

Planning for effective questioning

Examine and reflect upon questioning practices

- Record a whole-class question-and-answer session. Replay the recording to help you to evaluate the different aspects of your own questioning. You may find it useful to focus upon whether:
 - you asked too many questions
 - you had a balance of open and closed, high-order and low-order questions
 - you encouraged opinion, informed speculation and tentative answers
 - you handled incorrect answers effectively
 - you provided thinking time.
- Reflect personally asking questions such as:
 - Do you ever consciously audit your questions?
 - How good are the key questions you plan for each lesson?
 - How well do the questions you ask relate to the lesson’s learning objectives/goals?
 - Do the questions you ask challenge students’ thinking?
 - How often do you ask further questions that really probe understanding?
 - How often do the learners ask the questions?
 - How do the questions you ask promote learning?

The questions below provide a more specific framework to analyse your strengths and weaknesses in questioning, and to focus your next efforts. ‘Traffic light’ your responses, then choose one or two ‘ambers’ to develop and work on in collaboration with your supervisor/mentor/coach.

- Do you ask questions that reinforce or revisit the learning objectives?
- Does your questioning engage students in thinking for themselves?
- Do you involve all students?
- Do you model for students the sort of questions they might need to ask?
- Do you ask questions that show connections between previous and new learning?
- Do your questions motivate students?
- Do you preface your questions with an individual’s name and a motivational challenge? (E.g. “James, I know that you can give me three examples...”) Can you do this in ways that make it safe to get it wrong?
- Do you ask students to explain their thinking?

- What do you do when you ask the question “What makes you think that Rapeshe?” and get the answer “Dunno miss”. Do you provide other, extending questions: “What other alternatives did you consider?”, “Why did you reject them?”, “What makes this choice best?”
- Do you reflect back? “So, if I’m right what you’re saying is...”
- Do you ask students to listen accurately? Summarise? Speculate?
- Do they listen and respond to each other as well as the teacher?
- Do you sometimes play devil’s advocate with your questions?
- Do you promote justification and reasoning?
- What about speculation and hypothesis?
- Can you encourage upside-down thinking by asking for the opposite point of view or an outrageous alternative?
- Do you encourage thinking about thinking through your use of questions?
- Do you provide opportunities for students to explain the processes they choose, as well as describe the outcome?
- Do you foster an atmosphere of trust where student’s concerns and ideas are valued?
- Do you stage or sequence questions with increasing levels of challenge, moving them from unsorted or unordered knowledge to organised understanding, where patterns and meaning have been established?

Source: (Sullivan)

Establish expectations

- Let students 'in' on the way lessons will be conducted. Negotiate a set of 'rules' or 'norms' for group expectations related to individual behaviour during lessons and discussions. For example:
 - We all need time to reflect on past experiences if we are to gain new understandings.
 - We all need time to think before speaking.
 - We all need time to think out loud and complete our thoughts.
 - We learn best when we formulate and answer our own questions.
 - We learn from one another when we listen with attention and respect.
 - When we share talk time, we demonstrate respect, and we learn from one another.

- Introduce and explicitly teach and explain the norms. For example:

"We all need time to think before speaking."

"Sometimes, when I ask a question, several of you raise your hands right away. You know an answer immediately and you want to share it! Others of you are still thinking. And that's OK. In fact, I'm going to ask all of us to take more time before we speak and to use that time to think. Because even if you have an answer right away, if you think about the question for a little while before you speak, you may come up with another answer or a better answer. Why do you think it would be good to take some time to think before speaking?"

- After students demonstrate an initial understanding of this norm, it can be reinforced through practice and feedback.

"Let's try this. I'm going to ask a question, and then I want all of us to say together, 'one-thousand-and-one, one-thousand-and-two, one-thousand-and-three.' Then I'll call on someone to answer. OK?"

"Now I want you to practice this in your groups. You'll find a set of questions in your folders. You are to facilitate a group discussion, using wait time after posing each question."

The teacher might circulate around the room, monitoring and making notes for feedback that can be given to the class at the end of the exercise.

- Finally debrief the activity with the whole group – probing again to encourage students to reflect on the value of this norm to their learning.

Source: (Walsh & Sattes, 2005)

Establish student accountability

- Clarify with students the importance of everyone doing the thinking, learning and reflecting throughout each stage of every lesson. If the classroom culture emphasises that everyone is expected to think and be ready to answer any question rather than 'hands up', students are more likely to be involved with the lesson.
- Create a system to help you keep track of who you call on, so you can ensure that all students have equal opportunities to contribute.
- Forewarn students about some key questions: “Later in this lesson I am going to ask a question about...”
- Model how a variety of questioning strategies will be used in the classroom, reminding students that they can say “please come back to me” if they need more think time or are unsure and want to build on the ideas of their peers. However, be sure to let them know you will *always* come back to them.
- Try to avoid answering your own questions! If the students know you will give them the answers after a few seconds of silence anyway, what is their incentive?
- Try not to accept “I don’t know” for an answer.
- Allow additional think time, if necessary, by moving on and then coming back to the student for a response later.
- Offer hints or suggestions to guide students in formulating quality responses.
- If a student is unable or unwilling to formulate a response, then offer two or more options and let the student choose one.
- Always try to find something positive to say about students’ efforts, even if their answer is incorrect, as public embarrassment only confirms apprehensions about class participation.
- When students make mistakes, build their confidence and trust by asking follow-up questions to help them self-correct and achieve success.
- Practice questioning strategies with students. Repeat as necessary until various strategies become routine.

Build essential questions into lesson plans

- When planning units/lesson sequences, plan the essential questions to accompany the major learning objectives/goals for the unit/learning sequence. These ‘big picture’ essential questions should be concept-related, open-ended and designed to guide inquiry into the big ideas. For example:
 - *In what ways do living organisms survive harsh or changing environments?*
 - *Do the benefits outweigh the costs of deforestation?*
 - *What should we eat?*
 - *What can we learn from the past?*
 - *How do writers influence their audience?*
- Share the essential question/s at the beginning of the unit/lesson sequence to motivate students and generate interest. “These are the questions we will be trying to answer in this unit/lesson.”
- Use essential questions to guide the planning of further questions within lessons.
- Ensure the questions are answered by the unit/lesson.
- Match questions to and embed them in the learning objectives/goals for the lesson and share with students.
- Ensure there is a balance between asking and telling.
- Ensure there are questions planned that require students to engage in higher-level thinking as well as recall. It’s easy to pose a low-level question on the hop, but much harder to construct a higher-level question on the hop.
- Stage the questions so that the level of challenge increases as the lesson proceeds. This means asking knowledge and comprehension questions about new material prior to questions of analysis and evaluation.
- Pause during the lesson to check whether the key questions have been answered: “Have we answered this? What else do you need to know?”

Ask more open questions

Different experts categorise questions in different ways. However, the simplest and most important distinction, recognised by all experts, is between lower-order questions, which require children to remember, and higher-order questions, which require them to think.

As a general rule, lower-order or factual recall questions tend to be closed, with a single right answer, and are likely to be what, who, when or where.

Higher-order are more likely to start with how, why or which, and tend to be open – with a range of possible responses.

Lower-order questions have an important part to play in checking knowledge. But most research suggests teachers ask too many of these basic recall questions and not enough thought-provoking, higher-order questions. Because teachers ask so many questions each day, it's easy for one style of questioning to become habitual and lower-order questions feel safest because they keep the lesson moving.

- When planning, rework lower order questions to raise the level of thinking required.
- Pose one question at a time. Refrain from posing a string of questions.
- Ask the types of questions that have more than one answer or that don't have a single 'right' answer.
- Follow up answers with words and phrases like: *Explain, Why?, What makes you think that?* and *Tell me more*, to provide greater challenge, encourage speaking at greater length and get students thinking around the question in greater depth.
- Use tools such as Bloom's taxonomy to assist with the framing of questions that pose different cognitive demands.

Use questions to promote collaboration

Tips and tactics

- Begin a lesson by giving pairs of students a question to answer from the last lesson.
- Ask pairs to discuss a question for a minute before they answer it.
- Make questions a normal part of the lesson. "Earlier this lesson I asked you two questions. Turn to a partner and see if you're ready to answer them yet."
- Allow time for groups/pairs of students to research answers to more complex questions.
- Snowballing: pairs discuss, move into fours, share ideas, fours to eights – feedback. (Allows safety – no one person is responsible for the answer).
- Instead of 'leading' a discussion, teach students how to discuss and break the class up into groups of four or five students, so they can then discuss the issues. This is much more productive than having 30 or more students listening to just a few talk with the teacher.
- Students cannot answer questions or discuss something of which they know nothing. Design learning activities in preparation for student-led discussions that will give students background knowledge, evidence, and ammunition to argue a point.
- Help students identify opinion and utilise evidence to support their argument – the point of argument being to convince rather than to simply expound both sides of an issue.

Involve students in forming and asking questions

- If the classroom culture encourages the asking of questions and makes it okay to give a wrong answer, then students will be more likely to offer answers.
- Hold back on a new topic until the class has worked out what questions they would like answered in the course of the following lessons to encourage students' interest, curiosity and motivation.
- Give students 'post its' on which they write questions about the topic prior to the main teaching input. They tick off questions as they are answered and ask about anything not covered at the end. This can help students focus on the input, and help the teacher understand from what levels students are approaching a topic.
- Get one pair/group to formulate questions for another group/pair.
- Question Wall: a working space for students to communicate questions about their learning. Place closed questions on the left of the wall, whereas more open questions are placed progressively to the right hand side.
- Hot-seating: prepare questions to ask a character or person.
- Answer/question: the teacher provides an 'answer', students must think of as many possible questions for it as they can.
- 5Ws – *who? what? where? when? why?* e.g. in response to a photograph, a diagram, an account, a newspaper report.
- What questions might a ... have about this? e.g. a parent with small children about the closing of a local shop.
- Model appropriate types of questions e.g. thinking aloud: "...Now, a really good question at this point would be...because...". This can later be adapted to: "What would be a really good/ important question to ask at this point?"
- More senior students write exam type questions for themselves – and develop mark schemes to increase understanding of the kind of depth required. This is particularly effective as a revision strategy.

References

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