

Popping the question

Assessment for Learning

According to Mike Hughes, author of *Closing the Learning Gap*, the question that should be on every teacher's lips at the end of every lesson is: 'What have they learned?' It's a very interesting question to ask, but not an easy one to answer. In fact it's a bit reminiscent of the advice once given by a supervisor to a trainee teacher:



“Remember, they are always learning; they may not be learning what you think you are teaching them, but they are always learning!”

Assessment for Learning (AfL) places a lot of emphasis on both teachers and students asking questions and it encourages us to vary the kinds of questions we put to students. We are all familiar with closed and open question types. 'What is the capital of Ireland?' is a good example of a closed question in that it anticipates a single, factual answer. 'How do you think the people of Cork might feel about that?' is certainly not a closed question in that it encourages a more speculative response!

So, here are a couple of interesting ideas to try out in the area of questioning – a good strategy is to pick one that applies to class-work, give it a go in a class (any class) and pay attention to the impact it makes.

Use a longer wait time...

'Wait time' is the amount of silent time a teacher allows (insists upon) before accepting an answer to a question. So, next time you ask an open type question (of the type beginning: 'why do you think that...' or 'can you suggest reasons why...' etc.) make sure to leave 3 to 5 seconds of wait time before you begin taking answers. It mightn't sound like a long time to wait but it is longer than most of us wait for an answer before adding further prompts, or even answering the question ourselves! What you are trying to achieve here is that students give more thoughtful answers. One way of increasing the likelihood of this is to ask students to jot down a couple of speculative points *before* giving an answer to the question.

No hands...

Following on from the longer wait time, an effective strategy for ensuring that students give a bit more thought to the open questions you pose (and this is especially with the younger classes in mind) is that you insist that they don't put up their hands to answer. You nominate. That does two things; it prevents 'the usual suspects' from answering every time and it ensures that others in the class pay a little more attention to the answer.

Posing questions with teaching in mind...

It's a good idea from time to time to get students to imagine they will be teaching a topic to a younger person and to anticipate the questions the young person will ask. If group-work suits you (and your students) you can get them to try out their answers to those key questions on one another.

Finally, try this for just five minutes...

It is worthwhile also asking yourself some key questions about your students' learning. So, with cup of coffee in hand (optional!) think of any of your class groups with this question in mind: 'What do successful or effective learners do that other learners don't do, or don't do as well?' It's probably best to focus on a couple of individuals in the class – one a successful learner and the other not so. Avoid thinking of them in terms like "A is more intelligent than B" and so on; instead, focus on the learning patterns or habits they have developed and the ones you would like to encourage or develop in them. It's not as easy as it sounds... Assessment for Learning encourages us to observe and to be aware of **how** our students learn as well as **what** they are learning and anything we can do to increase that awareness is good.



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