Many protocols, especially the dilemma protocols, incorporate clarifying questions and the more thought-provoking probing questions. It is vital to understand the differences between them, and recognize the purpose and appropriate timing of these very different types of questions.

Clarifying Questions:

Clarifying questions are created for the benefit of the questioner, to improve everyone’s understanding about the presentation before proceeding. Answers to clarifying questions allow the participants to later ask good probing questions and provide useful feedback. Clarifying questions generally have brief, factual answers and don’t provide new “food for thought” for the presenter. The litmus test for a clarifying question is: Must the presenter take time to ponder before they answer? If so, it’s almost certainly not a clarifying question.

Some examples of clarifying questions:

- How much time does the project take?
- How were the students grouped?
- What resources were accessible for this project?

Probing Questions:

In contrast, probing questions are created for the benefit of the presenter, to help them think more deeply about the issue at hand. After a presenter is asked a good probing question, they will often pause and say something like, “I don’t know, I’ll have to think about that...” or “Hmmm...” with an upward cast of the eyes. If you find that your probing question does not have that effect, you may actually be asking a clarifying question or making a recommendation disguised as a question. If you find yourself saying “Don’t you think you should...?” you’ve definitely gone beyond “probing” and are recommending a specific action. When you ask a genuine probing question, the presenter will never have a ready, complete answer.

People often express how difficult it is to skillfully create powerful probing questions. With that in mind, we suggest you:

- Check to see if you have a “right” answer in mind. If so, delete the judgment from the question, or don’t ask it.
- Refer to the presenter’s original focusing question. What aspect or issue are they specifically asking you to review? Check your probing question for relevance.
- Consider asking “why...?” (making sure you’re advocating for the presenter with your language and inflection, rather than appearing to criticize). Also consider asking several “why” questions in a row.
- Try using a variety of verbs: “What do you want? ...assume? ...expect?”
- Think about the concentric Zones of Comfort, Risk, and Danger. Use these as a barometer. Don’t avoid risk, but don’t push the presenter into their “danger zone.”

Probing questions are used primarily in dilemma protocols. Because dilemmas are strongly tied to emotions,
a series of questions exploring this area is often productive. *What do you fear? What is creating the most anxiety for you at this moment?*

Here is an example of the continuum of “a suggestion presented as a question” to “a good probing question.” Imagine a CFG member presenting this dilemma along with examples of student work: “The strongest math students in my class aren’t doing their best work in response to my ‘interesting math problems of the week.’” Now consider these responses given during the probing questions portion of the protocol:

- “What if students used the rubric to assess their own papers?”
  This is clearly a [suggestion disguised as a question](#).

- “What do you think would happen if students used the rubric to assess their own work?”
  This is a tweak of the one above — [still a suggestion that sounds more like a probing question](#).

- “What would the students say is an interesting math problem?”
  This is a [good probing question](#). It pushes the presenter of the dilemma to look at the situation from the student’s point of view.

- “What would have to change for the students to work more for themselves?”
  This is also a [good probing question](#), because it pushes the presenter to think about a multitude of things that could improve student's intrinsic motivation. Possibilities may include changing:
  - the physical layout of the room
  - how the students are grouped
  - who constructs the questions
  - the activity to something that might work better besides those “problems of the week”

In summary, good probing questions:

- Are general and widely useful
- Don’t place blame on anyone
- Allow multiple responses
- Help create a paradigm shift
- Empower the person with the dilemma to solve their own problem (rather than deferring to someone with greater or different expertise)
- Avoid yes/no responses
- Elicit a slow response
- Move thinking from reaction to reflection
- Encourage taking another party’s perspective

Practicing probing questions as a group is highly recommended before participating in a dilemma protocol. The [Probing Questions Practice Activity](#) is a good way to do this.