

Questioning Strategies That Minimize Behavior Problems

By Nathan Bond

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QUESTIONING plays an important role in today's instruction. It accounts for 80 percent of classroom talk. Some teachers ask more than 100 questions per hour! Because this instructional strategy dominates class time, and because students are active during the lesson, there are more chances for management problems to arise if teachers do not follow good questioning techniques.

Classroom management problems occur under two circumstances during question-and-answer sessions. First, if students are dissatisfied or bored, they may exhibit off-task behavior as a way to let the teacher know that the instruction is failing to meet their

needs. Second, students may misbehave if they are unclear about the expected behavior. Exchanges between teachers and students occur quickly during a question-and-answer session, and teachers seldom make explicit the way they want the class to respond. Thus, students act out because they are unable to "read the teacher's mind."

Though educational literature provides some advice for asking questions, it often omits specific strategies that teachers can follow when employing this instructional approach. This article highlights some of the techniques mentioned in the literature and offers additional strategies to minimize classroom management problems.

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1. Write out some questions when planning the lesson.

Teachers seldom write down their questions while planning; instead they generate them extemporaneously during the lesson. This approach can lead to vague questions that do not engage students in high-quality thinking, and, consequently, unengaged learners may misbehave out of confusion or boredom. Teachers should generate questions that are clearly written, appropriate for the students' ability, and sequenced in a logical way.

To go a step further, teachers can project the planned questions on a screen using overheads or PowerPoint slides. By doing so, the instruction becomes clearer and multisensory by providing both auditory and visual input.

2. Establish your expectations for behavior before beginning the questioning period.

Teachers may want to remind students to raise their hands, listen carefully to classmates' comments, and respect one another's right to self-expression. Clarifying the ground rules reduces confusion and helps everyone know how to act. In addition to learning appropriate behavior for a discussion in a classroom, students learn important real-world social skills that can be used in a business or work setting.

3. Call on a variety of students.

The elements of surprise and

uncertainty are ways to keep students on their toes during a discussion. Teachers can keep students' attention by calling on them randomly. Because students are uncertain about on whom the teacher will call, they will remain attentive. Students will want to respond correctly because they generally do not want to look bad or be embarrassed in front of their peers.

Teachers should keep a record (either mentally or in writing) of the students who were asked questions. Effective educators know that they must interact with all children by the end of the lesson and keep all children engaged for maximum learning to occur.

4. Cue students before asking the question.

Classroom management problems arise because students cannot read their teacher's mind and thus do not know how to respond. Cueing the class before asking the question can minimize disruptive outbursts. Four cueing techniques follow:

- Call on a specific student and then ask the question (e.g., "John, what is the capital city of the United States?"). This approach is advantageous for two reasons: the teacher can ensure that a wide variety of students are involved throughout the lesson, and everyone clearly knows whom the teacher is addressing. As a result, management issues should not occur. A disadvantage

of this cueing approach, however, is that the remaining learners in the class will stop thinking once they hear a classmate's name being called. Quickening the pace may solve this problem.

- Ask students to raise their hands and then ask the question (e.g., "Please raise your hand if you can answer this question. What is the capital city of the United States?"). Teachers can use this approach as an informal assessment to determine the number of students who appear to know the answer and to give slower learners more time to formulate one. This cueing approach is clear, so management problems should be minimal. The only caveat is that students who do not raise their hands are embarrassed for not knowing the answer and may act out as a way to cover their lack of knowledge.

- Ask students to shout out the answer and then ask the question (e.g., "Boys and girls, please shout out the answer to this question if you know it. What is the capital city of the United States?"). Best used at the beginning of a discussion, this approach encourages participation because students do not have to worry about the correctness of their answers. Teachers should use this cueing technique cautiously because noise levels can quickly escalate out of control. If the cueing strategy is used before the question is asked, then the problems

should be few because students know the teacher's expectations.

- Ask all students to think of an answer before asking the question (e.g., "Boys and girls, I'm going to ask a question. I want everyone to think of an answer. Then I will call on someone. What is the capital city of the United States?" Pause to allow students time to think of an answer. Then follow up with, "John, please share your answer.").

Though teachers have to provide more cueing initially, the approach fosters more thinking from the class as a whole and allows teachers to maintain classroom control. Again, classroom problems should be minimal because more students are engaged in thinking and because they are unsure on whom the teacher will call.

5. Ask questions that are the appropriate level for each student.

"Success breeds success." When students feel success, they are more inclined to persist with a task. To help them feel success, teachers should tactfully ask questions at the appropriate level. Many instructors will call on students randomly as a way to keep everyone engaged; however, there is a downside to this approach. Calling on students randomly means that some questions will be answered incorrectly and that some people in the class will become discouraged.

Frustrated students may try to

hide their feelings by acting out or by distracting others. Lower-achieving students especially need to feel success and should be given feedback for their correct answers. Asking questions that involve personal issues or opinions is one way to involve this group. If low-achieving students feel that the question is too hard or too easy, then they may misbehave.

6. Ask questions that elicit positive or correct responses.

This technique often is used by speakers to keep their audience engaged. It is recommended that 75 percent of teachers' questions should elicit correct responses. Students will remain motivated and engaged with the teacher if they feel positively toward the information and can answer the teacher's questions correctly most of the time. Students generally will not disrupt the lesson if they are feeling successful.

7. Provide students with sufficient wait time after asking a question and before responding to their comments.

A study on questioning found that teachers wait a mere 0.9 seconds on average for their students to respond to a question. This amount of time is too short for average learners to complete the four mental steps required to answer a question.

Students must first hear the

question and decide whether they understand it. Second, they must recall the information from their memories. Third, they must consider whether their response will be accepted; and, fourth, they must decide whether the teacher will praise or rebuke their response.

When teachers increase the amount of wait time, the length of the responses increases, the responses reflect higher-level thought, and the failures to respond decrease. When students are afforded time to think of an answer, they also are less likely to misbehave.

8. Vary the way students respond to questions.

Responding verbally is the most common way for students to answer the teacher's question. An alternate approach is to ask everyone to jot down an answer before calling on a student.

Requiring students to record their answers encourages wider participation by the class and reduces management problems because students are busy writing and do not have time to misbehave. In addition, the teacher may want to call on several people before providing the answers.

9. Vary the person who responds to the questions.

Rather than the teacher always responding to the students, another variation is to ask classmates to respond to one another's re-

sponses. This approach promotes positive social interaction by encouraging respectful listening. It also involves more people in the lesson and creates a more interactive exchange between individuals. The more students participate in the lesson, the less likely they are to misbehave.

10. Respond to every answer and correct errors.

Listen carefully to students' comments and maintain a high ratio of positive to negative verbal feedback. Respond to every answer and offer specific praise. By doing so, teachers show their students that they value their ideas.

As a result, students will be more inclined to behave because they know that they are respected. Furthermore, if a student does not seem to understand, ask a classmate to rephrase the question or rephrase it yourself. If an answer is incorrect, indicate the part that is correct or ask a follow-up question for clarification.

11. Ask follow-up questions.

One way to foster more discussion is to ask follow-up questions. Ninety-five percent of teachers' questions are classified as low-level, usually requiring a yes or no response. Teachers can elicit more discussion by asking students to justify or explain their reasoning. Asking "why" questions promotes higher-order thinking.

12. Encourage students to ask questions.

A study of elementary and secondary school classes found that each student asks only one question per month on average. Teachers must take deliberate steps to get their learners to ask questions.

At the beginning of the school year, a short activity could be planned that requires the class to ask questions about a topic. For example, students could play the game Twenty Questions. Repeating the activity and rewarding participants will foster the desired behavior. Once the classroom culture of questions has been established, students then will feel more comfortable asking them.

Closing Thoughts

Questions can be used to assess readiness for new learning, to create interest and motivation in learning, to make concepts more precise, to check student understanding of the material, to redirect off-task students to more positive behavior, and to create the moderate amount of tension that enhances learning.

Asking good questions is an important skill that teachers must develop. Because this approach is used often, there is an increased chance for problems to occur. Following these recommended approaches should minimize classroom problems and maximize student learning. ei

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