

## **Improving Practice in Relation to Disabled Learners using Model of Joint Practice Development**

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**The author continues to refine and develop this submission.**

**Not for quotation or citation without author/s permission**

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## **Note on the film**

When we started out the aim was to create a film resource that could be used as a training resource for teaching staff to reflect on their practice in relation to disabled learners. At the time of writing, the film has been edited down to a 30 minute version. The final edits are due to be completed and the film posted on sites such as TedEX and YouTube so that it is available to a wide audience.

## Introduction

This project focuses on issues surrounding disabled learners in a Further Education College. Although there is evidence which indicates that some good practice exists, feedback from the disabled students themselves suggests that improvements could be made. Students reported inconsistent and variable practice across the college, and concerns were raised with relation to specific case-to-case support needs and appropriate adjustments. Whilst students at the college conceded that the tutors were not necessarily at fault, they believed that a more general lack of awareness resulted in failures in relation to these necessary adjustments and the provision of additional support. As such, the principal aim of this project is to assist tutors in the improvement of skills and knowledge in relation to disabled learner's *vis-à-vis* innovative developmental models.

Inspired by students surveyed, we initially considered how we might create a platform upon which learners' opinions could be heard. Our initial goal was to persuade tutors to consider and develop practice by listening to the voice of the students. However, the challenges of changing practice using this approach soon became apparent and so the focus of the project shifted to one of a joint practice development (JPD) model. In order to pilot an alternative scheme, four Disability Support Co-ordinators (DSCs) worked with ten tutors on a one-to-one basis. The aim was to assess if the implementation of a JPD model might be a more appropriate way of improving practice.

## Methodology

On the basis of our research questions and the subsequent aims of the project, we decided to produce a film that would inform our research, serve as a resource to promote good practice, and provide inspiration for learners and tutors alike. The project team developed the film, approaching students with disabilities and asking if they would be willing to talk on-camera about their experiences of education, thus granting consent. There were no set questions and the learners themselves were encouraged to talk about issues that they felt were most important. Two media studies students filmed the learners under the supervision of their tutor. Four subjects were filmed and we found that they articulated their experiences in a powerful way. We were confident that no tutor could watch this film without questioning and reflecting on their own practice.

The first methodological problem was identified when we tried to encourage people to watch the film. As we promoted opportunities for viewing, it became apparent that encouraging people to actually attend was a challenge. At a London conference, only five people attended a workshop that offered participants the opportunity to view the film. In the adjacent workshops, rooms were full to capacity and there were, on average, an estimated thirty attendees. Of the five attendees, one left as soon as the presentation began and the others were known to the project group so could not be considered 'true' attendees. We decided to address how we might encourage people to engage with our message when we had struggled to get their attention.

Upon reflection, we realised that our initial enthusiasm for creating an inspirational

and informative film meant that we had failed to truly consider how this resource would meet the initial aims of the project. We questioned if it were possible to change practice by developing a creative resource.

In order to address arising doubts, we also considered existing methods employed by the college to improve equality and diversity issues. The quality unit set up three days of cascade training, which middle managers were required to attend, and external speakers were appointed to provide their expertise. The expectation was that they would take away resources and information and disseminate this wisdom to their teams in order to demonstrate newly acquired skills to OFSTED. To ensure that the middle managers were exposed to the necessary information, three workshops of an hour and a half each were provided. One speaker commented that they felt that they were offering the 'sheep-dip' approach to training and the participants expressed their own frustration at the perceived absence of any new or useful information.

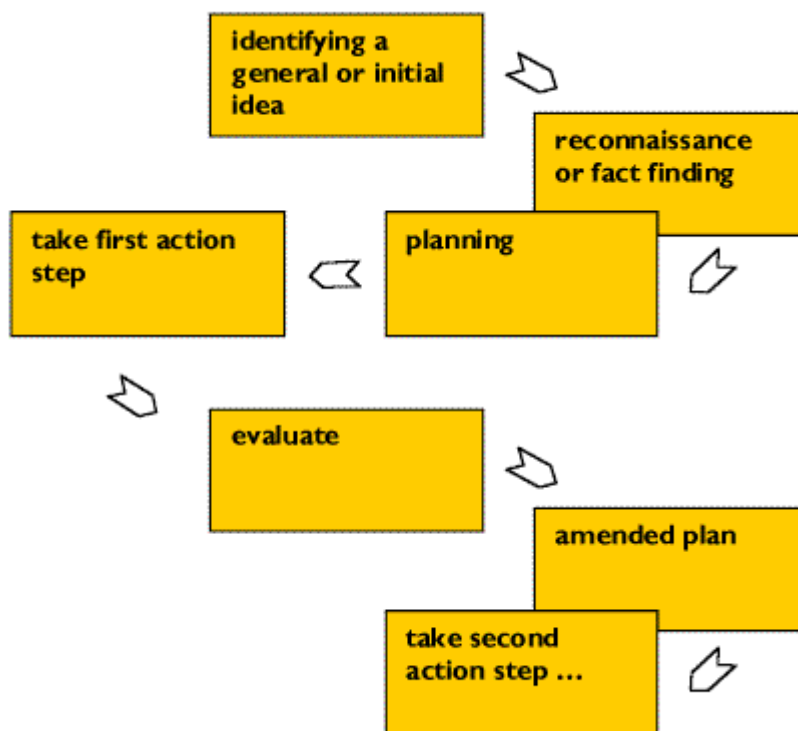
An alternative strategy was required that would both engage and enable staff to reflect on how they might improve their practice. Accordingly, this study considered the claims made in relation to the cascade model and trialled an alternative approach. DSCs were therefore asked to assist in trialling this new approach, based upon the model of JPD, and four DSCs were asked to use opportunistic interventions that resulted from their work alongside tutors.

An Educational Action Research (EAR) approach was used which allowed DSCs to carry out interventions working on collaboration with other members of staff. Carr

and Kemmis provide a classic definition:

*Action research is simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out (Carr and Kemmis 1986: 162).*

This approach was used as it is located in the realm of the practitioner and uses reflective practice (Schon, 1983). Whilst a prescriptive process was not imposed DSCs were encouraged to approach the work using Lewin's 'spiral of steps' (Lewin 1946, reproduced in Lewin 1948:202-3)



Reproduced from Smith, 2007

The overall process involves planning, executing, fact finding for the purposes of moving to the second step, and preparing the rational basis for planning the third step, and for perhaps modifying again the overall plan (Lewin, 1948:206). Criticism

has been levelled at this approach due to the assumption that the problem can be fixed in advance and that the reconnaissance activity is purely tokenistic (Elliott, 1991:70). Adopting a JPD model to engage in action research enables issues about validity to be improved by explicitly sharing the process and reaching a joint consensus about the best way forward. This was reinforced by equipping DSCs with a set of questions aimed at developing critical thinking in a community of enquiry. The questions were adapted from a Taxonomy of Socratic Questions created by the psychologist Richard Paul (1993). DSCs could therefore focus on the process of enquiry rather than identifying solutions.

### **Literature Review**

Society demands a wide range of outputs from educational establishment. As these demands increase there is a need to equip teaching staff with the skills to improve the teaching and learning that takes place within their classrooms. Equality and diversity is an area that has received particular attention from OFSTED and organisations have to consider the best way that they can develop the knowledge and skills of the workforce so that they can offer the learner the opportunity to engage with this area.

There is a particular emphasis on implementing actions that will lead to measurable outcomes as defined by OFSTED. This outcome has arguably reduced equality and diversity to a collection of activities that can achieve 'quick fixes' rather than encouraging practitioners to engage in thoughtful, reflective activity. The "Excellence Gateway" offers support and guidance to meet the requirements of OFSTED providing a wide array of case studies, assignments and other resources that the

tutor can access and use. If a tutor had the time to review the resources and interpret the messages they would then need to adapt the materials so that they were appropriate for their particular needs. This might challenge even the most committed tutor. Perhaps it is not surprising that colleges anxious about improving OFSTED grades opt to use training events based on a 'grab and go' approach that seeks to offer a fast approach to staff development. Mass provision is provided in the form of cascade staff developments that now seem to be favoured by many providers.

Cascade training has been empirically tested in other countries. Hayes (2006) considered the experiences of a nationwide in-service teacher training programme in Sri Lanka and proposes that a remedy to the potential deficiencies of the cascade approach can be addressed using training and development strategies that are 'context sensitive, collaborative and reflexive' Hayes, 2006, p 135). Hayes concludes that cascade training, rather than achieving the desired aims of an 'improved' curricula and 'more effective' teaching-learning methods fails to achieve this aim with the cascade being reduced to a trickle by the time it reaches the classroom teacher. The teacher faced with implementing an improved curricula and more effective teaching was least likely to benefit from this model of staff development. Coffield suggests that 'expansive teaching communities' (Coffield 2008:20) provides a wealth of expertise which is available to practitioners. Cascade training offers some opportunities for practitioners to work together in workshops, albeit it a limited way.



Opting for a 'slow movement' toward staff development might not be popular with providers who need evidence that a training activity has taken place. However, there may be something that we as practitioners can learn about 'seeking to do everything at the right pace' (Honore, 2004). Whilst the slow movement lacks scientific validation, practitioners will be able to identify with the need for time and space to think about and digest information and to think about solutions that are appropriate for the context in which we work. The issue of shared time for teachers to identify their own priorities and work collaboratively is also highlighted by Fielding (2005). Overall, what develops is a sense that practitioners benefit from time to collaborate and set their own agendas regarding their professional development. Cascade models fall short of this approach.

Time pressures, coupled with restricted training opportunities create an environment where it is difficult to stand back and consider how practice can be developed. This is particularly challenging in relation to equality and diversity issues where practitioners need the time and space to explore the issues, and consider their values in relation to the subject matter (Woodbridge & Fulford, 2004). Defining what is good practice in relation to equality and diversity is problematic as is being prescriptive. Yet Coffield notes that 'Good practice' and notions of 'transfer' may be reduced to notions of 'transmission' or uncritically 'implementing content' (Coffield, 2008). CPD therefore needs to provide practitioners with the opportunity to engage in supported, reflective practice that enables localised solutions to be achieved.

**What alternative approaches to CPD exist and how might they offer practitioners the opportunity to consider issues of equality and diversity within the curriculum?**

Fielding's (2005) discussion of JPD highlights an alternative way of bringing about professional development. Fielding considers how teachers learn from each other in ways that affect the daily practice of their work. Fielding (2005) proposes that JPD is supported by giving teachers the time to collaborate and develop supportive, trusting relationships. This idea reflects a challenge to organisations that may be reluctant to facilitate communities of practice and support teaching staff to take a more autonomous approach to their own learning. Coffield's also advocates the importance of 'developing expertise through systematic reflection with colleagues' (Coffield, 2008 p25). Fielding considers 'shared practice develops and extends itself over time through mutual interplay and reflection' (2005:103). This represents strong support in favour of a timely, reflective approach to staff development that is in stark contrast to the 'grab and go' approach that can be seen in many colleges.

(Biesta, 2009) comments that achievement and retention rates are the outcomes measure used to assess performance. This omits consideration of what quality teaching and learning actually is. In relation to disabled learners this is particularly problematic. Disabled learners might require an alternative approach to meet their particular learning styles and this would not be detected by a simple statement. A practitioner who has adapted their teaching style to include someone with ADHD will use a high level of skills. To adjust the curriculum, the tutor will need to listen to the learner and be prepared to keep adjusting and checking if learning strategies are successful. Experience and practice are essential in teachers developing the

appropriate knowledge and skills to do this successfully.

## Data Summary and Findings

We received a positive response from all staff involved in the process of JPD. In contrast to comments on cascade training, staff involved in this trial described feeling very positive about the process in its ability to tackle a wide range of issues. Interventions included, for example, a consideration of how best to support a student with mental health issues. Whilst the student met the academic requirements for the course, she had difficulty engaging fully with relevant material. Her tutor was unsure how to tackle this but, working alongside a DSC, the tutor's confidence was increased and she subsequently felt well-equipped enough to return to the student to offer her a range of solutions. The student was supported in her enrolment on a course that was perceived to be more appropriate for her. In addition to achieving a positive outcome for the student, the tutor also reported feeling better-informed when talking to students with mental health issues. When asked what helped her to change her practice the tutor commented:

*It's simple really. I was worried that I might say something wrong but talking it through with [name of DSC] let me rehearse some strategies and that gave me confidence. Knowing that I could go back to someone else if it all went wrong was also useful. So often you're on your own but tackling a problem in this way felt really good.*

The tutor also felt better able to consider the impact that mental health issues could

have on the course, enabling her to feel more confident about more effective future recruitment practices. The tutor also asked the DSC to attend the next programme co-ordinator's meeting in order to talk to them in more detail about mental health. Having a practical example on which to base the discussion resulted in a positive discussion for all involved. This example of JPD highlights the observations from Coffield (2008) that there is an expansive teaching community which can provide expertise and knowledge. Allowing practitioners to work together is a simple way that colleges can easily enable their staff to tap into this knowledge. As this example shows, this type of activity does not require much preparation but what is needed is a culture of co-operation and trust that enables people to work jointly and collaboratively.

An additional example of JPD involved the arrangement of work placements for students with learning difficulties. The work placement officer consulted with the DSC in order to inform them about available time slots. The tutor had previously identified expectations for the students on placement, yet the opportunity identified by the work placement officer did not meet the stated aims. The DSC asked requested that all parties, including individual students, worked together. This collaborative approach considerably increased the workload but the outcome was extremely positive and resulted in a good experience for the learner. The DSC met with the work placement officer and together they discussed how they might adopt a similar approach for future work placements. They agreed on this new protocol and decided that the way they have adjusted their practice has been beneficial, not only for them, but also for the students. This case highlights a simple example of how making small adjustments can have a positive impact. In addition, this example highlights the potential for achieving high quality outcomes using a JPD model that also includes

the learner. This type of approach may be particularly beneficial for disabled learners who often have decisions made for them without their views being sought or acknowledged.

A further example includes that of a DSC who worked alongside a learning support tutor. The tutor worked with a carpentry student who had left the core group in order to obtain one-to-one support on the basis of his individual literacy-support needs. The DSC consulted the carpentry tutor who had queried what steps the learning support tutor was taking to support the student. As a result of this conversation, the DSC organised a meeting which she would attend, along with the carpentry and learning support tutors, in order to discuss a potential observation. The possibility of providing the student with required support in-class, alongside the wider group, was raised. However, the carpentry and learning support tutors responded that this would likely not prove effective as the student could be distracted when working with others. The tutors also considered potential responses of other students in the class.

Following further discussion, they agreed to trial in-class support, whilst ensuring that four students who had been identified as having literacy-support needs were catered for by the appropriate tutor. The carpentry tutor was happy to take steps to guarantee that no individual would appear singled-out and the learning support tutor was on-hand to assist in a flexible way. Once again, reservations were raised about whether this would work for this particular group. The initial trial did not go well, with several students becoming noisy and disruptive. A further meeting was arranged and, at this point, all parties appeared to have grown despondent. Unexpectedly, the female learning support tutor suggested swapping with a male colleague, given that the group was all male, and she felt that a male tutor might have had better results. A

new trial was put into practice with a male support tutor working alongside the carpentry tutor. During the class itself, the approach was further refined, with the group being split into two so that half could focus on the more challenging assignments. At the follow up review meeting the feedback was positive; the students had accepted the support in place and the individual who had received one-to-one assistance seemed to be coping well with written work. Staff involved in this example of JPD felt that working together as a small team had enabled them to be supportive of each other, whilst simultaneously learning from one other. The carpentry tutor commented

*I was sceptical if this would work and don't think I would have stuck with it if [name of DSC] hadn't been there. But by trying it out, I could actually see it working. You know, it's a bit like the proof of the pudding. This actually worked for my group but I guess we all pulled together to make it work.*

This example highlights Fielding's recommendation that teachers need time to collaborate and develop supportive, trusting relationships (Fielding, 2005). In this example the trust element resulted in the staff involved feeling confident about taking risks and also expressing their doubts whether the approach would work.

A final example involved a lecturer who was unsure how 'strict' they could be with a student who had emotional and behavioural difficulties. The tutor discussed his concerns with the DSC who was able to offer suggestions. The intervention was brief but the tutor was informed how best to address the importance of setting out clear boundaries and enforcing these where necessary. The DSC followed up this initial discussion with a telephone call and the tutor reported that the student had responded positively and, subsequently, attendance had improved. During the

telephone conversation, the tutor commented that he had attended a course on behaviour-management strategies but had found difficulty in actually applying acquired theoretical knowledge to a practical situation. Through the discussion of the case with the DSC, the tutor felt more confident in the application of this theoretical foundation, which they/he/she had gained through additional training, to a real-world scenario. This particular scenario highlights the importance of systematic reflection with colleagues as advocated by Coffield (2008). Assisting the tutor to reflect on their practice and link it with what they had learnt from a previous training course required minimal input. Presumably, this was the first time that the tutor had been given this opportunity. Whilst it is not possible to generalise from this case it does illustrate the importance of assisting practitioners to apply knowledge using supported reflective practice.

## **Findings and Conclusions**

This small-scale investigation demonstrated just some of the positive outcomes made possible via the adoption of a JPD model. Staff commitment was evident and both faculty members and students who fully engaged in the process appear to have benefited from a range of positive results. The enthusiasm generated was encouraging and suggested that this may be a more effective way of engaging staff in contrast to obliging tutors to attend a cascade event.

Whilst the outcomes of the project were modest, these notable changes represented significant adjustments to practice and the end result provided solutions that were appropriate for the context in which we were working. Rather than simply repeating

the same mistakes as others, the JPD model provides an opportunity to trial actions and the adoption of an experimental approach allowed staff to find a workable solution to a range of problems.

Two tutors involved in this trial commented on their own attendance of past training events. Adopting a JPD approach assisted one tutor in the application of this knowledge to a real-world example. This outcome provides some indication of another of the potential benefits of JPD; cascade training may equip attendees with knowledge, but applying it in a real-life scenario requires additional input.

JPD facilitates the immediate application of knowledge. As illustrated by one of our examples, solutions were identified by bringing together two relevant parties who could discuss the issue in detail, when they would not normally have a platform on which to do so. This is very much in contrast with the cascade approach which gives people a so-called 'shopping basket' of strategies that they could, in theory, apply, should the appropriate situation arise. The immediacy of the JPD approach allows practitioners to see solutions in a short timeframe, thus rewarding their efforts.

We consider that we went some way to achieving the principal aims of the project given that the skills that practitioners learnt in developing and formulating their responses were applicable across a broad range of situations. Tutors developed knowledge about additional services, as well as new skills that they could apply when working with students with a variety of needs. For example, one tutor felt more confident about approaching students with mental health issues, demonstrating that the knowledge acquisition was relevant and immediately applicable.

The type of problem that could be addressed using JPD was interesting. Several



different issues were tackled, including how to work with students with emotional and behavioural difficulties, as well as someone with mental health issues. It could, potentially, be useful to compare such changes in practice when someone has attended a cascade event. Indeed, one tutor stated that whilst he had attended behaviour management training in the past, he had not felt able to apply this knowledge until he had been involved with this project. This lends further support to the effectiveness of JPD compared to cascade approaches.

Whilst only a small sample was used due to the limited time available, even the early results are encouraging. Real-life solutions can be achieved and positive changes in practice may be observed, in spite of the limits of such a project. Further research would be required in order to replicate these findings using a larger sample of participants. However, it is clear that we have taken positive steps towards identifying how JPD might be used and in what circumstances is it most effective.

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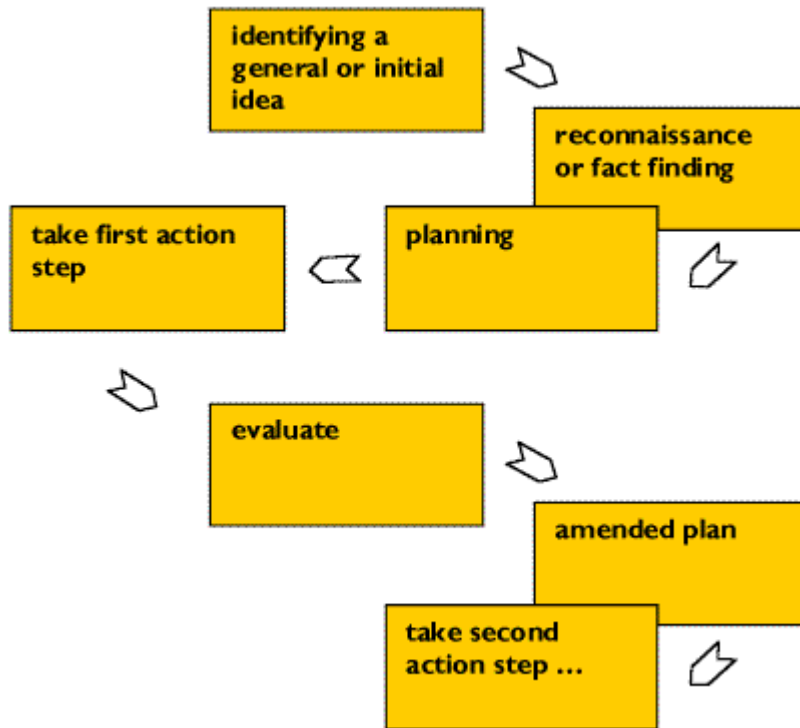
## Appendices

### Joint Practice Development Process Template

The following steps can be used to work with tutors and other staff in order to develop practice in relation to disabled learners.

1. Identify an area of practice that you would like to develop in relation to disabled learners. Describe what currently happens in as much detail as possible.
2. What needs to change and what would the preferred practice look like?
3. What further information might be helpful or what action might you be able to take to take to father further information?
4. Agree an action plan that might change practice to achieve the desired outcome. Make sure that the tutor knows that there is no right or wrong approach. If something does not work out then alternative approaches can be considered.
5. Confirm a review date. Discuss what has happened. Describe the changes and note what the tutor feels about working collaboratively. What impact has there been on the tutors practice?

## Stages of the Action Cycle



# A Taxonomy of Socratic Questions

Richard Paul

To make the Socratic questioning method readily usable by teachers, identifiable categories of questions have been established (Paul, Richard, *Critical Thinking: How to Prepare Students for a Rapidly Changing World*, 1993, pp. 276-77):

- questions of **clarification**
- questions that probe **assumptions**
- questions that probe **reasons and evidence**
- questions about **viewpoints or perspectives**
- questions that probe **implications and consequences**
- questions about **the question**

## **Questions of clarification**

Questions of clarification are basically asking for verification, additional information, or clarification of one point or main idea. The student would be expected to provide the information, expound on an opinion, rephrase the content, or explain why he/she made that particular statement. Clarification may also be requested from others in the discussion group.

- Why do you say that?
- How does this relate to our discussion?
- "Are you going to include diffusion in your mole balance equations?"

## **Questions than probe assumptions**

Many questions can centre around the concept of assumptions. The student may be asked for clarification, verification, explanation, or reliability of the assumption. Students may also be asked to identify another assumption which might apply to the particular case.

- What could we assume instead?
- How can you verify or disapprove that assumption?
- "Why are neglecting radial diffusion and including only axial diffusion?"

## **Questions that probe reasons and evidence**

This category of probing questions asks for additional examples, evidence which has been discovered, reasons for making statements, adequacy for the reasons, process which lead student to this belief, or anything which would change the student's mind on this issue.

- What would be an example?
- What is....analogous to?
- What do you think causes to happen...? Why:?
- "Do you think that diffusion is responsible for the lower conversion?"

### **Questions about viewpoints or perspectives**

The student might be asked whether there are alternatives to this viewpoint or perspective, how might other groups or people respond, what argument a person might use who disagrees with this viewpoint, or a comparison of similarities and differences between viewpoints.

- What would be an alternative?
- What is another way to look at it?
- Would you explain why it is necessary or beneficial, and who benefits?
- Why is the best?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of...?
- How are...and ...similar?
- What is a counterargument for...?
- "With all the bends in the pipe, from an industrial/practical standpoint, do you think diffusion will affect the conversion?"

### **Questions that probe implications and consequences**

The student might be asked to describe and discuss the implication of what is being done or said, the effect which would result, the alternatives which might be feasible, or the cause-and-effect of an action.

- What generalizations can you make?
- What are the consequences of that assumption?
- What are you implying?
- How does...affect...?
- How does...tie in with what we learned before?
- "How would our results be affected if neglected diffusion?"

### **Questions about the question**

The student might be asked to identify the question, the main point, or the issue at hand. In addition, the student might be asked to break the question into single concepts rather than multiple concepts or determine whether some type of evaluation needs to take place. The student or discussion group may also be asked to identify why this question is important.

- What was the point of this question?
- Why do you think I asked this question?
- What does...mean?
- How does...apply to everyday life?
- "Why do you think diffusion is important?"

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