

Guideline:

Academic Questioning & Discourse with Trainees

Sandra L Hearn MD, Edward A Hurvitz MD, James T Eckner MD, M Catherine Spires MD
Department of Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation at Michigan Medicine

Guideline Goals:

1. Establish a vision for a positive environment of academic questioning, discourse, and debate.
2. Identify unique factors that modify this environment where trainees are involved.
3. Offer a guideline for faculty and trainee participation in discourse that cultivates enriching, challenging and safe dialogue.

Take Five! Highlights for Presenters & Participants

For Trainees Presenting

1. Engage potential mentors and discussants early as you prepare for the presentation.
2. Not all uncomfortable situations or oppositions are negative; exploring alternative (sometimes opposing) viewpoints forms the foundation of honest academic discourse.
3. Welcome challenging questions! When responding, keep an open mind, slow down your thoughts, and seek clarity.
4. Did you accidentally mislead? Don't despair; research the area clarify in a follow-up email or communication.
5. Confused after hearing feedback? Take time to process with the feedback giver, or with a trusted mentor, later on.

For Participants and Feedback Givers

1. Trainee presentations make up a learning environment; we expect a range of abilities and support all in their development.
2. Deliver comments kindly, with a respectful, supportive tone and direction, including non-verbal cues.
3. When presenting an opposing understanding, aim to challenge the information or paradigm, rather than the individual speaking.
4. For complex feedback situations intended to further a trainee's growth, consider a private conversation.
5. If misinformation or misleading information has been presented, we are responsible for speaking up to seek or provide clarity.

Academic Discourse

Academic questioning and discourse are critical to academic research, education, medical advancement, and professional growth. Grand rounds, didactic lectures, and departmental academic days—with multiple experts convened—serve as prime environments for this type of dialogue. The goal in academic questioning and discourse is to deepen our collective understanding about PM&R related topics in a respectful and analytical way, ground in science and facts. At times, it entails correction of misinformation and/or consideration of viewpoints, interpretations or applications that are distinct from—even in opposition to—those presented.

When information is presented in a public setting:

- correction of incorrect information or misleading interpretations should occur
- professional academic discourse in the form of questioning or raising alternative viewpoints and interpretations is encouraged

All presenters, including trainees, need to be prepared to be challenged in a professional, respectful, and thoughtful way. We encourage dialogue with faculty and appreciate when colleagues engage to deepen our collective understanding and pique curiosity in the audience—safely and supportively.

Challenges & Considerations

Academic questioning and discourse in a public setting can be uncomfortable for both feedback giver and receiver. Inherent tension exists between creating a positive learning moment for the community, and the potential to undermine a trainee's confidence.

Naturally, a range of skill levels exists among faculty and trainees, both in delivery of the feedback and ability to receive it and respond appropriately. We aim to purposefully develop these skills and not shy away from practicing them! We expect professionalism, but not perfection—from feedback giver and recipient.

Public Academic Venues Represent a Learning Environment for Trainees

Our departmental presentation forums represent learning environments for our trainees. Presenting trainees are challenged to gain expertise and present to the department; however, there remains a natural and expected potential gap in expertise compared with faculty who have practiced the subfield for years. Faculty should expect to see a range of abilities across trainee presentations. Some trainees have vast and deep knowledge of a subfield, while others are novices who are undertaking (as a program requirement) an assignment to practice gaining expertise. Furthermore, many trainees who already have niche expertise challenge their own growth by choosing to research and present in an area where they have less experience, rather than their area of greatest strength. These features distinguish trainee presentations from those of visiting professors or experienced faculty. Let us not convey a feeling of annoyance upon noticing opportunities for improvement; remember that trainees are learning a skill and we are here to support their development, at whichever stage it may be. We are allies to the trainee in the quest for a deeper and more accurate understanding of the subject matter.

For Audience Members Giving Feedback and Engaging in Dialogue

Constructive Feedback Should be Given Supportively

All constructive feedback, and especially that given publicly, should be given kindly, with a respectful, supportive tone and direction. Faculty should be especially sensitive to tone and manner when delivering feedback to trainees, as there is a perceived power differential in our roles.

Consider whether to give the feedback publicly vs privately. Under potentially stressful or challenging circumstances, we should consider deferring some constructive feedback to a private setting. Internalization of feedback is generally more effective in a private setting where a learner's confidence is not threatened. At the same time, there can be great value in sharing teaching points with a broader community, if the feedback is at a level that others can absorb and if it can be given with a focus on the subject matter and our understanding of it (rather than critique of an individual). Furthermore, misinformation should be corrected.

When presenting an opposing understanding, aim to challenge the information or paradigm, rather than the individual him or herself. Allying with and supporting the presenter while offering critique of information or application can enable your comments to be better received.

Be aware of your nonverbal cues, such as your facial expression, body language, posture, voice and eye contact. These might convey a message in contrast with your goal (Hardavella et al. 2017). The giving of feedback should be deferred (not given publicly) if strong emotions prevent a supportive manner of feedback delivery.

Note how a trainee seems to respond to your feedback. If our feedback is not well received, consider whether your style or manner of delivery contributed to discomfort, unease, or defensiveness.

Frustration with factors external to the presentation content should not be directed at a presenter during the presentation.

When the discussion or debate involves multiple experts, avoid pulling the trainee into the middle of a debate or urging the trainee to “take sides.”

Should you decide to reserve your feedback for a private setting, consider helping the trainee to explore the material more deeply or accurately and to subsequently share additional information with the broader group after reflecting together in private.

For Audience Members Listening

If you are concerned that misinformation or misleading information has been presented, please speak up.

This is the foundation of honest academic discussion, and, for faculty, it is part of our obligation toward effective training.

If you are uncertain, seek clarification: *“I think you shared that _____. My understanding of this has been different: _____. I wonder if you, or others in the audience, could help me understand this distinction?”* Your voice might help others with expertise chime in and add clarity.

If you are unsure and not fully comfortable speaking up, it is appropriate to check your understanding with a subject expert who might subsequently share clarifying information with the department after the session.

If personal attacks or critiques occur, expect the session lead to intervene.

If he/she does not, speak up to redirect dialogue or raise concern. Professional debate and questioning is welcome, but personal attacks, in any form, are inappropriate and should not be tolerated.

Remember that not all uncomfortable situations or oppositions are negative.

Sometimes, academic discourse involves disagreement and can feel uncomfortable. You may be thinking, “I would have done that differently” or “I wouldn’t have said it quite that way”. Giving presentations is stressful, including creating and fielding question-and-answer or discussion. Your heart rate may be up, you may be concerned for your peer, and you may reach out and share your support or let them know how well they handled it. The tension or discomfort alone does not mean that someone is at fault or that something has gone wrong in the environment.

If you’re not sure and something doesn’t sit right, engage the session lead or a program/departmental leader.

For the Learner Preparing for Academic Questioning or Discourse

Prepare for presentations early & well.

Early preparation for your presentation and having strong mentorship will minimize need for corrective feedback and maximize your potential for engaging your audience in a high-quality discussion over real areas of controversy. Find out if others in the department have additional expertise in your area of interest, and approach them in advance to exchange thoughts or seek advice. You will likely find that they are eager to engage in a topic of mutual interest and that this mentorship adds value!

If you are especially open to inviting a high-quality discussion—one that may challenge you and prompt your growth—consider sharing with the audience some inferences or interpretations you might make, based on the material discussed. Acknowledge any limitations in your experience (if relevant) and invite others to share their thoughts in response, including what they might interpret or apply differently. This signals your open-mindedness and maturity, and creates a safe space for your colleagues to challenge you and engage with you at a high level.

Welcome the difficult questions! They may signal your success in several ways.

With rare exception, most instances of academic questioning are positive and well intentioned: the question or counter-interpretation is presented to enhance learning for the presenter, audience, and, often, the person speaking up. Look forward to being challenged! In many cases, becoming engaged in academic questioning signals your success as a presenter, indicating:

- (a) you have presented **clearly and cogently** enough that audience members understand,
- (b) colleagues perceive enough **importance and relevance** of your material to have an opinion/perspective worth voicing,
- (c) colleagues are both engaged enough in your **environment** and comfortable enough with your mastery of the topic to debate with you.

If this is the kind of academic questioning occurring, recognize this, and applaud yourself for having delivered a meaningful, clear and relevant presentation that engaged your faculty at a peer level!

Keep an open mind & seek clarity.

With this in mind, engage in these conversations with an open mind and a readiness to reflect. Fight the urge to defend! Take a deep breath, pause, and reflect before your respond. If you disagree or are confused by the comment, ask questions or seek clarification. Keep in mind that the feedback giver may also be nervous, is communicating in real time in public without preparation, and is likely speaking with good intent—to contribute to a learning moment for the community. Consider paraphrasing the feedback or concern that you hear aloud, to clarify your own understanding before responding: *“Before I respond, I’d like to make sure I understand your feedback. What I think I’m hearing you say is that ____ and that you’re concerned that ____ would be a premature given lack of _____. Is that correct?”*

There are different ways you can choose to respond.

1. In the spirit of academic discourse, you are welcome and encouraged to offer a thoughtful and professional counter-opinion back!
2. If the speaker has, in fact, taught you something, guided your understanding, and enriched the group’s understanding, simply thank them, in a positive light. Faculty understand their role is to participate and to teach, just as they do in clinical settings.
3. But if you are less certain or still confused after asking for clarification, here are some other options:
 - a. You can respond simply with gratitude & indicate an interest in exploring the topic more. *“Thank you. I hadn’t considered whether _____. I’d like to explore that more, and if you don’t mind, I may reach out to you after I’ve had chance to look at some of that literature.”*
 - b. If it’s out of the scope of what you explored, indicate so. *“That’s an interesting point. For this session, I chose to focus on the _____. I don’t know the answer to ____ but can see how that could relate this topic. Would anyone in the audience like to comment on this?”*
 - c. Engage your audience. *“I haven’t had experience with that clinical complication yet myself; I wonder if others here have? Can any of the MSK faculty speak to this question of how _____?”*

Often, faculty who engage with you and ask challenging questions are those most equipped to further develop your understanding, or to simply have an engaging and enjoyable discussion about a shared interest. Seize these opportunities! Don't hesitate to reach out for more clarity or to open discussion in a private setting after the session is over.

Turn an awkward situation into a real positive!

If you have received real corrective feedback and realize that you may have misled or confused others publicly, do not despair. This is a teaching and learning environment, and we all (faculty included) misinterpret or err sometimes. The fact that something confused you as you did your research and preparation probably means it would have confused others as well. We encourage following up by doing the needed research to clarify your understanding, and sharing a clarifying communication with the department. This actually transforms the situation into a strong positive for the learning environment, and reflects highly on you—a trainee who is learning, looking to gain expertise and enrich the academic environment.

Take time to process with the feedback giver, or with a trusted mentor, later on.

If you are left with a feeling of confusion or that you disagree with constructive feedback given—or that something about the encounter just doesn't sit right—consider approaching the feedback giver after the session, to seek a better understanding. We also encourage you to process and reflect with a mentor or friend. A mentor is often able to keep your best interest and development at heart, while also providing external perspective.

Know that this is all excellent practice for an academic career!

Useful Resources

[Seppala E. When giving critical feedback, focus on your nonverbal cues. Retrieved October. 2017 Jan 20;17:2017.](#)

[Hardavella G, Aamli-Gagnat A, Saad N, Rousalova I, Sreter KB. How to give and receive feedback effectively. *Breathe \(Sheff\)*. 2017;13\(4\):327-333. doi:10.1183/20734735.009917](#)