2. Encouraging Student Responses

In section one, we explored the value of cold calling during class discussions. This subtle shift in the way we approach questioning can have a substantial impact on students. Another area of strategic questioning where teachers can substantially improve student performance with only a minor change in their practice is in our use of wait time.

Research shows that teachers on average wait less than one second before they presume students don’t have an answer and continue the discussion themselves. Teachers wait even less time after a student response to jump in and tell them whether they are right or wrong. (The average for teachers in one survey actually rounds down to zero seconds.) Raising the average wait time up to as little as 3 to 5 seconds can have a very substantial impact on your class—particularly during the second pause as it is currently so underutilised in classrooms. Recent research has demonstrated that as a result of this change:

- The number of students who take part in class conversation will rise
- The detail and depth of responses are likely to increase
- Less students will resort to using ‘I don’t know’ as an answer
- Student answers are more likely to sight evidence to support their response
Wait Time/ Pause Time

The object of ‘Wait time’ is simple enough: to ensure you wait long enough after you ask a question or a student answers to get the most out of a student’s response. This is best addressed by separating the strategy into two stages:

Wait Time

The first wait time strategy is to consciously lengthen the pause after you ask a question in which students are given time to think of an answer.

Here is an example of effective wait time in a middle years class:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1DdWPxTkoic&featu-re=channel

Here is a video of a range of teachers explaining the value of that practice:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=86zZGu8NlA

Pause Time

The second type of wait time is that which happens after a student has responded to the question. Consciously pausing at this point often creates room for the student to add detail or a qualifying statement to their answer. This technique is sometimes called Wait Time Two.

Here is an example of a teacher using wait time and then pause time in a real class setting:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=endscreen&NR=1&v=2rQ_hosc5eY

Practicing ‘Wait Time’

Initially, it can be difficult to ensure you use wait time effectively but there are some practical techniques for ensuring that you wait long enough. Two examples of this are the ‘Stop ’n Prop’ technique and the 90 second countdown game.

1. Stop ’n Prop

After asking a question it is important to signal to students that you don’t require an answer immediately. How do you do this in your class? In secondary classes, one way of doing this is to ask your question and then immediately walk to another part of the room. Pause here (“stop ’n prop”) for a few seconds making eye contact with as many of the group as possible, and then walk to another part of the room. The object here is to make students feel less under scrutiny. Repeating this process several times reduces the expectation on students to produce instant answers and reminds you to give students extended thinking time.

2. 90 Second Countdown

One engaging way to assess how you use wait time in a classroom is to try a 90 second countdown. In this activity you use a stopwatch or a timer on your phone to try and wait for a cumulative 90 seconds of wait time during a class discussion. Each time you pause after a question or a student answer you start the timer, stopping it again when you resume speaking. 90 seconds of wait time is a relatively small amount but given that teachers on average ask between 45 and 50 questions in a half hour class discussion and only average about one second of pause time, this can be quite a challenging activity. If you are particularly adventurous you might ask a colleague or student to time you.

N.B. Another successful strategy for practicing your use of wait time is employing the Many Hands Up convention discussed in Section One.
Elaboration Cues

There are number of effective strategies for helping students make the most of their thinking time:

Placeholder Statements

Placeholder statements are short, neutral phrases that teachers use to ensure that they are not passing immediate judgment on a student answer. There is a tendency amongst some teachers, even those who are conscious of wait time, to conclude student statements with a quick evaluative response. A placeholder statement need not indicate whether a statement is right or wrong but simply encourages students to keep talking and exploring their idea.

In his Assessment and Learning Pocketbook (2007) Ian Smith calls these statements ‘minimal encouragers.’ He offers the following as effective examples:

'Go on…'
'Mmm…'
'Oh?'
'Then?'
'And?'
'I see…'
'Really…'

Reflective Statements

Alternatively, you might use reflective listening to indicate that you understand a student’s response but still leave them room to qualify or add detail to their answer. This is simply a matter of restating the student’s response indicating your understanding of their viewpoint.

- ‘So you are arguing that…’
- ‘It seems that you feel…’
- ‘So what you are saying is…’
- ‘You think we should view this as…’

Blank Prompts

Another good technique for encouraging student responses is to frame your responses as though you were unsure of an answer. This signals to students that they are chiefly responsible for developing a response to the question. This is largely communicated through tone but some teachers go as far as actually suggesting an incorrect or simplistic answer in the form of a question:

‘So what is the next step, again?’
‘So the poet’s only use of form is rhyme? Is that right?’