

We should all be asking more questions

Fear of looking 'stupid' holds us back from understanding the world better

SARAH O'CONNOR



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Sarah O'Connor FEBRUARY 7 2023



As a junior economics reporter, I was once given an assignment which made me panic. I had been asked to write a story about an economic concept I didn't really understand. No one else from my team was around. Googling it only left me more confused. Just then, Martin Wolf, the FT's chief economics commentator, walked past my desk. I took a deep breath and asked him. He explained it clearly in a few sentences, and if he thought I was silly for having to ask, he never made me feel that way.

Ever since then, I have been a big believer in asking "stupid" questions, by which I mean questions that you fear make you look stupid. But I'm worried this is a dying art.

It has never been easy, of course. Lecturers have always found that the best questions from students, the ones they worry might be daft but are actually very useful, tend to come during breaks, or on the walk between buildings after the lecture has ended.

When teaching moved online after the pandemic started, those opportunities disappeared. But

many academics and trainers discovered that online tools actually made it easier for some students to ask about the things that confused them. Suddenly, they could type questions in the chat box or send a direct message to the lecturer, rather than put their hand up and ask in front of everyone.

Platforms such as Mentimeter added an extra layer of comfort by allowing students to ask questions anonymously. Some academics have now integrated these online tools into their face-to-face lectures, so that students can continue to ask questions without revealing their identity.

There is clearly some value in this. I sometimes moderate audience Q&A sessions at events, and a handful of the same confident talkers can dominate. The ability for audience members to submit questions by text does seem to draw out a more diverse set of people who might otherwise stay silent.

But what if we are losing something too? The more we use technology to insulate ourselves from the discomfort of asking questions, the more fearful we might grow about doing it face to face. One academic told me the vast majority of his students “are really up for it” but seem too nervous to take “that final step”. He got so frustrated by the silence in lectures he brought in one of his child’s soft balls and told them: “I’m going to chuck this out and whoever catches it has to ask me a question. Any question.” He says they looked at the ball like it was a hand grenade.

Yet asking someone questions face to face can be the best way to make sure you really understand something. I have sometimes asked people to sketch diagrams for me too. This matters if your job involves clear communication — otherwise you can end up regurgitating technical terms because you don’t have the confidence to put them into plain language.

As a beloved journalism handbook of mine puts it, you have to be able to “call a spade a spade, instead of bringing in someone from Harvard to solemnly declare it a long-handled personal earthmoving implement”. Journalists don’t always manage this (me included).

A [recent review](#) of the impartiality of the BBC’s coverage of certain economic issues found that “too many journalists lack understanding of basic economics or lack confidence reporting it”. The review’s authors were also “disturbed by how many people said they didn’t understand the coverage”.

Fear of asking “stupid” questions can lead you to pretend you know more than you do, which also makes you more vulnerable to bluff, bullshit and fraud. To take one example: while artificial intelligence is making huge strides in some areas, companies are also buying plenty of commercial products that computer science professor Arvind Narayanan [calls “AI snake oil”](#).

One [study](#) published in 2021 asked participants to rank their knowledge of a set of terms on a five-point scale from “never heard of it” to “know it well, understand the concept”. Some of the terms were real; others were fake. The study found that people who were more willing to bullshit about what they knew were also more likely to fall for the bullshit of others.

I know not everyone is lucky enough to have a Martin Wolf wandering past their desk. But take it

from someone who asks questions for a living: most people really don't mind being asked something "stupid". If they do, it is probably because they don't really understand it themselves, or they have something to hide. In that sense, you learn something useful either way.

sarah.oconnor@ft.com

Letter in response to this column:

[Remembering questions you were afraid to ask](#) / [From John McNally, Brussels, Belgium](#)

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