Speaker 1: I was inspired to sign up because I got my certificate in the QFT online and I wanted to be here to hear it in person, and to see how I can further develop my skills by listening to how others use it in the classroom.

Christina Barsi: Hi, I'm Christina Barsi.

Sun Ezzell: And I'm Sun Ezzell, and you're listening to the Magic Mountie Podcast.

Christina Barsi: Our mission is to find ways to keep your ear to the ground so to speak, by bringing to you the activities and events you may not have time to attend, the resources on campus you might want to know more about, the interesting things your colleagues are creating, and the many ways we can continue to better help and guide our students.

Sun Ezzell: We bring to you the voices of Mount SAC, from the classroom to completion.

Speaker 4: And I know I want to achieve my goals, and I know people here are going to help me to do it.

Speaker 5: She is a sociology major and she's transferring to Cal Poly Pomona. Psychology major. English major.

Sun Ezzell: From transforming part-time into full time...

Speaker 6: I really like the time that we spent with Julie about how to write a CV and a cover letter-

Christina Barsi: Or just finding time to soak in the campus.

Speaker 7: Think of the natural environment around us as a library.

Christina Barsi: We want to keep you informed and connected to all things Mount SAC, but most importantly we want to keep you connected with each other. I'm Christina Barsi, Mt. SAC alumni and producer of this podcast.

Sun Ezzell: And I'm Sun Ezzell, learning assistance faculty and professional learning academy coordinator.

Christina Barsi: And this is the Magic Mountie Podcast.

Christina Barsi: Staying curious allows us to stay engaged, and what better way to practice curiosity than asking questions. I'm Christina and we have our last installment episode of the question formulation technique and this time you'll hear from your very own Mount SAC colleagues who've bravely tested this technique out in the classroom. Here we have a panel discussion of observations, challenges, and discoveries that they made while going through the process and if you'd like to try it out in your classroom, you can reach out to them to help get you started. Enjoy

Luz: Welcome to the panel on the question formulation technique. First of all, I would like to ask you to introduce yourselves briefly and to share how you have used the question formulation technique in your classroom. And what has been your purpose in using the question formulation technique?

Mark: Hi, I'm Mark. I also am from Massachusetts, that's why I volunteered. Anyway, so I teach astronomy and geology and they're both very visual subjects, and students come into the classroom not knowing anything about them, so they don't tend to know what they even want to know about them. So when I took this training, I guess I'd call it last time, they told us we need to introduce a prompt, like we had the words up here. This technique very much lends itself to a picture. So you put a picture up there and you have students write questions about it. That was really helpful because everybody learns and they can ask questions about a picture that's up there. And so that got people to be, I think it instilled a lot of curiosity. And of course that's what sparks the class. So that's why I like it.

Barbara: I'm Barbara Gonzalez, I teach read, and I also do tutor training. And there's two ways I have started using this. I'm a little kind of embarrassed to say this, but I'm going to say it. I'm not as consistent as I want to be with this process even though I know it works. And so coming here and having a spotlight on you is a little bit uncomfortable because I'm not real good at it yet. But the way I want to do this is to continue doing the things that are working and revisit them. What happens in my classes, I get busy with other things and I forget to revisit the question formulation and to continue to allow the students to have that in their hands. So in my read classes we work with something called KWL and it's a questioning process that is very metacognitive. And what I was experiencing and looking at, as I looked at these products that students were creating was sometimes the questions were wanting.

Barbara: In other words, maybe there was one question on there that they wanted to know about something and so you'd work with them and it was like pulling teeth. And then when I discovered the question formulation technique, it worked so well for me in participating in it. I tried it in class and it changed the whole dynamics of the classes and I was able to get better questions. Sometimes for some students that just meant more questions and they were still learning to look at their questions and pick the ones that were going to give them the biggest bang for their buck. Later I became, what is it, Inland Area Writing Project, I had to do this research project and it was not going well and it happened about the time we did the question formulation and I thought, I'm going to use this question formulation technique and look at my pre KWL charts and look at my later ones and there was a huge difference.

Barbara: So my inquiry, I was able to speak with some authority and some aha, I found something that's working. So it's become very important to me and I'm doing a little better. One thing that really changed for me was when I was teaching tutor 10A, it's an introductory tutoring class. I wasn't real happy with the Socratic method and the things I was seeing students do with other students and it seemed like they were using questions that seemed unauthentic and they were using them to kind of beat up the tutee. it was sort of like, Oh you don't know that. Well let me ask you another question, and you can literally see some students flinch with that.

Barbara: And I know the Socratic method is a good one. And I thought what if we started teaching tutors to ask better questions, to ask more questions, and then maybe open up the idea of, Oh that's what it feels like to ask questions, to develop those questions, and maybe we should open the room and be more democratic and let the tutees ask their own questions. So it's not written into the curriculum and I'm not teaching it anymore, but eventually I'll be teaching tutor 10R and I really would like to work with tutors and tutor trainers to bring the question formulation into that. Not to get rid of Socratic method, but to kind of close the loop on it.

Luz: Thank you, Barbara.

Dianne: My name is Dianne Rowley and I am also in learning assistance. Oh, Sun went to the conference, brought back the book and we have, I'm part of the developmental education study team. It's now kind of transformed into the inspired teaching community of practice on Fridays, once a month. It's just a group that talks about teaching. That's what we do. So this was quite some time we had the book and then we read the book and then I started implementing question formulation technique in my classes just from reading the book. And then we got Luz and Andrew to come to campus and then I got better at it cause I was kind of, I taught myself how to do it and then I learned how to do it. I use it because it helps me, I recognized right away it helps with the imbalance of power in the classroom, that the person who asks the question holds power. I try to always address the power imbalance teacher student dynamic. So this helps.

Sun Ezzell: Hi, my name is Sun Ezzell. I teach writing and reading and learning assistance. And after I went to your conference in Irvine, it took me like a week to work up the courage to try this in class. And a really amazing thing happened right away. A student who was taking a second class with me, we'd had a whole semester before and then he was taking a summer intersession class with me and I had never heard him say anything, not to me, not to any other students. And within five minutes of QFT, the very first time we tried it in class, he was standing up and gesturing and writing and guiding his group through the process. And I was like, wow, what other amazing things are going to happen through this process? So for me it's really been so important in terms of creating a comfortable, safe space for students, creating an equitable space in the classroom.

Sun Ezzell: And oftentimes in students' reflections, they'll say, I like that no one was left out. I like that everyone's voices were heard. And I think that's such a key part of learning experience for all of us, right? One of my favorite things to do with the questions after students come up with them is have them do something I learned from Barbara, which is a [inaudible 00:08:59] survey. They choose the questions that they would like to survey their classmates or survey folks outside of class. So that's one way to kind of start exploring the questions that come out of the QFT.

Herschel: Hello everybody. I'm Herschel and I teach English, and on the first day of class and I say, Hey everybody, welcome to English 1A, what are you going to do this semester? And students start to say things like, we're going to read. And they moan. And then I say, what else are you going to do? They're going to write. And then they moan. And then someone says, we have to write a research paper. And they all moan tremendously. And I stop and say, well, hold on. What does the word research mean? To research means to look things up and learn things new. So how about if I delete the word research paper and I call it a learn paper and they go, Oh, that sounds better. And I ask them, how many of you use your phone to look up stuff? There was a football game last night, who won?

Herschel: What was the score? And they do that on their phones instantly and we're talking about modern technologies changing the way we learn. So how do I take that concept into a academic paper? And so I came across the question formulation technique by taking one of Sun's workshops on flex day and it fit with my critical thinking system I was already using where a whole element of thought is known as questions. So I said, how deep can I go down this rabbit hole? And it ended up being a gold mine because the hardest part to do, it's easy for the students. It's hard for me. The hardest part to do for me is come up with the QFT. Well I actually gave you my students' questions from the spring of 2019 and then my QFT is on top, and it's obesity in America today. That doesn't seem like that would have been that hard to come up with.

Herschel: That took me three days to figure out. That is the hardest part of our job in the system. Because once I have that, and I can say this is what I predict will happen in class, it fit the essay we're writing, which is a food theme, and it was about who do we blame for obesity in America today? And the students had to write a letter as an essay to a company, a person, an entity blaming them for obesity. And so I said, instead of me lecturing for two days on this, why don't I just have the students figure out their own questions they want to ask and answer. And everything on that handout was designed by students and I think we had an average of 27 questions per group. And then when we did the open-close switch, we had another five questions.

Herschel: And then when I said, okay, did anything else spark a new question? Write that down too. We ended with around 33 to 35 questions per group, and they were shocked. And I gave them 10 minutes, way more time than we had. 10 minutes. They had 33 questions you guys. And that's really impressive when every student had a voice in what the question was. And then they write their essay and we can come back and we can look at those questions and we can answer most of them even if the student didn't write about it directly, right? So if they ask which state has the highest rate of obesity, I think it's North Carolina. And even though it's not in their essay, they can still answer that question now. And bingo. That's learning.

Luz: Thank you. So when you use the question formulation technique, can you just quickly tell us what was it that you wanted to accomplish, what was your specific purpose in using it? And can you say it in no more than two words?

Herschel: Good essay.

Barbara: Student engagement.

Dianne: Empowering students.

Mark: Barbara and I are singing the same tune. We're doing a duet. Student engagement.

Sun Ezzell: Equitable community.

Luz: So as you can see, there are many purposes in using the question formulation technique, and there are many more. So when, and I know that you have touched on this already, but what did you observe happen to students when they went through the question formulation technique process?

Mark: I just tried this again, and like Barbara, I'm not, I'm sure that I don't do it often enough. But it was very interesting to me this semester that I had my students, in a particularly dull moment for them, get together and do this technique. And at the end of it, there's one group of four or five students who, they only had about nine questions, and I was like, Hey, what happened to you guys? How come you only had nine questions? And one of them said, well we don't even know each other's names.

Mark: And I was like, did I need to address that? I mean, students come to our classes and the first thing they do is say hi, I'm such and such. So I didn't even know that. So that was brand new to me. So now, maybe I'll go to the name tents, but that was a really interesting thing that came out of that, was that they said even after they had done this, they didn't know each other's names so they didn't really ask each other any questions. So I think that's a valuable thing to remember is that, get the students to share their names and maybe their addresses.

Barbara: This one's kind of hard to express, but it's something that made me realize how important it is to give agency to students and how important it is to help students find their voice. So I have some students that just dive into this question formulation thing and they're really good at it and others that get better at it as we go along and some that are kind of quiet and hang back, but they still participate. And there was this one student that I wasn't really sure he was getting much of it and it came to student hour one day and his hands were shaking and I thought, Oh God, what do we have here? And he sat down and he had a list of questions for me and he was afraid I would get tired or annoyed with him for bringing in 10 questions and I don't even remember what they were about.

Barbara: It was about the assignment I gave him or something. And it just floored me because he was taking what he learned about creating his own questions and stepping out into something that was scary for him. That, number one, I was really taken aback that he was afraid to come talk to me, and it was midterm and I still, that bothered me. I thought I was setting up this wonderful environment, but it was just where he was at. It was difficult for him to ask questions. It was difficult for him to come, to create questions difficult, more difficult for him to come and ask me. But he did it. And so to me, I just think I know I need to do more of them and I'll let them do the talking.

Luz: Thank you.

Dianne: I've noticed that it's hard to tell the students. So the students, there's lots of curious students and they ask a lot of questions. Those same students, that handful of students you have, they're always asking the questions. So when we do the question formulation technique, it's clear to see that, there's students who are really curious and they always have a lot of questions and they're great. And then there's students who are intimidated by asking questions. They're, maybe they're shy or introverted or they just don't feel safe, they don't want to be wrong. But then there's students who just don't know what questions to ask. They just don't have any questions. They just, it didn't occur to them. They just don't know how to do it. So doing this in a group, in a mixed group is really good scaffolding for those students. The students who can ask questions, they're great, they're going to be fine. It's the ones who just don't really know how to do it or why they should do it. And so working in that group together, it helps.

Sun Ezzell: I think one of my favorite things about the process and seeing students explore the process is how quickly students have ownership over the process. Even the first time through. But definitely by the third time we use this, I'm always like, I could go get a latte and walk around campus for half an hour cause you guys have this on your own now. And the other thing that I noticed is how kind and compassionate students are with each other. And we've all had those classes where there's a student or two where we just think, this person just needs really just a lot of kindness and support from their classmates and I, every time I'm always struck by how kind the student's classmates are in including and reaching out and involving every single student.

Luz: Thank you, Sun.

Herschel: I think I found the process of prioritizing the questions to be the most informative for me as an observer when this is happening, I follow the stopwatch idea for, 10 minutes of this and five minutes of that. And I told my students, you have five minutes to prioritize your questions. I want you to pick five and then I give them what they're going to prioritize. So it's not just completely open, a little bit of a guidance on that. And I set my stopwatch for five minutes and I'm watching the class. And this is where the dialogue really happens, about how do you argue that this question is an umbrella for these questions and should it go one, two, three, four, five and why? And they start talking to each other and they sound like experts in their field. And there is where the confidence really builds in doing this.

Herschel: And most of them blow right through the five minutes. And I don't even tell them that it's over, I just stop my stopwatch and tell them, Oh yeah, you have more time, you have way more time. And then I look at it and it's been 12 minutes. So one of the things I've done is I let that number be flexible based on how the students are reacting to discussing the five questions. And I oftentimes will say, I'm just an observer, but you guys sound like your doctors in obesity now because look at all these things that you're trying to say and articulate and you know way more than you actually think you know, and once you get your five, now you've got to prioritize them. And I think that to me is the moment where they have the aha and you go, "See, I knew you can do it," and it leads them down a path to learning and knowledge.

Luz: Okay. So I have several questions, and you take it the way that you want. Value for you and your practice. What has been the most difficult aspect of the question formulation technique and what have been some changes that you have had to make?

Herschel: I'll start this one. I think the most challenging thing is making sure you do this more than once in a semester. So they get used to doing it on their own. So that requires you to budget your time in your classroom. And I could admit in a class like critical thinking where time is of the essence, it's hard for me to get the chance to do it two, three, four or five times. So one of the things I've done is I use modified versions of it. So rather than a gigantic group like we're in now, I might say, okay class, I just did something. There should be questions, spend one minute, write down three questions you have.

Herschel: And then I'll have them ask those questions of me or I'll have them talk to each other to find the answers. And I'll say if there's one question that a group couldn't answer, that's the one I want you asking me at this point, especially if it's about an assignment or a topic we're looking at. So yeah, the biggest thing would be time to do it consistently. And then adjustments I've made include doing it by themselves, doing it in short bursts, maybe three questions. That way I can make sure that I have answered everything before the class ends.

Dianne: If I don't use the right question focus. Like Hershel said, he spent three days figuring out his question focus. If I, if I'm not careful about that, the learning will go in a different direction that I haven't intended, which may not be bad, but I got stuff I have to cover. So it can, the time, I have to be careful about the question focus to try to get students, because I need to get students from A to B, not A to Z. So I have to be mindful that the first few times I went through the process, it took some time to, for me to know what to tell students to get them to do what they needed to do. So it took some practice. So the first couple of times didn't go very well, but that's okay. Kept working on it and it got better as I went.

Barbara: I would say being as authentic as I can in integrating it into the course outline already. So there's opportunity, and sometimes I intentionally sit down and look at my lesson plans and jot down when I might introduce it, and I need to continue to do that. And if it isn't going well to make an adjustment, I also really want to start collecting more of the students' reflections on it because they really do inform you if you get to see them. And for a long time I was using the free writes where you're free from my prying eyes to look at anything you're writing and that's kind of been a mistake because I don't get to see what they're saying.

Barbara: So making a more formal reflection that I would like them to turn in after we've done question formulation with an assignment that follows, it's kind of an introduction given for me to have a question formulation at the beginning of an assessment we're doing, but to actually come full circle and have them do a formalized piece. Just on that question, how did this help you? How did it inform you?

Mark: One of the issues I've had is students staying focused on the topic in a sense. If they think they've run out of questions because they're not really trying to do it, it's very easy for them to start doing something else. And another thing is sometimes when students don't take the whole process very seriously. I had a picture of the different terrains of California labeled on the wall, a map of California and said, here are the coast ranges, here's the Sierra Nevada range. And one of the important questions that my students asked was, is a range a stove? Okay, so yes, you end up with that kind of thing sometimes. And you just kind of go over it and say, okay, that's funny haha, next time it will be more serious hopefully. The other challenge I've had was what do you do with their questions afterwards? So I think it's valuable to go through the lesson that you had intended, however it is, if it's hands on activities and then come back to those questions and say, Hey, who can answer these? I think that's a good way to close the loop.

Luz: Thank you. So we are opening it now for questions that you have of the panelists.

Speaker 13: Do you all find that there's an ideal number for a group to get together and write questions?

Herschel: Four is my ideal number. Three, you don't get much diversity in the questions. Five, not everyone gets to say all their questions because of time. So I go with four.

Sun Ezzell: I always say groups of three to five and that could be tricky when you have folks who trickle in, but any fewer than three and there just aren't enough ideas, and more than five it's hard for people to participate.

Dianne: Same, three to five small group.

Speaker 14: I was just curious to know, do you do the same format where one person scribes, because it's intense. So is that a must do, have one person, or have you ever shared responsibility in scribing?

Mark: So yeah, so what I've done is I have individuals sit quietly for the first few minutes and write their own questions and then a scribe puts them all together on the sheet without judging, without discussing. And so that gets over that in a way. And that way, I mean again, you can be thinking of a question and by the time somebody gets to write it, you forgotten what your question was. So if they all write them down, that's worked really well for me.

Barbara: I pay attention to what's happening in the room and if, as you're walking around, if you notice that there's a scribe that's not asking any questions, I'll just throw out there, let your scribe ask their questions now and have them do it and formalize it that way. Sometimes they'll pass the marker around.

Sun Ezzell: So I think I've been forgetting that part. I don't ask for one volunteer to scribe, usually there is a volunteer. What I do is I ask for someone from their group to come up and get a piece of easel paper and someone else from the group to come up and grab a handful of markers. And I say just because you're grabbing the markers does not mean you have to be the only one who's going to write. How you begin is how it's going to continue. So if you're running around posting all the paper and putting out all the markers and then you're running around afterwards, grabbing everything and cleaning up and they're going to get their iced coffee on the way to the next class, that's how it's going to continue. So it's nice for them to have a chance to be responsible for the setup.

Barbara: Students will surprise you, too. So one time they just all, one group just everybody grabbed a marker and simultaneously they just filled the page with their questions. They still had to organize it. They still had to read it, they still had to open and close them and then prioritize. So it was kind of fun for that one group.

Speaker 15: Most of what I've heard so far has been activities in class. Is there anything that you've done to assign question formulation as homework, where students have to think about the questions at home and then bring in their questions?

Mark: Short answer is no, but I think that the time limit actually puts their brains into a frenzy and they have to, because otherwise they're going to judge their own questions, if they have too much time. So it may work very well, but I haven't done that.

Barbara: When I use question formulation technique, it's part of the process of accomplishing an assessment and so they do revisit it either by addressing the questions that they wrote themselves and done a little research to answer or they write about what it was like to come up with that question and what did it do to inform them of the finished products that they come up with?

Dianne: I teach online and I'm looking for a way to do this online. I haven't found that way yet, but if anybody has any ideas, let me know.

Sun Ezzell: I like to complete the whole process in class because then they have a chance to collaborate and one idea sparks another and then we make sure that they get to do the written reflection, which is so important, but that piece with having them choose questions, maybe their groups priority questions, maybe questions that weren't chosen as priority questions or their own questions on the question focus. Putting that onto a nine space where then they go out after class outside of the classroom and survey each other and then bring those conversations back. I found it was very effective.

Herschel: Yes, to answer your question. I have my students read a chapter in the book and their observations for reading the chapter are literally questions, so I don't build the QFT. The chapter is the QFT and therefore when they come to class they have all these questions and I tell them if you can answer it, do so before you come to class. Usually those are the closed questions and then in class we're going to talk for a couple hours and do some activities and then you should be writing down the answers to those questions as we encounter them. And then anything left over, that's when we start having those dialogues and say, okay, did I not answer one of the questions on your list? And that's when you get a lot of those, Hey, I read this chapter and I was confused on this one thing.

Herschel: What does this mean? And I can now pick up what it is I need to cover in more detail or reiterate for the students. And I think that works for any discipline, that should work online. Is your observations to prove you read it? It's not a test, it's not a quiz, it's nothing but questions. And if you need to give them a number to aim for like, Hey, this chapter is long, give me 20 questions, fine. You want to be more open ended and say write as many as you can think of, fine too. I mean if you want them to start building it into a scaffolded assignment, like do a research paper, give me some work cited here, tell me what you've learned. All that will come out of it. So I think that's a very effective way to do what you asked. Do it at home, bring it to class, let that lead our discussion.

Luz: Thank you. So as you can see, there is a lot of flexibility on how to use the question formulation technique and also how to adapt it, how to adjust it to your needs. So closing comments and you can say whatever you want to say.

Herschel: My closing comment would be is that I always think that anything that can be used across disciplines that can be modified for what you're doing is only there to help your students and what you do with it and how you use it really depends upon what you're doing that day or what you're teaching. And so, look at it, read about it, take your certification, if you can in this process, it's really hands on, and run with it. Like have fun.

Sun Ezzell: I guess I just would say that maybe I'm the only one, but sometimes it can be kind of nerve wracking to try something new in the classroom. You don't know how that's going to go. It's totally so worth it. So just kind of taking a deep breath, giving something new a try, and the changes that you see in your students and in your classroom community completely make it worth it and that we're here to support you.

Dianne: If you're thinking that your schedule is already packed, you have so many topics. I'm assistant curriculum liaison. I see your CORs, I see your lecture topical outlines, and your laptop outlines and they are packed. So it's going to be challenging for some of you in this room to work this in. I encourage you to try it. Maybe even have a conversation with your department and maybe try it as a department together to work it in. Maybe it's possible, amongst in the context of the topics that you already have and try it with somebody or just one other person and then you have somebody to kind of, if it doesn't go as well as you hoped that's okay. Try it again. Regroup. Have a buddy, try it with a buddy.

Barbara: I think examining something that's been kind of troubling for you. Something that your students aren't getting and you don't know why. Something that's key that they need before they go on. And I'm looking at David cause he teaches math and I think that's amazing and I kind of don't know how I would use question formulation technique for that. But if there's something that's going on in your classroom that you've noticed from semester to semester, that may be where you focus on something and see if you can try it one day and just give it a go and be nice to yourself, okay? Because sometimes I beat myself up over this and it's not good to do that because we're still trying and learning and growing.

Mark: I'd like to add, we could do a duet now. So first of all, I got to say, Sun you poor thing, you're like the only person in this room who's ever had trouble doing something new in your classroom. [crosstalk 00:31:00]

Mark: I also wanted to say, is you guys know, any panel discussion always has a dissenter. Right? But you couldn't find one for this. I just think it's really, it seems to work and that's really important and powerful. I think that this technique seems to, nobody has ever found a way that it doesn't work for them. I've never heard of anybody saying, I tried that, it didn't work for me.

Mark: I think another thing to address is something Diane was saying is that your schedules are packed, but don't you find that it goes faster when students are interested? So if you can get them to have a prompt that gets them interested in the subject, then you're going to get through your packed schedule easier than if you don't try this. That's my 2 cents.

Luz: Thank you so much. So let's give a hand to the panelists.

Christina Barsi: Thank you for listening to the Magic Mountie Podcast. Remember to subscribe on Apple podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you like to get your podcasts, so you can listen in the car, in your office, or however you like to listen. Once you subscribe, we'd love to hear what you think by leaving us a review. And don't forget to share your favorite episodes.