

The Questions Teachers Use

Questions lie at the heart of teaching. Well-used, questions can communicate information and expectation, guidance and challenge, all at once. Review the five key types of questions below for ways to make even better use of this central teaching strategy.

1. Checking Questions

Most teachers use checking questions to get a sense of how well the class retains material already studied, or to review. These questions are usually at the Knowledge and Comprehension levels of Bloom's Taxonomy.

To use them effectively, ask a brief series of questions about important facts or concepts, and give unambiguous feedback even when students give wrong answers. Vague questions, questions about minor details, and hesitant or "too nice" feedback, may confuse students.

"What are some plants that make up the understory of a forest?"

"Moss, mushrooms."

"No, those are plants of the forest floor."

Checking questions can help you assess or remind students on just a few key points. Usually the better-prepared students answer the questions, while others hang back, since the immediate "right/wrong" feedback may threaten their self-esteem.

2. Leading Questions

Leading questions invite students to suggest the next step in a lecture or demonstration, in order to have them actively follow or anticipate the teacher's train of thought. These questions should be at Bloom's Application, or Analysis levels.

Ask well-focused leading questions at logical points; overly broad questions invite off-topic answers that are hard to work with. Also, be prepared to follow through with a student's suggestion in order to show the class whether it works.

"How can we get all the x's to the same side of the equation?"

"Multiply both sides by 6."

"Let's see. . . . Yes, that did it."

"How can we find out what the poet means by saying that she is 'nobody'?"

"Look for other words about not being important or being important."

"Okay, what words like that do you see?"

"Well, 'they'll banish us,' 'they' seems to be more important people. Because they can banish people."

When you ask leading questions, you must be flexible enough to explore even unexpected answers, since brushing them aside may convince students to be passive. A more serious drawback is that leading questions break down a train of thought into small steps; they cannot give students practice in taking big steps in their thinking.

3. Personal Response Questions

Personal response questions ask students to relate their personal experience and values to their school subjects. You can use them at the beginning and end of a unit, to help students activate prior knowledge or reflect; or you can introduce them whenever students might need to step back from the subject to get a fresh perspective. These questions are not directly about subject matter, so they are not categorized in Bloom's Taxonomy.

Ask personal response questions that are clearly related to the subject matter, respect even negative answers, and help students tie their personal responses back to the subject.

“What do you think about Adams’ decision to put his family at risk for a political cause?”

“I would never do it. That’s where your first loyalty should be.”

“Why was Adams willing to do that?”

“How did you feel about the story?”

“I hated it.”

“What about it didn’t work for you?”

“It was so fake, the way it turned out all right in the end.”

“What things in the story made you feel it shouldn’t have ended happily?”

Students usually enjoy answering personal response questions, but they can quickly wander off topic when discussing them. Use these questions in combination with others that directly target subject matter.

4. Authentic Questions

Authentic questions (also known as interpretive, inquiry, or Socratic questions) call on students to explore issues or solve problems themselves. They are “authentic” because the teacher asking them is truly curious, and does not have one specific answer in mind. These questions are at Bloom’s Synthesis and Evaluation levels. Students answering authentic questions draw on personal perspectives and creativity to process subject matter. Authentic questions make a good basis for

sustained discussion, as students bring different points of view yet can learn from each other, because their opinions are all based on the shared subject matter.

Base authentic questions on rich learning materials, identify important issues, and test to make sure your questions have more than one sound answer. Treat students’ answers as works in progress; keep an attitude of open-minded curiosity so that students do not feel “shut down,” and give them time to consider each others’ answers and develop their own.

“Can you develop an equation for the area of a polygon with any number of sides?”

“Why do you think that Sarah returned to the ranch?”

Authentic questions demand careful preparation and patient implementation. They are very effective for teaching new subject matter in depth, as well as fostering students' thinking skills and habits of active learning.

5. Follow-up Questions

Follow-up questions “follow up” on a student's initial answer to an authentic question, to help the student bring out all of his or her thinking. A follow-up question may prompt students to clarify what they say, give reasons and evidence for ideas, or respond to competing ideas, so they are especially useful for sustaining discussions until everyone has shared and developed ideas fully. Follow-up questions may be at the Comprehension, Application, Analysis and Synthesis levels of Bloom's Taxonomy.

To ask follow-up questions, listen carefully to each student, and ask about whatever seems unclear or incomplete, or especially interesting. Specific questions are most effective, but even general ones such as “Why did you think so?” help students think more deeply.

“I think Sarah came back because she had to.”

“What do you mean by ‘had to’?”

“She went to the ranch in the first place because she had no where else to go, and that was still true.”

Follow-up questions give students recognition for their efforts while opening up further thinking. In fact, students usually correct misconceptions themselves when asked open-minded follow-up questions about their evidence and reasoning. Used with authentic questions, follow-up questions promote deep mastery of content and strong thinking skills.

How Do You Use Questions?

Review a video of your class, or ask a colleague to observe, and categorize the questions you ask and students' responses to them. Are you using the full range of questions to best scaffold your students' learning?

Authentic and follow-up questions are the most effective for new and deep learning, yet most teachers use them very rarely. These “higher order” questions require thoughtful preparation and committed implementation.

You can enhance your questioning skills with Great Books Shared Inquiry™ method professional development. It offers intensive modeling, practice, and easy to follow instructions for the most effective questioning for students in grades K through 12.

Bibliography

Allington, R. L., Johnston, P. H., & Day, J. P. (2002). Exemplary fourth-grade teachers. *Language Arts*, 79(6), 462-466.

Applebee, A. N., Langer, J.A., Nystrand, M., & Gamoran, A. (2003). Discussion-based approaches to developing understanding: Classroom instruction and student performances in middle and high school English. *American Educational Research Journal*, 40(3), 685-730.

Bloom, B.S. (Ed.) (1956). *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*. New York: David McKay Company.

Fall, R., Webb, N. M., & Chudowsky, N. (2000). Group discussion and large-scale language arts assessment: Effects on students' comprehension. *American Educational Research Journal*, 37(4), 911-941.

Pressley, M., & Woloshyn, V. (Eds.) (1995). *Cognitive strategy instruction that really improves children's academic performance*. Cognitive Strategy Training Series (2nd ed.) Cambridge, MA: Brookline Books.

Sahin, A. (2007). Teachers' classroom questions. *School Science and Mathematics*, 107(Jan.), 369-370.

Contact your Great Books educational consultant to learn more about our classroom programs and professional development:

- gbfconsultant@greatbooks.org
- **800.222.5870.**