



SMP Probing Questions Exercise

Adapted from the work of JoAnne Dowd and John D'Anieri, Southern Maine Partnership.

This protocol is designed to be used in conjunction with both a written Guide to Probing Questions (from SMP or others) and a set of distinctly different written stances on a particular issue (such as equity, the role of the principal in school leadership, etc.). **Participants need to have read the Guide to Probing Questions and the range of stances on the issue to be explored before beginning the protocol.** It's also helpful for participants to have the Guide and stances in front of them during the protocol. The protocol itself is designed to take 50-60 minutes.

1. Get Organized (10 minutes)

The facilitator explains the process and organizes participants into groups of 3 or 4. Within each small group there are three roles that rotate. In each round, one participant is the presenter/responder, another person is the facilitator/timekeeper, and another is the chart paper recorder. Plan for about 10-12 minutes total per round. It's important that the facilitator help the group stick to the protocol

2. Presentation (1 minute)

The presenter/responder begins by discussing, for no more than one minute, which of the written stances on the issue he/she feels **most closely** matches his/her own stance.

3. Clarifying Questions (1 minute)

Any other member of the group then asks clarifying questions — only two total. The presenter/responder responds. (This is to help clarify the difference between clarifying and probing questions.)

4. Probing Questions (6 minutes)

The group members then take turns asking the presenter/responder a total of 4-6 probing questions (although anyone can pass if they don't have a probing question when their turn comes). Many of the probing questions may focus on specific words in the selected stance. As each question is asked, the recorder writes the question (but not the response) on chart paper. The presenter/responder responds to each question substantively **OR** by saying, "I may need to think about that."

5. Reflection (1 minute)

Group conversation pauses for one minute while everyone reflects on the questions written on the chart paper. The presenter/responder quietly reflect on which questions pushed his/her thinking the most. At the same time, the other group members quietly reflect on which questions best match the ideas in the Guide to Probing Questions.

6. Reflection Sharing (2 minutes)

The presenter/responder then briefly reports on which questions pushed his/her thinking the most, and some possible reasons for this. Then the other group members briefly explain which questions they think seem to best match the ideas in the Guide to Probing Questions.

Repeat steps 2-6 for the other group members.

7. Process Debrief (within small groups – 10 minutes)

In what ways did the “process” of this activity work for you? Do you have any suggestions for improving this protocol?