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The Skill of Questioning

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The importance of a well-developed questioning technique

Acquiring skills in questioning students is an important step towards becoming an effective teacher. A good questioning technique can:

- allow teachers to gather information about the level of students' knowledge,
- actively involve all students in learning,
- develop the communication skills and confidence of students,
- encourage students to become self-directed learners, and
- provide recognition and reward for achievement.

Teachers develop the skills of effective questioning throughout their careers. Guidelines for effective questioning, such as those given below, will not of themselves create expert teachers, but can assist the ongoing development of an important asset for all teachers.

Guidelines for effective questioning

A question-based style of teaching is easiest to manage with individuals or small groups, though it can be managed successfully in large groups by experienced teachers.

The following guidelines contain some hints for effective questioning:

1. Recognise and use different types of questions.
Closed questions, such as "Did you read the state budget in the newspaper?", invite a 'yes' or 'no' answer. **Open questions**, such as "What is the likely impact of the budget on unemployment?", invite a more detailed response. **Forced answer questions** seek a choice between alternatives you offer, as in "Was the budget delivered by minister X, Y or Z?" As a general rule, endeavour to ask open questions, for they usually initiate productive interaction. Students may view closed questions as rhetorical or may respond as a group. (However, note that rhetorical questions can be useful way of signalling the direction of a lecture or relationships between material, as in "Why should farmers be concerned about the impact of the budget? This is what we will examine in the next lecture.")
2. Pitch questions at an appropriate level. Students are less likely to respond if a question is perceived as either too difficult or too easy. If in doubt, rephrasing or prompting may assist.
Remember that a slow response may indicate poor phrasing of the question, rather than lack of understanding on the students' part. Vary the level of difficulty of questions to allow students at different levels to participate.



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3. Wait for a response. Not allowing sufficient time for students to answer is a common problem. Be prepared to wait a number of seconds, though you may find the silence awkward. Eye contact may encourage a student who is uncertain to respond.
4. Respond positively to all answers that students offer, with verbal and body language. Respond warmly and with encouragement. An inaccurate or inappropriate response from a student requires attention -- it may be possible to reward correct elements within the response whilst indicating where it was incorrect. Students may be able to correct their answer themselves if they are prompted and encouraged. Be prepared to re-direct the question to allow a number of student answers to build to a coherent whole, or challenge with alternative views.

In large groups, try addressing questions to 'buzz groups' - small groups in which students rapidly discuss an issue and contribute a response to the group as a whole. Buzz groups can serve as a means of encouraging interaction within large lecture groups.

At worst, inappropriate questioning techniques may highlight students' inadequacies rather than strengths, or may be used to embarrass students in a mistaken attempt to motivate or discipline. Ineffective questioning may also involve:

- emphasis on closed or forced response questions rather than open questions,
- indiscriminate direction of questions to individuals rather than to the group,
- inadequate pauses to allow for student answers, or
- inadequate or inappropriate response to student answers.

Inviting questions from students

Teachers shouldn't be the only ones asking questions. It is desirable to create a classroom climate in which students are able to ask questions confidently of the teacher and of each other. Students will be uncomfortable asking a question if they feel they may be demonstrating their ignorance and open to peer ridicule. Developing a climate in which students feel relaxed about asking questions requires patience, time and the demonstrated willingness of the teacher to invite such questions.

Some lecturers are comfortable with students presenting questions either at the start or end of a session. Requesting questions ahead of time might encourage students to put adequate thought into their preparation.

Students should be encouraged during their learning to ask questions of themselves. This can be done in class or through incorporating questions into written course materials or distance learning materials.

Recommended reading

Some ideas on questioning can be found in Dillon, J.T. *The Practice of Questioning* Routledge: London, 1990.