm going – because you must never go somewhere without telling an adult - then I would...'. You can see where this is going. The focus of the discussion has been entirely lost and even if the pupil does return to the point, the discussion is in danger of being hijacked by other concerns such as whether you should tell your parents where you're going or even what to put in a sandwich!

Anyone who has tried to run an enquiry using only open questions will instantly recognise the problem I'm describing. Open questions are far too wide and therefore a discussion that consists of them is in constant danger of losing focus. This is fine if there is no particular objective for the discussion, but in most cases where an enquiry would be helpful, there is an objective. Therefore, when there is an objective, open questions become 'the enemy of a good enquiry'.

This wideness can be shown with a simple diagram:

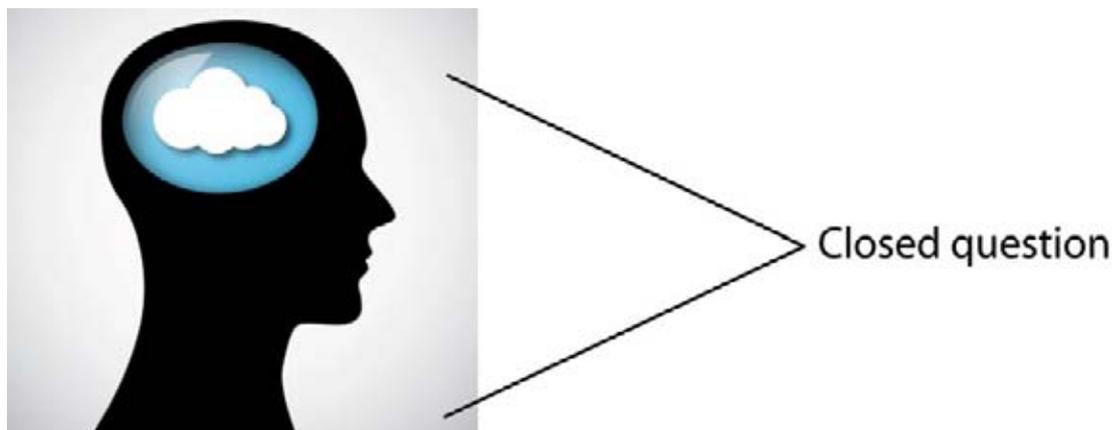
Figure 1: The open question



The question that I recommend on the training courses to follow the pupil's point about the first ever number ten is as follows:

'So let's imagine that we search the whole world until we have found the first ever number ten written down like that [pointing to the one on the board: '10'], have we found a real number ten?'

You will notice that the above is a closed question and for this reason, maintains the focus the open question lost. This can be represented as follows:

Figure 2: The closed question

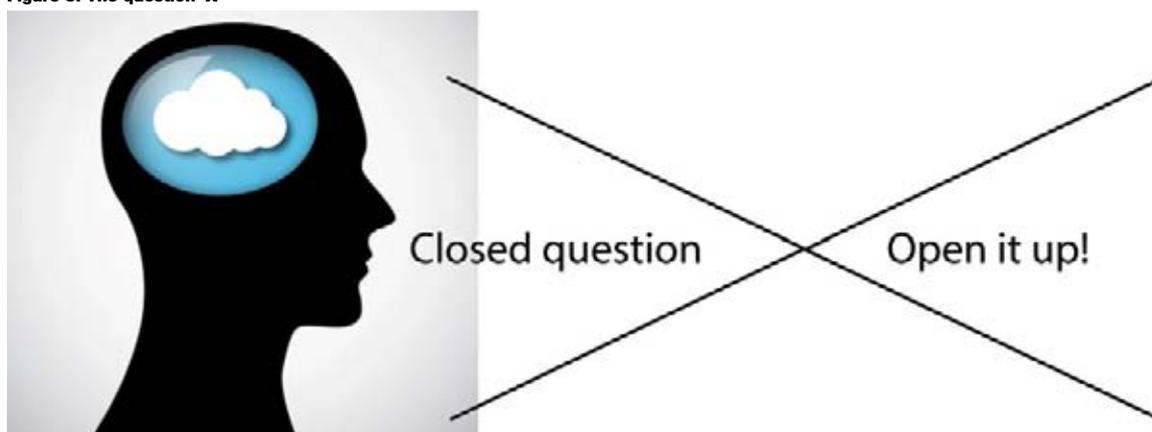
Opening it back up

However, when asked a question like the one above, a child is likely to answer with a simple yes or no. So now I can return to what to do to combat this.

For the purpose of the argument, let's say the child says 'Yes'. My recommendation is simple – so simple that it will seem not worth pointing out – but when we at The Philosophy Foundation observe people running enquiries, it is one of the most common oversights... Drum roll please!

If you have not guessed already, the strategy simply requires that you say 'Why?', or words to that effect such as 'Can you tell me what reasons you have for that?'. I call this manoeuvre 'opening up', because it opens up a closed question and invites the speaker to say much more than a one-word answer, while maintaining the focus of the closed question. This solves the problems that both types of question pose, or should I say, it gives you the best of both worlds – the focus of a closed question but the rich content of an open question.

So, the shape of this questioning strategy is:

Figure 3: The question 'X'

I call this the question 'X'. It also captures the idea that both types of question are crossed to create a new and useful questioning approach.

There are a number of different ways that a question can be opened up. You can ask for:

- Clarification ('What do you mean by that?')
- Explanation ('Can you explain what you mean?')
- Elicitation ('Can you say more about that?')



- Justification ('Why?' or 'What reasons do you have for that?')
- An example to illustrate their point.

With groups that I have been working with for some time and who are familiar with me and my methods, I simply circle my hands round each other (sometimes accompanied by the minimal prompt 'go on' or 'because...?') to indicate to the speaker to say more. This leaves it to them to decide what kind of response they give and means the facilitator only needs to be more specific if necessary. All of these are examples of opening up a question.

So, you no longer need to stop using closed questions, you simply need to make sure (and this is the bit that is so easily forgotten) that you open them up again!

One final point of clarification. There is an important distinction between an enquiry needing to be had around an open question and an enquiry needing to consist only of open questions. It is the latter claim that I think is wrong but that, often, people conflate the two.

So, if we return to the girl looking for a number, the overall question being addressed in this enquiry is 'What is a number?' - which is, of course, open. This kind of question (of the form 'What is X?') is known as a Socratic question and is marked by the quality of being open. However, my recommendation is that the questions that the teacher/facilitator uses at any one time during this broad enquiry will not always – and in fact not usually – be open, but closed. This distinction helps to show where and how the common misconception that one must always use open questions for an enquiry comes from.

Peter Worley is CEO and co-founder of The Philosophy Foundation. For more information on their work, visit their website www.philosophy-foundation.org.

Knowledge trails

1. **How do you measure the height of a pyramid?** – In true Socrates style, Peter Worley uses questions to help his students discover the answers for themselves.
library.teachingtimes.com/articles/ctl_2_1_how_do_you_measure_the_height_of_pyramids
2. **What can university philosophy learn from primary philosophy?** – Peter Worley looks at the presentation of information, the role of dialogue and assessment in the teaching of philosophy. He also explains a number of questioning strategies including 'iffing' and 'anchoring'. (External link)
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