

# Help Your Students Learn to Ask Good Questions

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URBAN ALLIANCE FOR ADULT LITERACY



# Overview

In these sessions, we will:

- Share information about the ongoing Community of Practice on the Right Question Strategy for adult foundational education (AFE) practitioners
- Introduce a method to help adult learners **ask their own questions**
- Discuss how to integrate the method into adult foundational education

# Today's Agenda

- Information on the Community of Practice and convening organizations
- Background on the work of the Right Question Institute
- An experience in the method
- Unpack the method and explore its applications
- Discuss ways to integrate the method into AFE
- Additional resources, next steps, and discussion

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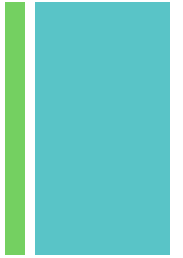
# Purpose of the Partnership

URBAN ALLIANCE FOR ADULT LITERACY

OPEN DOOR COLLECTIVE



- Introduce the ***Right Question Strategy*** to teachers, tutors and program administrators in our field.
- Train and support the Pilot Project Participants with monthly **Community of Practice** meetings focused on their, and their adult learners' use of the Right Question Strategy.



# What is the Urban Alliance for Adult Literacy?

- Brings together individuals and local urban adult literacy networks, coalitions or initiatives
- Focuses on adult (foundational) education issues, concerns, developments, and opportunities that are particularly relevant in urban environments.
- A national affiliate of ProLiteracy



# What does the Urban Alliance for Adult Literacy do?

- **Facilitates creation, and strengthening** of adult education coalitions or networks in urban communities
- **Brings together** members of local collaborations (networks, coalitions, cooperatives, etc.) of adult foundational education providers serving U.S. cities and urban counties
- **Provides** via Greenhouse Meetings, (webinars), a website, and an asynchronous discussion group **ways to share opportunities and challenges, and strategies and resources to effectively address those challenges,** and
- **Raises awareness within our field and with others** (e.g., policy makers and funders) of the importance and needs of urban adult (foundational) education.



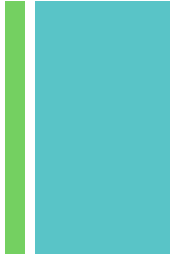
# Website



[www.urbanallianceforadulteracy.org](http://www.urbanallianceforadulteracy.org)

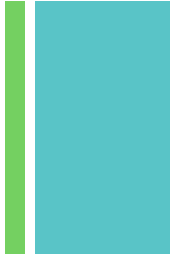


# What is the Open Door Collective?



- A national Project of Literacy Minnesota, now in its eleventh year
- **Mission:** Provide opportunities for national dialogue and discussion about adult foundational education's intersection with other sectors to support social and economic justice
- **Poverty alleviation efforts:** The Open Door Collective (ODC) is dedicated to reshaping U.S. society to have dramatically less poverty and economic inequality and more civic engagement and participation in all our society has to offer. We believe that AFE can help open the doors of opportunity for everyone to healthier, more prosperous and satisfying lives.

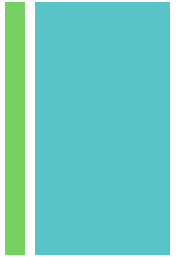
# + What have we learned from the Community of Practice?



3 months (midway) into the Right Question Strategy Pilot Project, this is what we see..

- **High engagement level** of teachers, tutors, and administrators throughout the Community of Practice.
- After group trainings, individualized coaching, and Community of Practice (CoP) monthly meetings most participants are **increasing their comfort level in applying the Right Question Strategy**.
- The monthly CoP meetings allow participants to **share successes and challenges** with each other, and with the project coordinators.
- Success! After this first pilot we will offer a second **Community of Practice in 2026-2027**. For more information contact David Rosen at [djrosen123@gmail.com](mailto:djrosen123@gmail.com)

# + What have we learned from the Community of Practice participants?



- The Right Question Strategy can be applied in adult education to deepen learning and help students build foundational skills.
- Adult learners benefit from a process that requires them to think more deeply about classroom topics or life experiences.
  - ELLs use the strategy to engage in critical thinking in English
  - Some students practice goal setting for the first time
- Educators who use the Right Question Strategy develop greater confidence in their facilitation skills through repeated practice (like exercising a question asking muscle).

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# Background on the Right Question Institute



# The Right Question Strategy

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An educational strategy that fosters the development of two skills:

- Asking better questions
- Participating more effectively in decisions

# Why questions? Why decisions?

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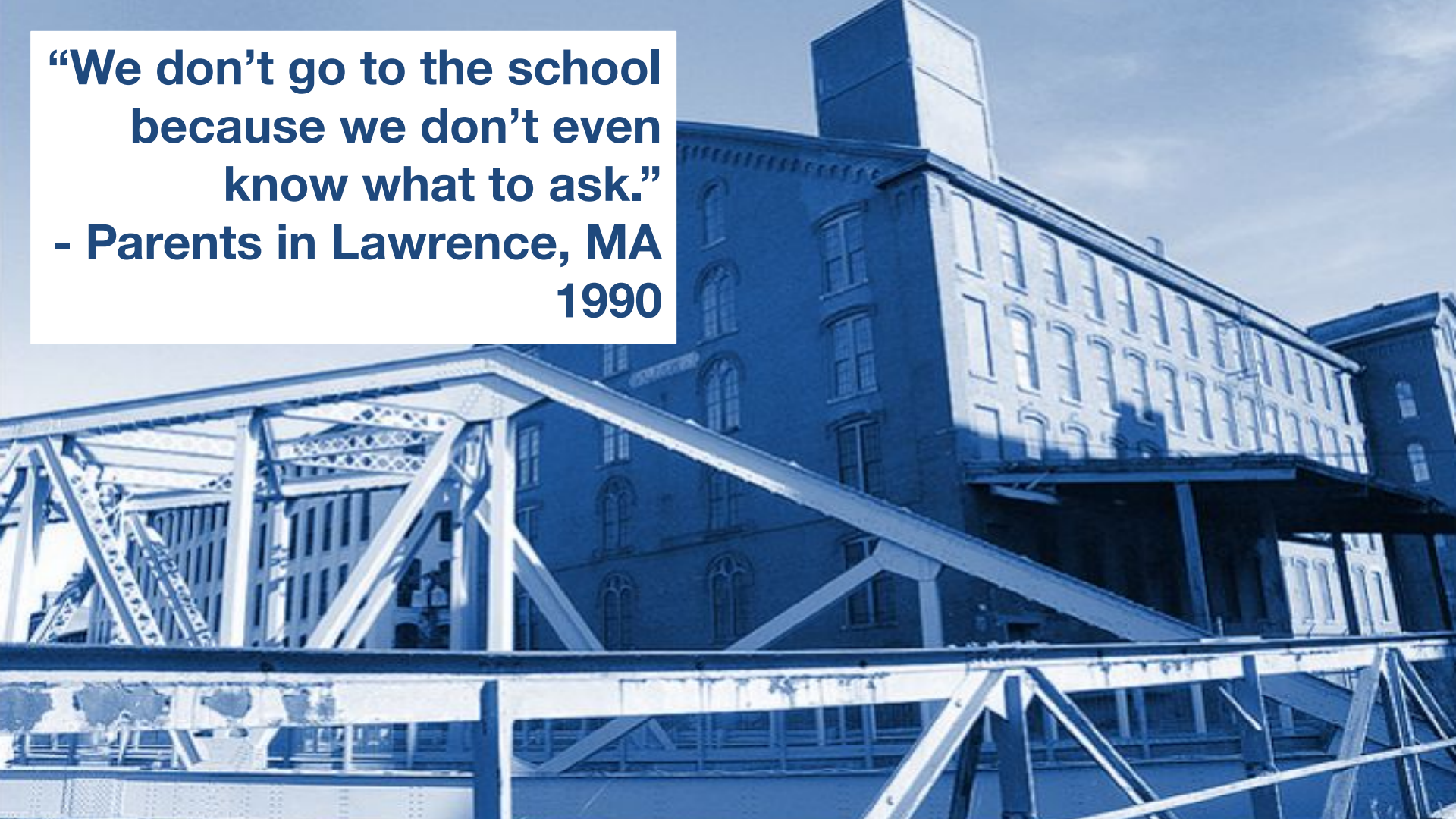
Asking questions is a **foundational skill** for thinking, learning, and taking action.

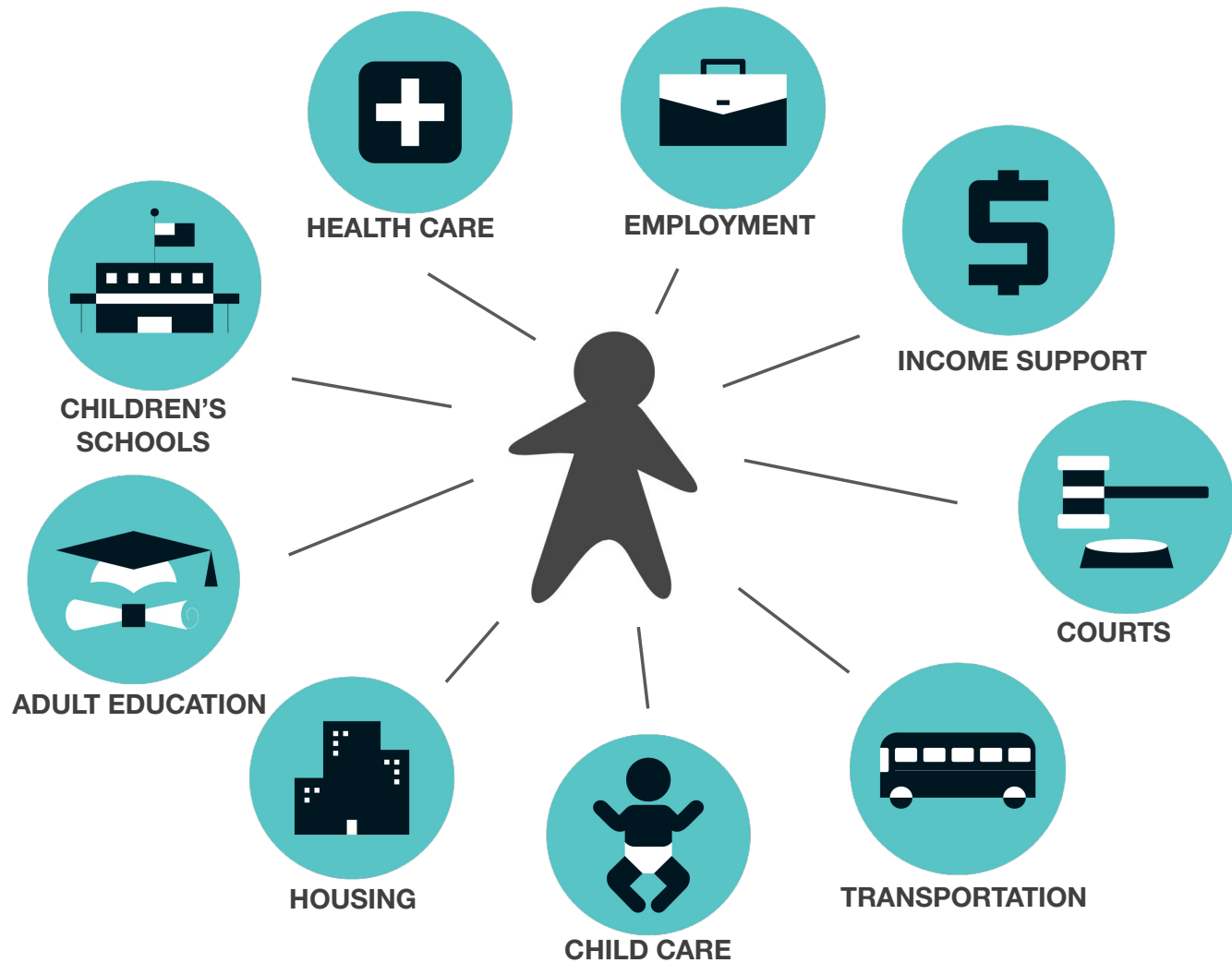
The ability to **focus on decisions** helps people become more **effective** and **strategic**.

People become more **engaged**, understand more **deeply**, and **discover** their own power.

These two skills are rarely taught.

**“We don’t go to the school  
because we don’t even  
know what to ask.”  
- Parents in Lawrence, MA  
1990**





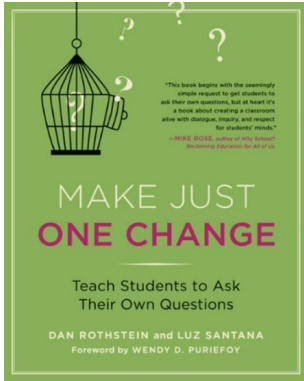


# Right Question Institute

A Catalyst for Microdemocracy



HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION



**NIH Public Access**  
**Author Manuscript**  
*Med Care*. Author manuscript; available in PMC 2013 February 25.  
 Published in final edited form as:  
*Med Care*. 2008 March ; 46(3): 247-256. doi:10.1097/MLR.0b013e318158af52.

**Evaluation of a Patient Activation and Empowerment Intervention in Mental Health Care**

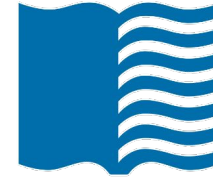
Margarita Alegria, PhD<sup>1</sup>, Antonio Polo, PhD<sup>2</sup>, Shan Gao, MS<sup>3</sup>, Luz Santana, MS<sup>1</sup>, Dan Rothstein, PhD<sup>3</sup>, Aida Jimenez, PhD<sup>3</sup>, Mary Lyons Hunter, PsyD<sup>3</sup>, Frances Mendlela, BS<sup>3</sup>, Vanessa Oddo, BA<sup>3</sup>, and Sharon-Lise Normand, PhD<sup>1</sup>

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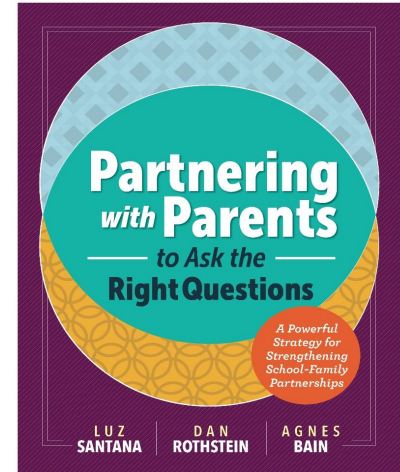
**NIH Public Access**  
**Author Manuscript**  
*Health Educ Behav*. Author manuscript; available in PMC 2013 January 07.  
 Published in final edited form as:  
*Health Educ Behav*. 2009 February ; 36(1): 138-154. doi:10.1177/1090198108314618.

**Patient-Provider Communication: Understanding the Role of Patient Activation for Latinos in Mental Health Treatment**

Dharma E. Cortes, PhD, Cambridge Health Alliance, Harvard Medical School, Boston, Massachusetts  
 Norah Mulvaney-Day, PhD, Center for Multicultural Mental Health Research, Somerville, Massachusetts, and Harvard



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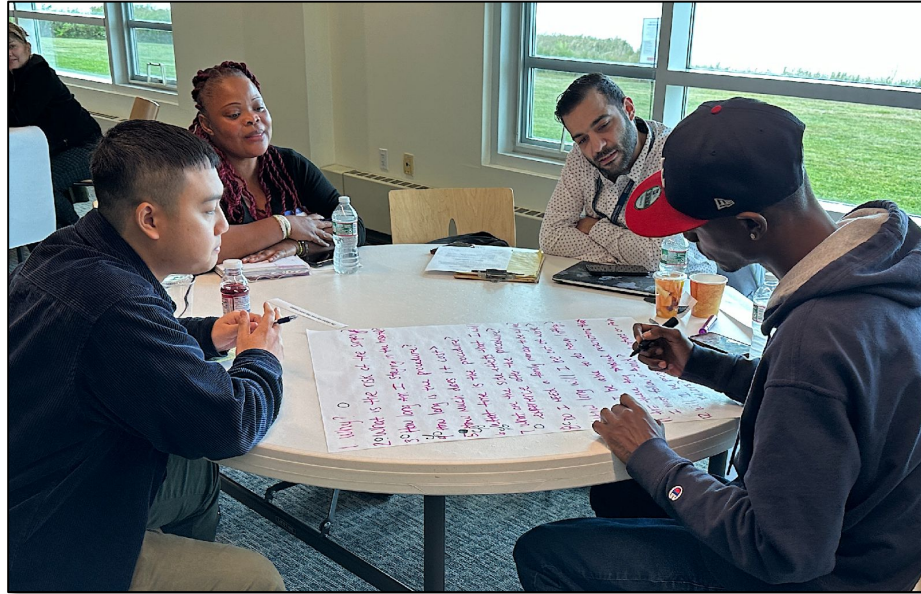
SOCIAL INNOVATIONS Journal



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# An experience in the Question Formulation Technique or QFT



*Interactive Exercise*

# Rules for Producing Questions

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1. ASK AS **MANY** QUESTIONS AS YOU CAN
2. DO **NOT STOP** TO ANSWER, JUDGE OR DISCUSS
3. WRITE DOWN EVERY QUESTION **EXACTLY** AS IT IS STATED OR COMES TO MIND
4. **CHANGE** ANY STATEMENTS INTO QUESTIONS

**What might be difficult about following these rules?**

# Today's Question Focus:

Choose one of these statements for your Question Focus:

**Your child might be held back in the same grade  
for one more year.**

OR

**The doctor might be changing your medication.**

***Your child might be held back in the same grade for one more year.***

**OR**

***The doctor might be changing your medication.***

- Ask as many questions as you can.
- Do not stop to answer, judge, or discuss.
- Write down every question exactly as it comes to mind.
- Change any statements into questions.

# Categorizing Questions: Closed or Open

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- **Closed-ended** questions can be answered with a “yes” or “no” or with a **one-word** answer.
- **Open-ended** questions require more **explanation**.

Identify your questions as closed-ended or open-ended by **marking them** with a “**C**” or an “**O**.”

# Closed- and Open-Ended Questions

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<b>Closed-ended questions</b>	
<b>Advantages</b>	

# Closed- and Open-Ended Questions

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<b>Closed-ended questions</b>	
	<b>Disadvantages</b>

# Closed- and Open-Ended Questions

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<b>Open-ended questions</b>	
<b>Advantages</b>	

# Closed- and Open-Ended Questions

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<b>Open-ended questions</b>	
	<b>Disadvantages</b>

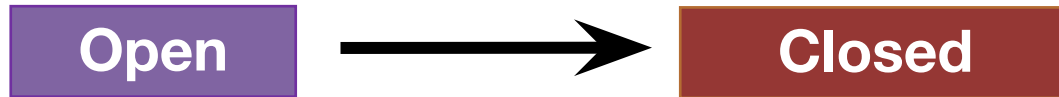
# Improving Questions

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Change one **closed-ended question** so it becomes **open-ended**.



Change one **open-ended question** so it becomes **closed-ended**.



# Prioritizing Questions

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## **Review your list of questions.**

Choose three questions you consider *most important* from your list.

## **While prioritizing, think about the Question Focus you chose:**

*Your child might be held back in the same grade for one more year.*

*The doctor might be changing your medication.*

# Reflect

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**What did you notice about your thinking as you went through the process?**

# Reflect

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**How do you think the adult learners or communities you work with could benefit from using a similar process for formulating questions?**

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# Unpacking the method

# Overview of the Method

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- Deliberately building the skill of asking questions using this method helps build the **agency** of the people you serve
- People who learn this method will be able to **engage** and **learn** more deeply in the classroom
- This method also helps people **advocate more effectively** for themselves, and **navigate systems** where decisions are made that affect their daily lives and the lives of their families

# The Question Formulation Technique

1. Question Focus

2. Producing questions



1. Ask as many questions as you can
2. Do not stop to discuss, judge or answer
3. Record *exactly* as stated
4. Change statements into questions

3. Improving questions

- Categorize questions as closed or open ended
- Change questions from one type to another

4. Strategizing

- Prioritize your questions
- Action plan or discuss next steps
- Share

5. Reflecting

# The Question Formulation Technique

1. Question Focus

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3. Improving questions

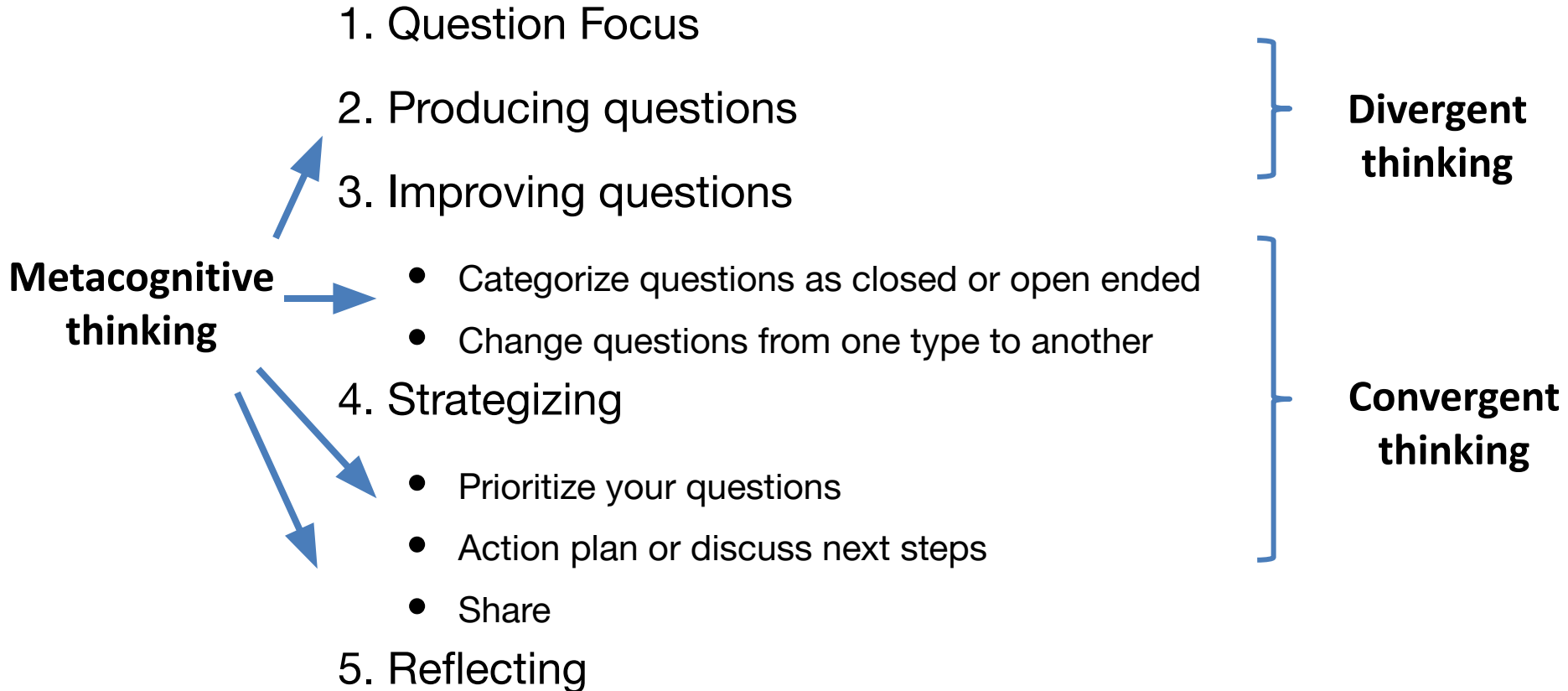
- Categorize questions as closed or open ended
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4. Strategizing

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- **Action plan or discuss next steps**
- Share

5. Reflecting

# The Question Formulation Technique

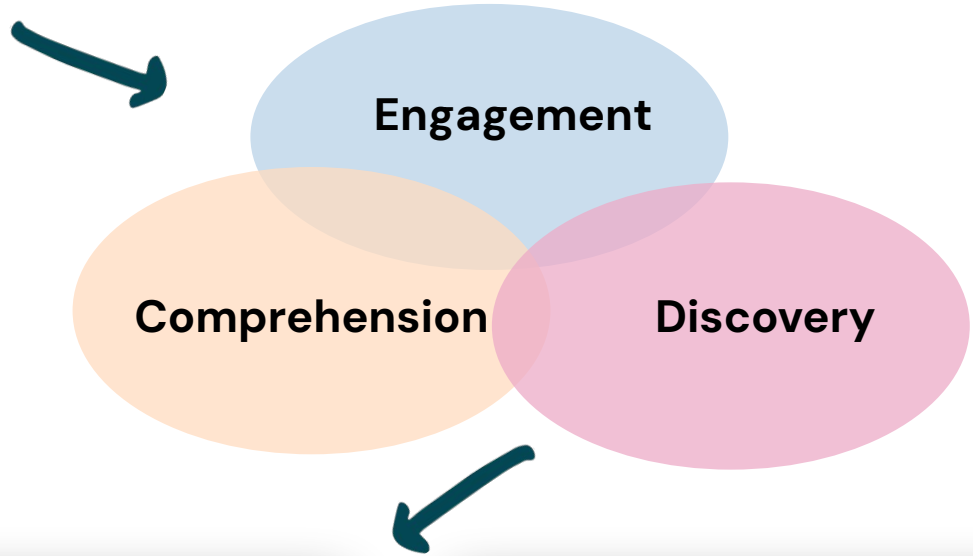


# Theory of Question Formulation for Learning

## QUESTION FORMULATION

RQI's definition:

"Generate questions divergently and then work to improve them through convergent and metacognitive thinking"



### Motivated Learners

- Purposeful
- Committed
- Persistent
- Self-directed

### Nimble Thinkers

- Flexible
- Analytic
- Agile
- Independent

# How does this connect to adult foundational education?

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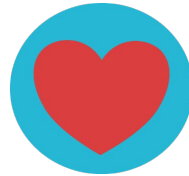
When people formulate their own questions . . .

- Students strengthen their ability to think and learn **independently**, in the classroom and beyond
- People feel a stronger sense of **agency** as they navigate systems
- People are better able to **advocate and make their voice heard** for themselves and their families

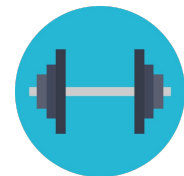
# Three changes as outcomes:



**COGNITIVE**



**AFFECTIVE**

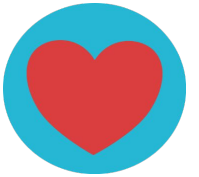


**BEHAVIORAL**

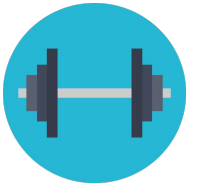
“Estás más preparado. **Sabes lo que quieres.** Cuando sabes lo que quieres, **buscas la forma de obtenerlo.** [You are better prepared. **You know what you want.** And when you know what you want, **you can look for a way to get it.**]” - Nelida Herrera, Sacramento, CA



“It helps you advocate for yourself, **without feeling overwhelmed or inferior** to what someone might have. I wasn’t intimidated any more... **it makes you feel like, ‘I can do this.’**” - Alicia, Boston, MA



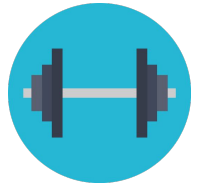
“I didn’t know I could ask questions at the school. But, **by doing that, I was able to get my son the services he needs.**” - Session participant who learned to advocate for her son with a hearing impairment, Mass.



**“We became homeless, we were evicted from our apartment. . . .I was like, I can’t bring the kids to a homeless shelter, I’ve been there myself once and I don’t ever want to go back. It helped me to be more confident. When I went into that room, I don’t think without writing down those questions . . . I wouldn’t have been able to do that. I wouldn’t be able to go in there and not cry and be hysterical . . . I wasn’t like that at all, I was completely under control.”** - Stacey French, Dover, New Hampshire



As a result of this workshop I plan to: What ever it takes to get the information I need.



**“What ever it takes to get the information I need.”**- Session participant, Louisville, KY

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# **Applications in the field**



*Earldine Tolbert*

## ***Insights from a former adult educator***

“People don’t even realize they have the right to ask questions of people who make such big decisions about their daily life.”

### ***Recounting a story of one student successfully avoiding an unlawful eviction:***

“[E]verybody started going back and asking questions. They were excited for her because she tried it in real life and it worked. They felt more empowered to ask questions on their own. They really had the right to do this.”

# Examples of applications

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- **12th grade government teacher** – Engaging students at the start of a unit
- **Financial literacy coach** – Helping individual clients problem solve and think strategically about their finances
- **Adult literacy program instructor** – Preparing mothers to have a conversation with the commissioner of the New Hampshire Division of Children, Youth and Families
- **Social worker at a legal aid organization** – Preparing clients for court appearances and meetings with attorneys
- **Organizer/parent liaison** – Supporting parents in advocating for violence prevention programs

*Additional examples of applications are available in the session slides.*

*Link to be shared at the end of the presentation.*

# Integration

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**What are some specific situations in which you could use a method for helping students ask their own questions?**

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# Access Resources

[rightquestion.org/resources](https://rightquestion.org/resources)

# Resources

## Teaching Templates & Guides

### 5 Pasos Para Hacer Mejores Preguntas

Hacer **sus propias preguntas** puede ayudarle a que **su voz** se escuche y obtener más de la **información**

Spanish translations available for many resources

### 5 Steps for Asking Better Questions

Asking **your own questions** can help you **get more information** and **advocate for what you need**.

**1 Question Focus** - the topic  
you will ask questions about.  
Write it here →

**2 Come up with questions  
about the topic using  
these four rules** →

- Ask as **many questions** as you can
- **Do not stop** to try to answer or judge the questions
- Write each question **exactly** as it comes to mind
- **Change** any thoughts or statements into questions

Write your questions here:

**3 Work with your questions.**

Find different types of questions on your list:

- **Closed-ended** questions:

Practice **changing your questions** to get  
different information.

estar las preguntas  
e venga a la mente  
mbie cualquier  
ta

a **cambiar sus preguntas**  
ner información diferente:

# Resources

## Facilitation Videos

View on our resource page

**RQI** Right Question Institute  
A Catalyst for Microdemocracy

STRATEGY | OUR WORK | ABOUT | **RESOURCES** | CONTACT | SIGN UP | LOGIN | DONATE

TEACHING + LEARNING | LEGAL EMPOWERMENT | VOTER ENGAGEMENT | SELF-ADVOCACY

## Resources

**BOOKS:**  
PARTNERING WITH PARENTS  
MAKE JUST ONE CHANGE

**VIEW BY FIELD:**  
TEACHING + LEARNING  
SCHOOLS + FAMILIES  
+ DOWNLOAD AND USE  
INFORMATIONAL MATERIALS  
FACILITATION MATERIALS  
+ WATCH + LISTEN  
INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEOS  
WEBINARS  
PODCASTS  
+ READ  
RIGHT QUESTION INSIGHTS  
RIGHT QUESTION ROUNDUP

LEGAL EMPOWERMENT  
VOTER ENGAGEMENT

**[Video] Using the Question Formulation Technique (QFT) with Individuals**  
FIELD(S): Schools + Families  
TYPE: Instructional Videos



“I believe unconditionally in the ability of people to respond when they are told the truth. We need to be taught to study rather than to believe, to inquire rather than to affirm.”

- **Septima Clark**

**Next steps**

# Next steps

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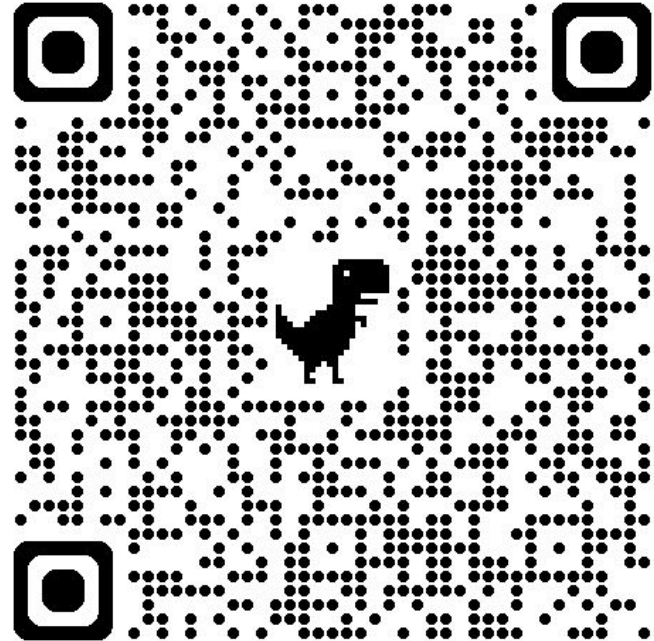
- Register on our website to access free resources:  
[rightquestion.org/join](https://rightquestion.org/join)
- Access the slides and resources at this link:  
[rightquestion.org/events/mcae-2026](https://rightquestion.org/events/mcae-2026)

# Evaluation and Request for Information

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Please fill out the following evaluation to share feedback and sign up to hear more about the upcoming Community of Practice:

[bit.ly/RQI-MCAE](https://bit.ly/RQI-MCAE)



**Some final thoughts...**

# Thank you!

For information about the 2026-2027 AFE CoP Pilot project, contact David J. Rosen [djrosen123@gmail.com](mailto:djrosen123@gmail.com)

For information about the Right Question Institute [contact@rightquestion.org](mailto:contact@rightquestion.org)

Register to access free resources at:  
[www.rightquestion.org](http://www.rightquestion.org)

# Free Resources

The Right Question Institute offers many of our resources and methodology through a Creative Commons License and we encourage you to make use of and/or share this resource. **Please reference the Right Question Institute** as the source when using our resources or methods.



Source: [www.rightquestion.org](http://www.rightquestion.org)

# Facilitating the methods

# Facilitation Tips

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- Introduce the process as quickly as possible
- Do not explain the topic or question focus or give examples of questions
- Do not stop to answer the questions as they are being produced – that is not your role
- Make sure to leave time for reflection – what did you learn? How can you use it?
- If you are facilitating in groups, make sure all group members are following the rules and contributing questions, including the scribe

# Using the process

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***One small shift in practice:***  
the student is the one asking their own questions

# The Question Focus

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The Question Focus is a stimulus for jumpstarting questions. It is the focus of question formulation.

Today we used:

***Your child might be held back in the same grade for one more year.***

***The doctor might be changing your medication.***

# The Question Focus

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The Question Focus is usually presented as a statement, but can be a visual, an audio, or anything else that will prompt people to ask questions.

**Only one requirement for the Question Focus:  
*It should NOT be a question.***

**One key tip for an effective Question Focus:  
*The simpler, the better.***

# Examples of applications

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- **12th grade government teacher** – Engaging students at the start of a unit
- **Financial literacy coach** – Helping individual clients problem solve and think strategically about their finances
- **Adult literacy program instructor** – Preparing mothers to have a conversation with the commissioner of the New Hampshire Division of Children, Youth and Families
- **Social worker at a legal aid organization** – Preparing clients for court appearances and meetings with attorneys
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# Classroom example: 12<sup>th</sup> grade government

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Teacher: Daniel Fouts, Des Plaines, IL

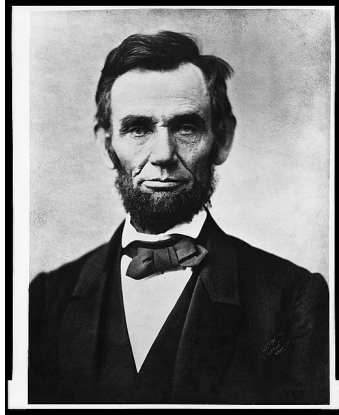
Class unit: The American presidency at moments of crisis

Purpose: To engage students at the start of the unit and to help students select a topic for an independent project

# Question Focus

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“Nearly all men can handle adversity; but if you really want to test a man’s character, give him power.”



# Student questions

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1. How does power challenge one's morality?
2. Should everyone have some type of power?
3. Does power make people corrupt?
4. What if the person who is qualified for power doesn't attain it?
5. How is a man's power tested?
6. What is considered power?
7. What defines good character?
8. How can we ensure that the good men get the power?
9. What kind of man can handle adversity?
10. What can power tell us about a man's character?
11. How can power be obtained by adversity?
12. Why are some people affected by power differently?
13. If adversity supposedly makes you stronger, does that mean that power makes you weaker?

# Next steps with student questions

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- Each student selected one question from the class list to work on throughout the unit
- Students answered their question using research and knowledge from the unit in a two-page reflection paper
- Students shared their reflections in a class discussion on the final day of the unit

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---

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# Financial coaching example #1

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Case Manager/Coach: Melvin Korpue at Amos House, Providence, RI

Meeting topic: Finding more affordable transportation to/from work.

Purpose: To support homeless community members in securing long term stability through financial coaching and employment support.

# Question Focus

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You are paying more in transportation which is eating at your savings.

**1 Question Focus** - the topic you will ask questions about.  
Write it here →

You are paying more in transportation  
which is eating at your savings.

# List of participant's questions

Write your questions here:

- Statement - Well I have to go to work!
- \* - What other options are there beside ~~using~~ Lyft/Uber? C
  - Public transportation? How do I use it, is there a bus that goes to my work? O
  - \* - What happens when I leave work at night - C
  - Can I do share rides with coworkers? C
  - What happens when the weather is bad - C → O
  - How much am I spending on Lyft/Uber? Why is it that much? C → O
  - \* - Can I afford a car and monthly insurance? O → C
  - \* - Can I get a work transfer to a location close to my home? C → O
  - Should I ask for a raise to help pay for my transportation? C → O
  - Should I get a different job? Since this one is far - O
- How should I ask for a raise at work?

# Participant's priority questions

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Question #1: What are other options are there besides using Lyft/Uber?

Question #3: What happens when I leave work at night?

Question #7: Can I afford a car and monthly insurance?

Question #8: Can I get a work transfer to a location close to my home?

# Financial coaching example #2

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Case Manager/Coach: Melvin Korpue at Amos House, Providence, RI

Meeting topic: Not being able to afford rent without saving money.

Purpose: To support homeless community members in securing long term stability through financial coaching and employment support.

# Question Focus

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You will not afford to pay your rent if you don't budget/save money

**1 Question Focus** - the topic you will ask questions about.

Write it here →

You will Not afford to pay your rent  
if you don't budget/save money

# List of participant's questions

Write your questions here:

- Where will I live if I get kicked out my place C
- Who is able to help me pay my rent C u
- Why can't I save money - I'm working O → "Statement" reaction
- Where is my money going? What am I buying C
- X - Should I open a bank account C → O - How do I open a bank account  
and what types of accounts will help me save money to pay rent
- X - Where is the safest place to store money only to pay my bills O - C
- How do I start to see where my money is going O → C - Should I save
- How do I budget, How do I start saving O
- Should I automate my savings weekly, monthly etc... O
- What is the right amount to put away every pay check C
- Should I create a calendar of when my bills are due C
- X - Why ~~Am I~~ Am I always behind on bills O  
\* Is there something behind ~~my~~ behind my ~~behaviors~~ behaviors that causes these short comings to happen

# Participant's priority questions

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Question #5: Should I open a bank account?

*This sparked other questions: How do I open a bank account? What types of accounts will help me save money to pay my rent?*

Question #6: Where is the safest place to store money only to pay my bills?

Question #12: Why am I always behind on bills?

Question #13: Is there something behind/beyond my financials that is causing these short comings to happen?

# Next steps with participant questions

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- Make a plan to take steps towards financial stability: opening a bank account, creating a budget, identifying areas of overspending.
- Help participants access other resources, such as public benefits for food or rental assistance and job coaching to prepare for interviews.
- Support participants in decision-making around spending and managing finances.