

PRECEPTOR SERIES:

# Teaching with Questions: Avoiding the Pitfalls of “Grilling” to Become a Better Preceptor

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**T**he use of purposeful questions is a technique commonly employed by preceptors to enhance student and resident learning. When utilized correctly, it serves as an effective mechanism to assess baseline knowledge, bridge the gap from textbook to patient care, teach new concepts, and promote critical thinking.

## The Socratic Teaching Method is Not “Pimping”

The Socratic teaching method is thought to have originated with the Greek philosopher Socrates.<sup>1-3</sup> Rather than directly delivering information, this approach dictates that a teacher prompts students through cross-examination to recognize their own deficiencies followed by asking proactive questions to steer them toward realizing true knowledge through introspection.<sup>4</sup> However, the term “pimping” is often erroneously used synonymously with the Socratic teaching method. Brancati is often credited with popularizing the term “pimping”, a technique where a senior practitioner asks a series of difficult, and often intentionally unanswerable, questions to a learner in rapid succession.<sup>5</sup> A superficial justification for this practice suggests this method teaches under stressful circumstances, similar to a situation the learner may find once in independent practice, but often the more devious intent is to maintain the status quo hierarchy via psychological intimidation.<sup>6</sup>

Recently, the medical profession has faced scrutiny for the long-standing history of “pimping”.<sup>7,8</sup> This is in part because a “word that refers to an immeasurably harmful practice is an ill-suited synonym

for a pedagogical exercise” as described by Martin and Wells.<sup>9</sup> Critics argue that “pimping” promotes intimidation by making the learner feel frustrated, anxious, inadequate, and belittled.<sup>9,10</sup> Pharmacy preceptors are in a unique position to use questioning techniques in an active practice environment to challenge learners and have an obligation to create an atmosphere that promotes development. Preceptors should apply historic and modern interpretations of the Socratic teaching method to promote critical thinking skills that fit their practice area. This serves as a superior approach to teaching while avoiding the negative outcomes associated with “pimping”. In this model, expectations of the preceptor are discussed and clearly established with the learner from the beginning, thereby achieving a similar objective in a less threatening manner. Use of the Socratic teaching method is a developed skill that requires a tailored approach to each individual. In order to optimize effectiveness, spontaneous questioning requires a keen sense of the knowledge base, experience, and learning style of each student and resident. The following text will provide some suggestions on how this skill may be incorporated into the daily practice of preceptors.

## Set Clear Expectations

As mentioned previously in the *JPSW* preceptor development series, expectations and goals of both the learner and preceptor

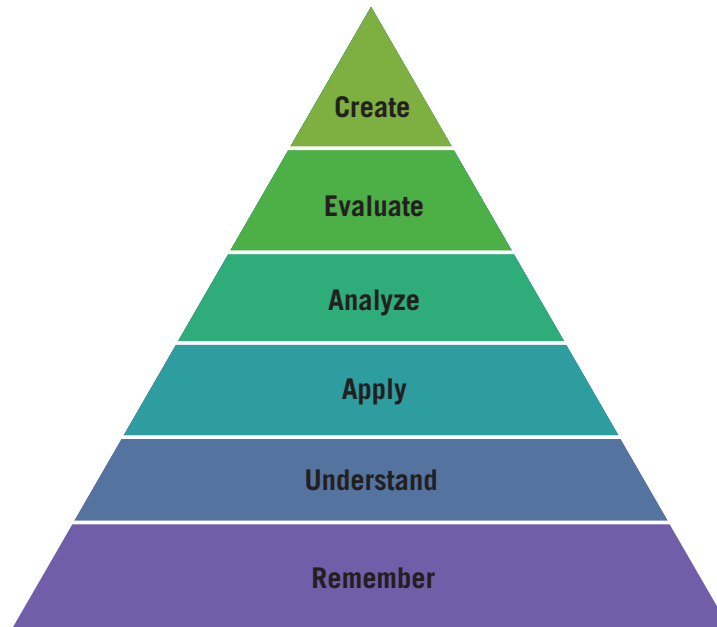
must be established prior to the start of the learning experience.<sup>11</sup> Doing so will prevent, or at least minimize, conflict during the learning exercise. Clearly identify that the role of the preceptor is to facilitate learning by identifying gaps in knowledge and subsequently help the learner fill those gaps. Make clear that questioning will continue to areas beyond the learner’s knowledge base, and the learner will routinely find themselves outside their comfort zone. It must be

explained to the learner that going beyond their comfort zone is essential to assess knowledge and concept acquisition, provide motivation, and enhance the development of new skill sets. This is in sharp contrast to “pimping” where the intent is often

more malicious, may include intimidation or humiliation, and is less focused on the acquisition of new knowledge. To further facilitate learning, allow the learner time to prepare for topic discussions ahead of time. This approach should still include respectful questioning and allow for back-and-forth dialogue. When the learner is faced with a question to which they do not know the answer, it is important that they understand what the expectations are of them. In many cases the preceptor may be tempted to simply answer the question for the learner, but that may deprive them of an additional learning opportunity. This is where the experienced preceptor is expected to employ an alternative technique depending on the scenario. If the learner

**To be able to ask a question clearly is two-thirds of the way to getting it answered.**  
- John Ruskin

**FIGURE 1. Bloom's Taxonomy**



Remembering	Understanding	Applying	Analyzing	Evaluating	Creating
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recall facts and basic concepts</li> <li>Questions may begin with <i>define, list, repeat, or state</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Explain ideas or concepts</li> <li>Questions may begin with <i>describe, discuss, explain, or identify</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use information in new situations</li> <li>Questions may begin with <i>demonstrate, interpret, predict, or solve</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Draw connections among ideas</li> <li>Questions may begin with <i>infer, compare, contrast, or relate</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Justify a stand or decision</li> <li>Questions may begin with <i>assess, defend, critique, interpret, or choose</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Produce new or original work</li> <li>Questions may begin with <i>design, create, devise, develop, or plan</i></li> </ul>

seeks clarification, the preceptor could choose to reword the question, ask it from another perspective, or take a more learner-centered approach. Sometimes it is helpful to allow the learner more time to logically work through the answer. Other times it may be a knowledge deficit and the learner simply needs the opportunity to research it independently. If this is the case, then establish a clear and reasonable deadline at which time the topic will be revisited. It is essential that the learner anticipates that the preceptor will hold them accountable, but in a respectful and supportive manner.

**Ask Purposeful Questions**

The art of asking purposeful questions combined with the ability to tailor them to specific situations is an acquired skill. When utilized appropriately, the use of spontaneous questions is one of the most effective approaches to facilitate learning and promote critical thinking. Questions must be purposeful, clearly worded, and should crescendo in a logical progression leading the learner toward a meaningful point. It is important that

a preceptor adjust the starting point of questioning based on the learners level of experience and understanding. For example, questions directed to students completing Introductory Pharmacy Practice Experiences are generally initiated at a different level than those asked of pharmacy residents. Once the preceptor has ensured a clear understanding of fundamental concepts, questions can progress to the next level to further challenge the learner.

Bloom's taxonomy serves as a well-established framework for understanding the hierarchy of skills possessed by an individual and may be incorporated into the Socratic teaching method.<sup>12</sup> When following this model, sessions should progress from lowest to the highest order as the learner demonstrates mastery of the subject. (Figure 1.) In practice, it is common for preceptors to utilize questions that only focus on the two lowest levels which are *remembering* and *understanding*. Questioning at this level places an emphasis on the basic recall of prior knowledge, but fails to encourage independent thinking, application of newly gained knowledge, or

development of original ideas.

Preceptors must consider their questioning techniques in advance and re-evaluate their approach based on learner responses. When encountering roadblocks, preceptors should be willing to reword questions appropriately or modify teaching style based on learner needs. Questioning sessions should not include rapid-fire questions or random pharmacy trivia facts. Preceptors should also avoid asking questions "just to ask questions". Each question must serve a specific purpose and be related to the concept that is currently being discussed. Repeatedly asking questions that are too advanced or not understood is counter-productive and can be discouraging to the learner. Preceptors should avoid the temptation to directly answer the question for the learner or ask leading questions that give the answer away as this inhibits the development of critical thinking skills required to achieve higher levels of learning. Finally, preceptors and learners need to summarize each session together. The learner must have the opportunity to ask follow-up or clarifying

questions as needed. The preceptor should provide the learner with feedback that is balanced, candid, and fair. Feedback may be delivered in a variety of ways, but it must be objective.<sup>13</sup>

### Overcoming Obstacles to Facilitate Respectful Questioning

The reality of precepting is that challenges will arise, requiring a joint effort on behalf of the preceptor and learner to have a positive experience. Time constraints and interruptions are common problems that all preceptors have encountered. A busy practice environment should not prohibit the use of purposeful, spontaneous questions. Preceptors should use probing questions as teaching points arise to assess understanding and revisit these topics later in a more detailed discussion as time allows. This practice encourages the learner to connect concepts to practical application. If possible, dedicated time should be scheduled for topic discussions to maximize the opportunity for learning and minimize interruptions.

When utilized appropriately, the Socratic teaching method is mutually beneficial to both parties. However, this practice requires a commitment from both sides. Just as learners are expected to face challenging questions, preceptors must be willing to leave their comfort zone. This

technique will likely generate additional questions and allow for advanced topic discussions, which are potentially outside of the preceptor's area of expertise. Preceptors must not shy away from this challenge, but should embrace it to help foster an atmosphere of mutual learning and development.

### Summary

Precepting is a time-honored tradition and a responsibility that should not be taken lightly. As pharmacy preceptors we have an obligation to help the next generation succeed, often in manners that we were not ourselves afforded. By setting clear expectations and asking purposeful questions, we can successfully incorporate the Socratic teaching method seamlessly into practice to facilitate learning. Helping learners overcome obstacles to gain new knowledge serves not only to enhance the precepting experience, but will also promote the advancement of our profession. ●

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Congratulations to Dr. William Peppard on being recognized as a master preceptor by the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (AACP). Dr. Peppard is among seven individuals being recognized as a master preceptor by AACP this year and was nominated by the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Pharmacy. The distinction is bestowed on outstanding preceptors to recognize their dedication and commitment to excellence in experiential education and professional practice.

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