



Teachers' Desk Reference: Practical Information for Pennsylvania's Teachers

Using Questions Strategically to Enhance Learning

As a classroom teacher, you ask students countless questions throughout the day. The way you pose questions to students influences how engaged they will be in instructional activities and how deeply they will connect with the subject matter you want them to learn. This issue of the *Teachers' Desk Reference* will describe the purposes for using questions, the various types of questions, and how you can plan deliberate use of questions to enhance your students' learning.

Picture a typical classroom during a whole or small group lesson in any content area. The teacher asks a question and waits for students to raise their hands. The teacher chooses a student and that student answers the question. The teacher provides feedback in the way of correction or elaboration and the student is engaged in content-related instruction for the duration of the interaction.

Are all of the students engaged?

During this interchange between the chosen student and the teacher, what is happening for

the rest of the students in the group? As soon as the teacher chooses one student to answer a question, the other students put down their hands. Are these students engaged in the interaction between the teacher and the chosen student? Do they listen to the response and feedback? What about the other students in the class who didn't raise their hands to answer the question in the first place? It is difficult to discern whether any of those students are engaged and gaining anything from this instructional scenario. Is it also possible that some students may display unwanted behaviors during this time?

Use of higher-order questioning techniques not only involves the learner, but helps students reach past simple recall of facts to more in-depth analysis, evaluation, application, or problem-solving related to a concept.

More effective questioning techniques are available to teachers to engage all students actively in learning while giving teachers information that lets them know whether students are progressing appropriately through the content. Not only must teachers ensure that they engage all students through

questioning, teachers need to consider the level or type of questions they use to engage learners.

Considering a Question's Purpose

In order to choose one technique over another in any particular situation, it is important to know the purpose of the questions you are planning to ask. Questions may have the following intentions:

- **Engagement** – We ask questions to invite the learner into a topic, to generate excitement about the subject matter, and to set the stage for learning. Questions that create a problem to solve or ask students to consider what might happen if a particular situation occurred can create portals of entry into a topic to arouse students' interest.
- **Making Connections** – Questions can be used to make connections to previous learning or to students' personal experiences.
- **Building Fluency** – Questions can be used for practicing newly acquired skills to build fluency and proficiency.
- **Assessment (Formative/Summative)** – Questions can be used before, during, and after instruction to assess students' knowledge and skills related to the content. The teacher can generate follow-up questions and adjust instruction based on student responses.
- **Extending Learning** – Questions create a basis for students to engage in deeper investigation of a topic.
- **Information** – Sometimes we ask questions just to get information, such as offering a choice or for housekeeping or paperwork. These are not educational questions, but do add to the number of questions asked throughout the day.

Selecting Types of Questions

Once you have determined the intent or purpose of questions to be used at various phases of instruction, you can plan to incorporate different questioning styles. Below we describe the basic types of questions and provide examples of questioning techniques.

- **Closed** – A closed question can be answered with a single word, a short phrase, or yes/no. There may be only one correct answer. Closed questions usually seek factual, quick answers

from the respondent. Closed questions may be used as conversation starters, quick assessments, or to gain closure or confirmation of a situation.

Examples:

What time will you be ready? Did you like today's lunch? How long did it take you to get here? It's a bit chilly today, isn't it? What is the capitol of Peru?

- **Open** – An open question allows for a lengthy, thoughtful response. There may be more than one correct answer. The respondent may be asked to share an opinion or explain a point of view about a topic. Open questions may be used as follow-up to closed questions; to find out more about a student's needs, ideas, skills, and opinions; and, to extend the conversation about a topic.

Examples:

What did you do over the weekend? How does the relationship between the President and Congress affect voting on the bill? Why do think it is important to be a good steward of the earth?

Using Questions Strategically

Both teachers and students can ask questions:

- **Teachers ask questions** – In many situations during instruction the teacher will lead a class discussion by posing questions to students. This can be accomplished in an active, engaging way to ensure high-level contact with the content.
 - Use questions that focus students' attention on key ideas and understandings you want them to gain from the lesson or unit.
 - Pose questions that provide an appropriate level of challenge and maintain engagement – not so easy as to be boring, not so difficult to overly frustrate students.
 - Student interest can be maintained by presenting questions in the form of a game where students need to provide missing information.
 - Develop questions (probes) that assess students' levels of learning and inform future instruction.
- **Students ask questions** – It is important to get the students involved in asking thoughtful questions, engaging in dialogue with classmates, and crafting thoughtful responses to questions or prompts. In this situation, the teacher may serve

more as facilitator – allowing students to think, explore a topic, and identify the essential ideas.

- Students ask questions of the teacher
- Students pose questions to each other
- Students create questions for games or as formative assessment

Reflecting on Your Questioning Style

How do you use questions in your day-to-day teaching? The following questions may help you to reflect on your use of questions. In what ways can you improve your use of questions to increase student learning or engagement?

- For what purpose(s) do I ask questions in my classroom?
- What types of questions do I use most frequently (open or closed)?
- What level of questions do I use in my classroom – mostly recall or higher-order questions?
- How do I ensure questions focus on meaningful ideas?
- What types of questioning techniques do I use to engage all learners?
- What type of feedback do I provide to student responses? Do I provide constructive feedback that honors the response?
- How do I use follow-up questions to prompt deeper thinking and responses?
- Who is doing most of the talking in my classroom? Do I allow students to pose questions, to provide thoughtful responses, to build on responses of others?

Understanding the purposes for using questions and the various types of questions, as well as planning for the deliberate use of questions, ensures that your students are engaged in instructional activities that will enhance learning.

Ten Engaging Questioning Techniques*

- **Open discussion** – Ask a question and open it up to the entire group without any further structuring.

Use open discussion when you are certain that several participants want to participate. Its straightforward quality is also appealing. If you are worried that the discussion might be too lengthy, say beforehand: “I’d like to ask four or five participants to share...”

- **Response cards** – Pass out index cards and request anonymous answers to your questions. Use response cards to save time or to provide anonymity for personally threatening self-disclosures. The need to state yourself concisely on a card is another advantage of this method.
- **Polling** – Design a short survey that is filled out and tallied on the spot, or verbally poll participants. Use polling to obtain data quickly and in a quantifiable form. If you use a written survey, try to feed back the results to participants as quickly as possible. If you use a verbal survey, ask for a show of hands or invite participants to hold up answer cards.
- **Subgroup discussion** – Break participants into subgroups of three or more to share (and record) information. Use subgroup discussion when you have sufficient time to process questions and issues. This is one of the key methods for obtaining everyone’s participation.
- **Learning partners** – Have participants work on tasks or discuss key questions with a participant seated next to them. Use learning partners when you want to involve everybody but don’t have enough time for small group discussion. A dyad is a good group configuration for developing a supportive relationship and/or for working on complex activities which would not lend themselves to large group configurations.
- **Whips** – Go around the group and obtain short responses to key questions. Use whips when you want to obtain something quickly from each participant. Sentence stems (e.g., one thing that makes a manager effective...) are useful in conducting whips. Invite participants to “pass” when they wish. Avoid repetition, if you want, by asking each participant for a new contribution to the process.
- **Panels** – Invite a small number of participants to present their views in front of the entire class. An “informal panel” can be created by asking for the views of a designated number of

participants who remain in their seats. Use panels when time permits to have a focused serious response to your questions. Rotate panelists to increase participation.

- **Fishbowl** – Ask a portion of the class to form a discussion circle and have the remaining participants form a listening circle around them. Bring new groups into the inner circle to continue the discussion. Use fishbowls to help bring focus to large group discussions. Although time consuming, this is the best method for combining the virtues of large and small group discussion. As a variation to concentric circles, you can have participants remain seated at tables and invite different tables or parts of a table to have a discussion as the others listen.

- **Games** – Use a fun exercise or a quiz game to elicit participants' ideas, knowledge, or skill. Use games to pick up energy and involvement. Games are also helpful to make dramatic points that participants seldom forget.
- **Calling on the next speaker** – Ask participants to raise their hands when they want to share their views and request that the present speaker in the class call on the next speaker (rather than the instructor performing this role). Use calling on the next speaker when you are sure there is a lot of interest in the discussion or activity and you want to promote participant interaction.

*Adapted from Silberman, M. (1995). *101 Ways to Make Training Active*, 2nd Edition. San Francisco: Pfeiffer.

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

Josh Shapiro, Governor

