5. Student Questions

It is not only important for students to answer the right kind of questions - they must also ask them too. As teachers become more confident employing the strategic questioning techniques we have explored they should encourage students to play a more active role in leading class discussion.

The fundamental idea here is to avoid the teacher asks/student responds/teacher evaluates pattern of questioning where teachers can end up doing more of the thinking than their students. In the video below, Dylan Wiliam characterises this pattern as the I.R.E. (Inquiry, Response & Evaluates) approach:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=029tSe0aGio

We have looked at a range of techniques that help us realise Wiliam’s goal of a “basketball” style discussion. Second draft and exemplifying are two obvious examples of this. However getting students to be more actively involved in the question and answer process also requires that they routinely compose questions.

One engaging starting point for discussing strategic questioning with students is ‘Race to the Bell.’
Race the Bell/Clock

This is a great whole class review activity where students take turns either asking or answering a question on the topic they have just been studying. The game starts with the whole class standing. If a student asks or answers a question they can sit down with the goal of the game being that the whole class is seated again by the time the lesson ends. These simple rules can produce sophisticated interactions if facilitated carefully:

- Students are often eager to ‘get out’ so there will often be a chorus of responses to easier questions. To ensure an orderly class insist on getting students to put their hands up and then use this to your advantage by carefully selecting students to answer. If a student has experienced much success in a particular lesson or is showing more enthusiasm and engagement than normal pick them to respond.

- Use the strategic questioning techniques used in this online course. Don’t accept incorrect answers for instance - that’s glossing - instead refer the question back to another student. Do the same with partial or incomplete answers and then let both respondents sit down when the answer has been fleshed out. This helps if you have an uneven number of students but also asking a question yourself works well and will ensure that you don’t have one student left at the end of the game.

- Some teachers playing this game enforce ‘Don’t ask a question unless you know the answer’ policy to stop silly or pointless questions. This obviously can be helpful when dealing with disruptive behaviour but there is something to be said for letting students who might feel afraid to ask a question in class time to use the cover of the game to ask about something the feel they should already know. Perhaps a more effective technique is simply telling students they can’t sit down until someone has answered their query.

Another engaging activity to get student’s thinking about strategic questioning is the ‘Question game.’ This is particularly useful as an activity for encouraging students to actively listening.
Question Game

The Question game is where participants have a conversation consisting only of questions. The game ends when one of the participants makes a declarative statement. Before we go on, have a look at the example in this video:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zuYUtPavQU

The rules of this game are very simple. You have to avoid making a statement at all costs. For older students, you also must avoid hesitating for too long, repeating yourself or responding with an unrelated question. When a player does any of these things, it is considered a ‘foul’ and their opponent wins a point. Typically this game is played over a number of rounds with the winner being the first to three. When students play this game they very quickly realise that the real skill involved here is listening carefully to the other participants and then quickly formulating a question that is appropriate to the context. It usually only takes a brief demonstration for students to understand what is involved but takes practice to fully master. This fun activity makes students self-aware of what is involved in being good at asking questions and is excellent training for getting them to take an active role in class discussions.

N.B. If you’re in a primary school setting, this may be too difficult for your class. You may wish to try a more simple listening activity, such as the ‘Counting Game’.

The Counting Game:

The object of this game is for students count up to a designated number – usually the number of students in the class – by simply calling out their response a student to at a time. However the ‘hook’ of the game is in its simple rules:

A) If two students call out at the same time they have to start again.

B) If the class does start again then they individual students can’t call out the same number they used in the last round. (If you said ‘One’ in the previous round you can’t say it this time.)

C) No one may call out more than one number.

D) Students are not to use any organise their response or discuss who goes next.

Very quickly students realise that the game is much harder than at first it seems and abruptly their focus on listening goes up dramatically. Teachers often use this game to get students to start listening more closely to each other and it is a great activity to shift the dynamic of a rowdy post-lunch class or as a prelude to delivering an important piece of information. It is particularly effective in this situation if you break mid-game to do this as student concentration will be at its highest. For those who don’t teach maths the game works just as well if students recite from a list of facts (names of prime ministers, gases in the periodic table etc.) instead of numbers.
Bloom’s Question Stems

There are a wide variety of lists of question stems based on Bloom’s taxonomy. In this activity we ask you to present your students with one of these lists and then get them to create six questions on a topic they are studying, one from each level of Bloom’s list.


This helps students understand that questions can be posed at different levels of complexity and provides them with model questions that they might ask of themselves and their classmates. An engaging extension of this activity is to have your students create a topic test for their peers.

This test will consist of three components:

- Five true or false questions
- Ten multiple choice questions and
- Five short answer questions.

N.B. It is often helpful to refer back to the Bloom’s verb list when explaining this task. For instance, short-answer questions are paragraph-length responses to questions from the higher-order categories used in Bloom’s taxonomy.
Conclusion

Often it is extracurricular activities or the success of a single student for which teachers are celebrated. Few teachers get their name in the school newsletter for keeping their students on task during a hot Friday afternoon lesson. But it is maintaining a high level of practice lesson to lesson, exercise by exercise that is the defining feature of great teaching.

Effective strategic questioning is a big part of everyday teaching excellence. Teachers who have mastered a wide range of questioning techniques can achieve a range of important aims. They can:

- Engage more students, more readily throughout their lessons
- Employ carefully scaffolded questions to build student knowledge and extend student thinking
- Elicit student responses of greater depth and detail.

And if we are looking at the practical challenges of everyday teaching, perhaps most importantly they can improve student learning without adding substantially to their workload.

This resource explores ten key questioning strategies for achieving these aims. The real test of teacher practice is not whether teachers are aware of these strategies but whether they use them in routine way in their everyday classrooms. In that sense the key question of this entire resource is not ‘Can you use these strategies?’ but ‘Do students learn from them?’

Teaching is a complex and challenging craft and these strategies can only ever be a brief sampling of effective practice. However, at the core of these emblematic examples is the belief that great teaching can be taught - and that the best place to measure this success is in the classroom experiences of our students.
Cahill, H. 2008 "Learning Partnerships: the use of poststructuralist drama techniques to improve communication between teachers, doctors and adolescents PhD thesis", in Graduate School of Education, The University Of Melbourne.


Online Resources:
Project Zero Thinking Routines
http://pzweb.harvard.edu
Classroom Dynamics is the partner book for And Gladly Teach. In this book, Glen builds on his early work on student engagement: covering key issues on feedback, critical thinking and effective questioning technique. The real strength of the book lies in Glen’s ability to present practical activities that can be used in the classroom that are based on high quality research. There are checklists, classroom worksheets and more than 20 classroom activities outlined in simple easy to read language. His chapter on ‘Changing Classroom Dynamics’ could well change your teaching life – turning around that class that is ‘off-track’ is a brilliant chapter.

Glen Pearsall is one of Australia’s leading providers of professional development on Instructional Practice. A Leading Teacher at one of Victoria’s best schools, he is now an acclaimed presenter of professional development for classroom teachers across Australia. His expertise is in high quality instructional practice and the development of classroom cultures based on sound pedagogy and sound educational research. His first publication And Gladly Teach is now its fourth reprint and such is the breadth of resources and activities that Glen has at his fingertips – he has now produced this second volume – Classroom Dynamics.

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