

Questions in the Classroom

Center for Teaching Effectiveness, The University of Texas at Austin

To put the emphasis on thinking into practice in a classroom, teachers must present subject matter from sources in addition to the text they must develop sensitivity to ideas that are useful in instruction and evaluation. Pertinent ideas take such forms as these:

1. A contradiction to information offered in the text
2. A different interpretation or evaluation than offered in the text
3. Additional evidence to support a point made in the text
4. A different line of reasoning to arrive at a conclusion made in the text
5. A new example of the use of a generalization, value, definition, or skill developed in the text
6. More recent or accurate information on a topic presented in the text

Some thoughts from Sanders:

- "The textbook is weak in that it offers little opportunity for any mental activity except remembering."
- "A reasonable rule of thumb for an academic course is that a minimum of one-third of the time allotted to questioning in both instruction and evaluation should be devoted to levels above memory."
- "While studying a topic in preparation for instruction, the teacher should be on the lookout for the big working ideas the generalizations, values, definitions, and skills that are important enough to deserve emphasis. These are the ideas that best lead to higher level questions."
- "...more knowledge a teacher has, the better chance he/she has to fashion learning on all levels appropriate for his/her students."
- "Another advantage of scholarship is that it gives a teacher more confidence in subjective evaluation. The teacher who avoids the synthesis and evaluation categories is often the one who has not had enough experience in his/her subject field to be able to give a convincing judgment of the quality of a student's work."
- "An important rule in framing questions is that questions designed for grading should reflect the same kind of thinking used in instruction. It is wrong to ask a variety of levels of questions in instruction but revert to the memory category in evaluation. It is equally wrong to conduct instruction on the memory level in order to save higher-level questions for an examination. The best way to avoid these errors is to compose examination questions and instructional questions at the same time and make a determined effort to keep them parallel."

Mistakes to Avoid

As with any idea in education, a special concern for questions poses certain dangers. Teachers who strive for higher level questions may lose interest in the bread-and-butter memory quest on. They become so intrigued with sending students through intellectual labyrinths that they neglect fundamental knowledge. They may tend to cater to the capacities of superior students. Simple questions designed for slow learners are just as necessary as complex ones in all categories. Subjective questions are important and have a challenge of their own, but should be mixed with a liberal number of objective ones. There is satisfaction in giving the one right answer to an objective question and being told the response is correct.

adapted from: Sanders, N.M. (1966). Classroom questions: What kinds? New York: Harper and Row.