

Questioning like playing the piano

Introduction

When you are in the flow of your activities, you are concentrated on something else than yourself. Of course, you can play piano, cook or practice tai chi being aware you are doing that in the meantime. But as soon as you start thinking : “What am I doing?” you will somehow interrupt the flow of the activity and you risk making mistakes. For Alan Watts, the problem is even more fundamental. A mere conceptualizing of what you do already alienates you from the experience. In his ‘Wisdom of Insecurity’, he writes : “When you dance and you think ‘I am dancing’, you are not really dancing”. There is only the experience, there is no I who experiences.

Suppose your client says : “I think you should work as hard as you can in life”! You might think then : “I don’t agree. Life is more than working hard”. Having had this thought, it is difficult not to start convincing your client of what you think. You somehow will want to make him think your way, to move him in your direction. Because you think it’s a better way, it’s better for him if he wouldn’t work so hard! As a consequence, the client will feel unaccepted, pushed etc. But if you let go of everything you think about the content of what he says, and you follow the direction the client takes in his reasoning – even if you don’t like it - you will get better results.

There is a good reason to relax and to stop thinking about what you think of all this : the client himself is ‘pregnant’ of content, he has more than enough knowledge about the issues he raises because he has had many experiences of, in this case, the virtue of hard working. Much more than you can ever imagine. So why does he need a consultant then? To structure all this, to get some order in this knowledge by formulating a standpoint, to problematize what he says and how he thinks, to ask for arguments, having a critical stance on his arguments etc.

Of course, you can only get in the flow of playing your piano when you master your instrument. And that means : practice, practice, practice. So here is another questioning exercise about exactly this ability of the consultant : to take distance from own opinions in order to do your work concentrating on the speech of the other.

Exercise

The exercise is executed in triplets (variation possible in pairs) . Time : in total 30 min.

Objectives of the exercise :

The participants :

- Take emotional distance from their own firm convictions
- Formulate questions in a short and clear-cut way
- Formulate open questions
- Make the interlocutor reflect upon what he/she says
- Concentrate on the structure of the other’s thoughts

1. Preparation

This part is executed on your own.

1. Write down on a piece of paper something you are wholeheartedly convinced of. It should be a standpoint that is easy for you to defend because you are emotionally involved (you are angry, happy, sad,... about it). It should also be a statement that is rooted in your own experience. Don't think too hard, write down the first that comes in mind.

Example : "My children have to clean up their rooms."

2. Rewrite the statement using more general terms. The criterion here is : someone who doesn't know your life must be able to understand it.

Example : "Children have to clean up their rooms"

3. Reformulate this statement into a question. This question should be formulated according to the following criteria :

- a. It should be an open question : it must be impossible for the client to guess what the questioner himself thinks about it. So no hidden answers in the question, no suggestive or rhetorical questions.

f.ex. : not "Don't you think children should clean up their rooms themselves?"

- b. It should be formulated in such a way that you can disagree about the answer. So to be avoided are propositional introductions as 'do you think that', 'do you believe that'. For if the client answers : "Yes, I think that...." It is impossible to disagree (because he in facts thinks this).

f.ex. : not "Do you think children should clean up their rooms?"

- c. The question should be formulated in as general terms as possible

f.ex. : not "Do your children have to clean up their rooms?"

- d. The question should be as short as possible

f.ex. : not "Do your children have to clean up their rooms every time they have finished playing with puzzles in their rooms?"

- e. You should avoid words that require more explanation

f.ex. : not : "In how far can I influence my own satisfaction balance regarding the education of my children?"

So a good final formulation of the initial statement could simply be :

“Do children have to clean up their rooms?”

2. Questioning exercise

In triplets : one is questioner, the second is client, the third is observant

The questioner reads his question out loud. He takes no notes.¹ For 5 minutes, he questions the client. The aim is to be able to repeat in the words of the client :

- a) The answer of the client to the question
- b) (all) the arguments he has for this answer.

For the whole period of 5 minutes, the questioner is only allowed to ask questions (or remain silent). His questions must have an open character (so no hidden answers allowed). The client answers sincerely to the questions asked (so no tricks to make it more difficult for the questioner). The questioner is not allowed to critique the answer nor the arguments the client holds. He merely has to ‘give birth’ to them, to register and to remember them.

Tasks of the observant :

- a) Takes notice of the time. After five minutes, he rings a bell
- b) Is allowed to interrupt when the questioner :
 - a. Does something else than merely asking questions
f.ex. “I hear you say that it is difficult to ask children to clean up their rooms”
 - b. Askes a closed question
f.ex. “Don’t you think they shouldn’t expect this from their parents any longer when they are 15?”

He does so by merely raising his hand and saying in a few words what’s wrong (f.ex. “no question”). So no further explanation from the observer, the questioning continues

- c) Is not allowed to interrupt to give his own opinion.
- d) Leads a short evaluation at the end. There are two issues to be discussed. Take for every turn maximum 2 minutes for the evaluation.
 - a. (to the questioner) What was the answer of the interlocutor and what were his arguments?
f.ex. “No, children do not have to clean up their rooms
because :
 - it’s their private room where they can do what they want
 - in this way they learn to master their own stuff by themselves”

¹ Every time I write ‘he’ here, I mean ‘he or she’. The same with ‘him’, I mean ‘him and her’.

- b. (to the questioner and to the client) : what were the difficulties you encounter doing this exercise?

After two minutes (max.) of evaluation, the positions change (Questioner, client, observer). And the exercise is repeated.

3. Outcome

Because the starting point of the question is a 'strong conviction' that is moreover rooted in experience, the questioner has the difficulty of being emotionally involved in the content of the dialogue with his client. However, the task is not to show this and to keep on asking open questions. On top of that, he should be able to repeat the answer and the arguments of the client. So he is in a way forced to concentrate not only on what the client says but also on the structure of what he says. Altogether, this is a complex task for the questioner. As the exercise is repeated 3 times with different roles, the task gets a bit easier for the second and the third person but remains difficult. The exercise can of course be repeated changing the teams.