



Evaluating Knowledge

How can I ask adults what they know about a topic without making them feel uncomfortable or threatened or stupid?

Finding out adults' knowledge without making them feel 'on the spot' or 'back in school' is a challenging task in program evaluation. Unlike attitude questions to which adults enjoy giving their opinion, knowledge questions tend to make them feel 'exposed' because they believe they ought to know the information you are asking. If adults feel this way, they are less likely to finish or return your survey.

To measure knowledge, many instructors like to use True/False questions. On the positive side, these questions can test many things: factual knowledge, critical thinking, applicability of principles, and priorities. On the negative, these questions can be threatening, even demeaning when a person doesn't know the answer and has to guess. For the instructor, the answers that are 'guesses' create a serious problem; they hide a clear, scientific view of what the class actually knows or does not know.

To retain the value of True/False questions, improve their scientific worth, and eliminate adult resentment, add three new categories: Probably False, Not Sure, and Probably True. Put the items down the left-hand side of the page so that the answer columns look like this:

<i>Item 1</i>	FALSE	PROBABLY FALSE	NOT SURE	PROBABLY TRUE	TRUE
<i>Item 2</i>	FALSE	PROBABLY FALSE	NOT SURE	PROBABLY TRUE	TRUE
<i>Item 3</i>	FALSE	PROBABLY FALSE	NOT SURE	PROBABLY TRUE	TRUE

In a recent pilot of a survey among dairy farmers in which 35 True/False statements were used to measure knowledge, the farmers chose Probably False, Not Sure, and Probably True over 60 percent of the time. The choice of these answer categories is exciting news to an instructor for it identifies the items that need to be emphasized in the program.

The choice is also good for adult learners: the farmers commented after the survey, these three answer categories make you feel 'less stupid.'

Nancy Ellen Kiernan, Ph.D., Program Evaluator, nekiernan@psu.edu

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