The Top 10 Strategic Questions for Teachers

By Glen Pearsall
“Good teaching is more a giving of right questions than a giving of right answers.”

– Josef Albers
It takes a lot of hard work to make teaching seem effortless. Asking questions is the central activity in much everyday teaching practice. However, what teachers can achieve in discussion with their classes can vary widely. For a teacher starting out, just conducting a teacher-centred class discussion in which they quiz their students knowledge of a topic can be very challenging.

By contrast, expert teachers learn the techniques for turning class discussion into a complex exploration of ideas in which students have an active and engaged role, often answering and asking questions of each other as much as responding to the teacher. These strategic questioning techniques are the by-products of years of trial and error and they often become an unexamined part of expert teachers practice...

In fact so innate do these techniques become to the way they teach that some expert teachers find it difficult to articulate precisely what these techniques are or how they are using them.

The aim of this resource is to encourage new and experienced teachers to take a close look at their own questioning techniques. It offers teachers practical ways to identify and then practise the questioning techniques that have the most impact on our everyday classes.
This resource focuses on the ten questioning strategies that research and the practical experience of teachers suggest have the biggest impact on student outcomes:

1. **Cold Calling** — Sometimes referred to as the 'No hands up rule', cold calling is asking students a question without waiting for them to indicate whether or not they have the answer.

2. **Question Relay** — When a student wants to shrug off a question with a lazy 'I don't know', you can ask them to listen to two other responses and determine which is the best response.

3. **Wait time /Pause Time** — The two kinds of teacher wait time. The first kind is when you wait after a question to give students an appropriate amount of time to think of an answer. The second kind is when you pause after they give the answer to encourage them to add greater depth and detail to their response.


5. **Inverted Questions** — Framing your questions with a statement of fact and then asking why or how is this the case, as opposed to asking a closed question to discover that fact.

6. **No Glossing Rule** — Waiting for students to give you the complete answer, rather than accepting a partial response and filling in the rest yourself.

7. **The Golden Question** — “What makes you say that?” A simple question formulation that teachers use to elicit detailed and properly justified responses from their students.

8. **Elaboration Cues** — Questions designed to guide students towards more detailed and thoughtful answers. These include blank prompts and placeholder statements.

9. **Second Draft** — Asking the class to rephrase a correct answer for the sake of clarity and precision.

10. **Exampling** — Asking a student who has answered a question correctly or one of their classmates to provide examples to support the response.
Additional Skills For Strategic Questioning

Before we explore each of these techniques in detail it is important to recognise that it is difficult to employ these techniques if a class doesn’t have some underlying rules about how they interact in class discussion. Below is a checklist to see how many of these rules are established conventions. If you don’t have some version of most of them it might be worth establishing some more of these to get the most out of this course:

Does your school have established standards of behaviour in the following areas?

Greeting Rituals & Rallying Calls – Do you have established routines that you can employ to seek and hold student attention?

No Put Down Rule – Do you have an established convention that no one can say anything derogatory or pejorative to another person in the class?

Consequence Ladder - Do you have a clear incremental ladder of consequences for inappropriate or off-task behaviours?

Do you have well-practised techniques for helping students avoid unwelcome distraction during class discussion?

On-Task Signal – Do you have non-verbal signals that you can use to direct off-task students back to the conversation without side-tracking the discussion?

E.G. The so-called Bill Rogers Hand – combining the use of a raised open palm and a warm smile as you walk at an angle towards a student – is probably the best known of these strategies.

Pivot Words – Do you have pre-rehearsed phrases that you can use when students interrupt or are off-task during a class discussion to direct them back to the task at hand?

E.G. Jenny Mackay’s “That’s not the issue right now” and “Nevertheless...” are highly effective examples of this technique.

Praise Strategies – Do you routinely use praise strategies to encourage positive behaviour and get students back on task in a low-key fashion?

‘Cross’ and ‘Proximity’ praise are good examples of the kind of strategy.
Cold calling and question relays are two techniques that are very effective for subtly shifting the dynamic of classroom discussion.

Cold Calling

Sometimes referred to as the ‘No hands up rule’, cold calling is asking students a question without waiting for them to indicate whether or not they have the answer. Typically this involves posing a question to the class and instead of waiting for an individual to offer the correct answer, you identify a student to venture a response.

‘Who can tell me what a prime number is?’

(Cold Calling): ‘What is a prime number? John?’

Note here that cold calling works best when you identify a student to answer after you’ve asked the question. In the example above, if I asked ‘John, what is a prime number?’ more students would tune out from the question itself as they would see the question as something purely for John. Expert teachers often make the most of this technique by having a substantial pause between the question and naming the student who it’s directed at.

‘What is a prime number? …John?’

Sometimes teachers are reluctant to ask questions this way because they feel it may expose students who don’t have an answer. However cold calling is specifically designed to address the stigma associated with ‘wrong answers.’ By making these incorrect answers routine, cold calling shows students that making mistakes or not knowing is simply a routine step on the way to understanding.
Being wrong is not the opposite of being right but halfway to being right.

The question and answer protocol of cold calling encourages students to more fully participate in class discussion. It fosters a culture where it becomes routine for students to indicate the extent of their understanding, rather than only be involved when they have a solution. There is good evidence to suggest that only about a quarter of students regularly answer questions in class (D. William 1996) and this simple change ensures that those who don’t will take more active roles in class discussion.

This can be seen in the video links below:

1. Dylan William’s TV show on the value of ‘No Hands Up’
   http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J25d9aC1GZA

2. Cold Calling Video from an actual classroom
   http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rOGelBaK9Fc

Cold calling is most effective when students are aware that this is the style of questioning you intend to use and understand why it is being used in class. It is important that you make clear that you are just encouraging students to have a go and that you are aware of the various learning difficulties that students face and won’t unfairly put them on the spot.

“O.K. guys, we’re going to have a class discussion in which I cold call to find out what you are thinking. Remember we do this to encourage everyone to have a go and to listen carefully to our discussion. You might be asked a question that you don’t know the answer to, but it’s O.K. not to know because it is a normal part of learning.”

If you are reluctant to use the cold calling convention in class or if you want to get more out of this style of questioning, it is worth exploring the three techniques listed below:

---

Safe Questions

A safe question protects students from feeling exposed in class discussion. They are ‘safe’ because they emphasise that the teacher is asking students to speculate about a possible answer rather than immediately knowing the answer. The teacher makes questions safe by employing qualifiers such as ‘might’ and could’ in their questions:

Traditional Question:
“What is the answer, Emma?”

Safe Questions:
“What might be the answer, Emma?”
“What do you think the answer could be, Emma?”

Here is a famous example of a safe question technique suggested by Dylan Williams:

Teacher: “What do you think the answer is?”
Student: “I don’t know.”
Teacher: “If you did know what might the answer be?”

---
Question Relay

It can be frustrating when cold calling students for an answer if their knee-jerk response is an unthinking ‘I don’t know’. Question relay is an effective technique for ensuring that students don’t dodge questions in this way. In this technique when a student tells you that they can’t come up with an answer, you don’t simply move on to another person. Instead you tell them to listen carefully to the next two responses as you will be returning to them in a moment. After listening to these answers, you then ask the student to judge which of these answers was most satisfactory.

Teacher: What are some of the health problems associated with smoking, Li?

Li: I don’t know

Teacher: OK, listen carefully to the next two answers. I’m going to come back to you to ask you which of them you think is the most accurate.

If you are still unsure about trying the cold calling protocol in your class, you might want to trial employing the ‘many hands up’ rule.

Many Hands up

The Many Hands Up convention is another approach to cold calling or what William calls the ‘No Hands Up’ rule. In this protocol students are told that whenever you ask a question in class you will wait until most hands are up before nominating a student to answer. In this way it becomes routine for students to think for an extended period before having to discuss their answers. (If after a protracted time of 30 seconds or so only a couple of students have raised a hand, then you will need to rephrase the question because it may not be targeted carefully enough to student ability.)

In lower primary classes, many teachers use a variation of this when students who know the answer are asked to hug themselves. This avoids the common problem of students who have yet to learn how to contain their enthusiasm from calling out before their classmates have had a chance to properly think about the question.