Varying your Discussion Prompts as an Instructional Strategy

It is important to vary the types of discussion prompts you use to keep students active and engaged, to elicit multiple levels of critical thinking (Richardson, Sadaf, & Ertmer, 2012), and to facilitate all four phases of Dewey's practical inquiry model (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001). These include

1. **Triggering event:** This phase initiates the inquiry process where learners recognize or identify a problem.
2. **Exploration**: This phase focuses on exploration of the problem as learners exchange information as well as possible explanations.
3. **Integration**: This phase focuses on interpretations/construction of meaning where learners incorporate ideas from the exploration phase to justify hypotheses, connect information from various sources, and evaluate possible solutions to make decisions.
4. **Resolution**: This phase focuses on providing potential solutions where learners implement the proposed solution by means of practical application.

These four phases are not considered discrete nor linear as some overlap between phases may occur (Swan, Garrison, & Richardson, 2009). In the following table, we describe differing discussion prompt formats and provide sample prompts as a guide.

	Format	Description	Sample Question
1	**Playground** Exploration Phase	Questions require the interpretation or analysis of a specific aspect of the material, or 'Playground', for discussion. Students are free to discover and interpret the material.	In the first paragraph of the web article, "Attributes of Good Listening," the author states that, "You cannot be a good leader unless you are a good listener." In 1-2 paragraphs explain in your own words what the author means by this. How are the two (listening and good leader) related? Do you agree or disagree? Explain your reasoning.
2	**Brainstorm** Exploration Phase	Questions ask students to generate a number of conceivable ideas, viewpoints, or solutions related to a specified issue. Students are free to generate any or all ideas on the topic.	Epistemology—one of those terms you will encounter throughout graduate school but may never have actually discussed in detail in your courses—until now. The Spiro article talks about epistemic beliefs about the nature of learning and the organization of knowledge (p. 304), the idea that learners, young and old, may hold an unconscious belief about how to organize their knowledge, and this can become tricky once you bring ill-structured lessons into their curriculum or experience. Begin by providing a scenario or observation of such an occurrence in the content area you work in. Next, how would you address their epistemic beliefs and this potential problem

			with the ideas presented in this week's readings (or other readings)? Support your ideas.
3	**General Invitation** Exploration Phase	Questions invite a wide range of responses within a broad topic in an open or unfocused discussion.	In an effort to broaden our discussions, I'm going to invite you to write about anything of interest to you about the teaching of writing this week. What are you thinking about? Wondering about? What rises to the surface for you when you think about being a writing teacher? If you need some ideas, here are some possible topics: Minute or Muddiest Point Papers Creative writing in the English classroom Responding to student writing Grading and rubrics Ideas for your mini-lesson assignment coming up soon--what are you thinking of teaching us?
4	**Funnel** Exploration/Integration Phase	Prompt begins with a broad opening question, followed by one or more narrower questions, and ending with a very concrete question.	Reflect on your experiences with writing assignments in middle and high school. What kinds of assignments were they? How did you respond to them? Which of the major composition pedagogies discussed in class did they reflect? Do you think these types of assignments would be effective in your future classes? Why or why not?
5	**Focal Question** Integration Phase	Questions relate to a specific issue and require students to make a decision or take a position and justify it. Students are asked to support one of several possible positions.	At this point in the semester, we have discussed learning and the theories of learning. Now we need to go one step further and discuss a very important element in that learning process – the learners. It is important that you think about all of the various types of learners you will potentially encounter; however, for this online discussion, we will focus on one specific type, the group of learners known as Millennials. This is the group that was born sometime between 1978 and 2000. They are a very unique group and one that you probably have some great insights into – most of you are members. Discuss the following: *Should the Gen Z learners be taught differently than how generations of learners of the past were taught?*
6	**Lower Divergent**	Questions require students to analyze information to	There are at least two ways to think about multimedia learning, (1) multimedia learning as

	Integration Phase	discover reasons, draw conclusions, or make generalizations.	information acquisition, and (2) multimedia learning as knowledge construction. Moreover, there are two common ways of presenting multimedia learning: - The Learner-centered approach says, "How can adapt technology/multimedia to enhance human learning?" - The Technology-centered approach says, "How can we use the capabilities of the technology in designing multimedia presentations?" I think that these points can serve as a practical framework for thinking about our projects. Given this, where and why (think of the curriculum links/gaps for your learners and the environment) does your project fit within this framework.
7	**Analytic Convergent** Integration Phase	Students are required to examine relevant materials and produce a straightforward conclusion, summarize the materials. Answers require analytical thought but lead to a single correct answer.	This is a first-come, first-serve activity. You are each required to choose one learning theory, either from last week's readings, this week's websites, or another source. You are to (1) legitimize the theory by checking into a reputable source (e.g. not just the websites, and Wikipedia does not count) and verifying the major principles or components of the learning theory, (2) summarize these components for your peers, and (3) provide us with a scenario where your learning theory would be applicable (e.g. sample activities) to distance learning for this course in particular. In other words, your target audience is your peers and you are adopting the viewpoint of the instructor. Be sure you label your discussion posting with the name of your theory
8	**Shotgun** Integration Phase	Multiple questions that may contain two or more content areas.	Rules for discussion: Answer one question and reply to one other person's response. 1.Websites such as YouTube and eHow offer "expert videos" that are geared toward the general public, and that can teach anyone how to do anything (anything from baking a cake to flamenco dancing). How do such websites encourage or discourage learning? What are the advantages

			and/or disadvantages of using such videos or websites to facilitate learning, or as learning tools? 2. Discuss how the use of intelligent computer programs or tools in the classroom relates to Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal development (ZPD). Give an example that teachers could apply in their classrooms
9	**Critical Incident** Resolution Phase	Questions relate to a scenario or case study students have read; students are typically asked to propose solutions to the issues presented in the scenario/case study.	For the following scenario you'll be providing instructional design solutions—and there is no one "correct" solution, although there may be "optimal" solutions. Scenario: A group of 15 US Army personnel, stationed in Afghanistan, would like to work towards their college degree during their down time (as a unit their duties are scheduled so that the group as a whole is never on "down time" all at once. Since they have various backgrounds (all are high school graduates) you have been asked to teach an initial or pilot course for this group, one they can all take that will count as an elective: History and culture of Afghanistan, 1700-present. They are all tentatively to be stationed at this one location for at least the next 4 months. How would you proceed?

Richardson, J.C., Sadaf, A., & Ertmer, P.A, 2012 (adapted from Andrews, 1980)

References

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