

The Art of Asking Questions:
What Lessons We Can Teach Our Students

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2019

Abstract

Getting students to ask questions in class, about the content, can be a difficult undertaking especially once students get to university. The nature of the lecture format makes it problematic for students as they often feel like they can't ask questions. When children are small they ask questions all the time. Sometimes we get tired of them asking questions and wish they would stop. Then when they get older they do stop asking questions and I am often disturbed by that in my classes. I want my students to ask questions but they appear to be reluctant to put themselves front and centre by asking questions in class. When students do ask questions they are often of the procedural variety as they attempt to find out information about an assignment. The challenge is to get them to ask questions about the content. This discussion paper focuses on the reasons why students do not ask questions in university and provides some insight on how we can encourage our university level students to ask questions in our classes.

When we are young we ask questions, a lot of questions. Anyone who has come in contact with a young child understands this concept. They ask questions all the time such as what is inside a pickle, what happens when I eat chicken, can a wasp bite, do you need a Band-Aid if a bee stings you and so on and so on. What happens to that curiosity as we age? It seems that once children reach school-age they quit asking as many questions. I often wonder why. And, I wonder if our school system has something to do with why they stop asking so many questions. Is it because they are getting all of their questions answered before they have to ask them or is it because they think they are not supposed to ask questions when they are in the classroom? The idea of not asking questions becomes so engrained in them, over the years, that it becomes learned behavior. By the time they get to university they have stopped asking questions. And, if someone stops asking questions they stop learning.

There is so much to consider when thinking about questions and their place in the classroom. As teachers, we have to ask ourselves if we really want students who ask a lot of questions in our classrooms. It slows down the flow of the class. It can get us off topic. It can turn-off the other students in the class. I used to tell my son that there was no such thing as a stupid question but then he proceeded to ask me a bunch of questions that were not stupid but were maybe irrelevant to the topic at hand. We have all had those annoying students who ask a question right after we have finished explaining the concept because they were not listening. I always want to answer flippantly but what I do now is get another student to explain whatever it is the student asked. It reduces my blood pressure and my desire to put the student down as that is never a good strategy. It's tempting but not professional.

Questions while Listening

The purpose of education should be to help our students learn to be critical thinkers. One of the ways to do that is to get them to think of questions while they are listening to their professors' talk. I have spent many hours looking out at a sea of students who stare back at me with blank expressions on their faces. They are sitting physical in my classroom but their minds have gone on a holiday. I attribute this to the fact that I have not engaged them in the material by asking interesting questions. I expect them to participate but if they are not listening it is hard for them to be engaged.

As professors we are hard-wired to ask our students if anyone has a question. How many professors look around the room, once, and then continue as if no one was there? I remember reading somewhere that teachers allow their students five to ten seconds to formulate a question before they move on which is less time than it took you to read this sentence. I have seen it myself. I may even have done it a time or two but this does a disservice to our students if we do not take the time to wait for them to respond. When we don't give students enough time to ask questions we are basically telling them that if they can't think fast enough we don't have time for them.

One of my colleagues was lamenting the fact that he taught what he thought was a good lesson, no one asked questions, and then on the quiz the next week only a couple of students were able to answer his questions. What happened he wondered? What happened was a failure to communicate. The professor did not communicate the information in such a way that the students understood and if they did not understand they could not ask questions. They may have thought of questions after class when it was too late. If we really want our students to become critical thinkers we have to provide time for them to think about what it is we are teaching and

then give them more time to formulate their questions. I have started giving a minute. It's not long and it doesn't mean I don't get through the material but it does give students time to think and that is my new goal. It can be awkward looking out at students who don't ask questions but eventually, I have found, someone will ask a question which frees up other students to ask their own questions or to make a connection to the material.

If students are to learn, and that should be the goal of every instructor, then we have to teach them how to ask questions as they are listening. It will not be easy and is certainly not for the faint of heart but if we truly believe that we are teachers who have something to offer our students then it is worth our while to find a way to get them to ask questions in class. I ask a lot of questions in my classrooms. I want my students to participate but I have come to the conclusion that it is not enough that I ask questions and my students answer. I want them to think about what they are hearing and to question me on what I am telling them. Not to be confrontational but to make it a cooperative learning environment where everyone feels comfortable asking and answering questions. Oh sure, I get the occasional question in class but those are usually procedural questions about what they have to do on an assignment but they do not ask conceptual questions.

Questions while Reading

One of the skills I teach my students is how to read a textbook. Textbooks can be daunting for students, especially first-year students, who have to understand vocabulary before they can understand the content. They have to understand how textbooks are put together, the text structure, and they have to understand the role of the text in a textbook. It is not unusual for students to give up trying to read a textbook because it is too difficult for them to understand. I get that. I know how frustrating it can be to read something outside of my field. I have to spend

a great deal of my energy keeping track of the unfamiliar vocabulary, and trying to comprehend the message the author of the book or article is trying to get through to me, the reader. I confess, sometimes I give up, just like my students do.

How then to teach students to ask questions while they read? I tell my students that they should annotate their text while they are reading. I explain that this means they should be writing questions in the margins as they read. I tell them that every time they read anything, whether it is a textbook or an article, they should have questions about it. This will lead to them thinking about what they read. Thinking about it in terms of not only what it says, but how it says it, and why whatever the author is saying is important?

These questions can become the foundation for questions they can ask when they come to class. This preparation will eliminate the need to think fast, in the classroom, because they will already have questions ready. This also facilitates a more complete understanding of the content. If students learn to ask questions about what they are reading, rather than just be consumers of information, they will learn why asking questions is so important. They will become actively engaged with the material. With active engagement comes confidence. With confidence comes the trust in themselves to know that asking questions does not show they do not understand the material but in fact, shows the opposite. It shows that they understand that they do not know enough about the topic and therefore, must learn more. This is where their professor comes in. They are experts in their field and can thus explain concepts that the students may not understand.

Questions in Class

I decided to informally ask my students why, as they age, they stop asking questions. I teach mainly first-year students but there are oftentimes upper year students in my courses as

well. The feedback I received followed the same reasoning for the most part across age level and were independent of the course or the year. I asked students if they ask questions in class, and if not, why they stopped asking questions. I told them I did not think it was because I explain everything so well that they do not have any questions to ask. While I might like to entertain the idea that I am such a good instructor that my students have no questions to ask I know this is not true. Here are the reasons why my students told me they stop asking questions in higher educational institutions:

1. **They are more self-aware.** I asked them what they meant by being self-aware and they said that they understand that they are no longer the only person in the room. They have become more conscious of what they know and what they don't know. Young children are not self-aware and so ask questions because they honestly do not know the answer. My four year old granddaughter was listening to her dad sing a song and one of the lines was *about not wanting to die or wanting to die*. I confess I was not listening closely. My granddaughter stopped him and asked *daddy did you say you want to die?* My son-in-law explained that no, he did not want to die, and she asked "then why did you say it". These are very good questions but, as adults, we wouldn't think to ask those questions because we know it is just a line in a song and does not pertain to our own lives. This is being self-aware. We begin to monitor our own thoughts and emotions so there is no need to ask as many questions because we already know the answer or we can determine the answer from the context. Small children do not understand the concept of asking too many questions. Their parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and other people in their sphere indulge their questions. They point out how clever the child is for asking questions. But, once

they go to school their teachers do not have the time to answer every question a child has because they have 25 other children in the class. If they made time to answer every single question that every single child had then nothing would get accomplished so children learn not to ask questions. They are rewarded for being quiet in the classroom and then it becomes learned behaviour. They may still have many questions but they learn that they can look up the answers to their questions themselves and so they can stop asking others to give them the answers. Or, they wait to get home and ask their trusted adult to answer the questions for them. Thus, making classrooms quiet places where the teachers dispense the knowledge and students, listen and take it in. This leads to less thinking on their part and more acceptance.

- 2. They have a fear of being judged by their fellow students or their professors.** My students explained that when they were in kindergarten up to approximately grade three they asked a lot of questions without thought as to the other people in the room. But, as they got older, they realized that other people make judgments about them based on things they say or do. They become more self-conscious. With self-consciousness comes the fear of being judged. They then become nervous worrying about what others think of them. This fear leads to them not wanting to ask questions as they know that others will judge them and their perceived lack of knowledge. When I was getting my under-graduate degree in Education, I used to ask lots of questions in class because I wanted to be the best teacher there was and in order to be the best I needed to find out as much information as I could about what makes a good teacher. My classmates would stage whisper to me to stop asking questions because

they wanted to get out of class early. They were implying that the reason we went to the end of our allotted time was because I was asking questions. I learned not to ask so many questions in class because I did not want to be known as the one who made all the other students stay in class when what they really wanted to do was get out early and go home.

3. **They don't want to come across as stupid for not knowing the information and for needing help.** My students told me that when they look around the classroom, they get the impression that everyone else knows what is going on and they are the only ones who don't know. This perceived lack of intelligence makes it difficult for them to confess that they do not know something. They become worried that people will think they are stupid because they ask questions in class. This insecurity makes it impossible for them to admit that they do not know something and have to ask a question. It becomes a matter of pride. My students, referenced the students who do ask questions in class and they pointed out that those students are the ones who are confident enough to ask questions. They appear intelligent. Students compare themselves to other students who always get the high grades and always ask intelligent questions.

But, what they don't think about is how long that student spent on their assignments and what topic they wrote on. It is important to remember that even those students who appear to have things under control have also made their fair share of mistakes to get to that stage. Comparing oneself to someone else is never a good strategy unless they are a mentor but then they likely wouldn't be in that class.

Some instructors also make students feel bad for asking questions. The instructors might not know the answer and they do not want to come across as not being up to date on the topic. I find that when students question me about something and I don't know the answer I tell them I will do some research and get back to them. This forces me to think and discover just like I expect my students to do. It also provides an effective model for my students of what they can do when you don't know something.

4. **They are introverts.** These students are too shy to ask questions in class. They might have a lot of questions but will not talk in class. I find those are the students who come to see me after class to ask their questions. Some of the questions are so good that I wish they would have asked them in class. When I ask them why they did not ask the question in class they tell me that they are not comfortable asking questions in front of their classmates. I feel bad for those students because they become outwardly passive learners when inside they have a million questions and are really actively involved in class. Unfortunately, their personality won't let them participate in class or I suspect in life.

I have had students, in my classes, tell me that my class is the only one they ask questions in. When I ask why, they tell me they don't honestly know. They have not figured out the reason they feel comfortable enough in my class to ask questions but not in others. It is always my goal to make my students comfortable enough to ask questions. I get my students to write at the beginning of every class on something they might have an opinion on. I provide the writing prompts that typically deal with local issues that might impact their daily lives and they write. Writing forces them to

think. Then I ask for their opinion on the topic. This ensures dialogue between myself and their peers. This ice-breaker at the beginning of class opens them up to more dialogue in the class and gives them the confidence to ask questions.

5. **They do not pay attention in class or are too lazy to formulate questions.** It is human nature to not pay attention to something that is not relevant to our lives. We politely look like we are paying attention but we really aren't. Our students are the same. If they are not engaged in the material then they are not interested and therefore do not have any questions because they do not know what the instructor was talking about. These students also rely on other students to ask questions.

How can we keep our students interested in learning and thinking about what we are teaching? This is not an easy task and one that we all struggle with in the classroom.

We have all had those students who come to our class to sleep, who come to class to do homework for other classes, or to check out social media sites. This is annoying to us because we wonder why they bother coming to class. Why don't they just stay home? I prefer to think that students come to class because they do want to learn.

They are just not engaged enough or do not see the relevance in what I am teaching.

So, it follows, that by getting them to ask questions about the material, it should make them more engaged. Easier said than done. I don't like putting students on the spot but sometimes it is a wake-up call for them. This is harder to do in a large lecture theatre where it is impossible to tell if the students in the back are taking notes on their computers or are busy playing video games.

6. **The education system focuses on getting the right answer, not asking questions.**

I was thinking back to when I was an undergraduate student. The only class I asked

questions in was my calculus class. Then, I wondered why that class? I realized that I could ask questions in that class because there was a right answer. We are more comfortable asking questions when we know there will be a definitive answer. We lose confidence when we realize that there are no pat answers and this leads to our feeling incompetent or worse stupid (see above).

We must also look to the types of questions we ask our students. Are they designed to have a right answer? Are they closed questions where there is only one right answer or are they open-ended questions which allow our students to come to their own conclusions which opens up the discussion? I consider my most effective classes to be the ones where everyone is talking and discussing a topic. Sure, it can get messy and chaotic but that is when real learning takes place. And, the best part of those classes is that I also learn something about the topic that I may not have considered. I ask questions of the students when they tell me something I am not familiar with and this models for them what they can do in a classroom when they don't understand.

What can instructors do to foster questions in the classroom?

1. Relinquish control to the students. We all want our students to be successful.

We say we want them to learn to think for themselves but if we don't let them ask questions, in our classrooms, because we want to control what they learn then we are not teaching them how to be critical thinkers. I am constantly amazed at what questions my students come up with in the course of a discussion. These questions keep me learning along with the students. They often bring up information that I do not have which leads me to think about a topic from a

different perspective. Without the types of questions they ask I would not grow as an individual or as an instructor.

Relinquishing control does not mean chaos. It means that students are free to ask questions about the content without thinking that I am the ultimate authority on every topic. Yes, I am knowledgeable about my area but that does not mean that I am the only one who can contribute to the conversation. This should be what we aspire to in a classroom. We want to foster a conversation where students are free to bring up their own points of view and we can debate them in a non-judgmental way.

This means ensuring that our students understand that everyone is entitled to their opinion but that they have to have evidence to back it up. This is harder to come by depending on the topic. This idea of evidence gets students to think about why they have taken the stance they have and how their own personal biases have influenced what they think and what they do. If students are focused on thinking the professor has all the answers it leads to a very stagnant classroom. So, if you are truly interested in engaging your students in becoming critical thinkers you will find a way to get them invested in the topic. I find if students are invested in the topic they want to speak and ask questions.

- 2. Give students time to ask questions.** As educators we always ask our students if they have any questions but this is usually relegated to the last two minutes of class when everyone just wants to go home, including the instructor. We sweep our eyes around the room and if no one raises their hand we move on. This takes less than a minute. What happens to those students who actually have a question?

We don't give them the time to formulate a question. It takes time to phrase a question. This is why it is easier for students to ask procedural questions such as how do you write an annotated bibliography because that is easier to ask, then why do we have to write an annotated bibliography? And, the students might think that it is insulting to the instructor to ask such as question. After all, if they are being asked to write one there must be a reason so they don't question that reason.

- 3. Teach them there are often no right answers.** As stated above if we teach our students that there are multiple perspectives and therefore multiple answers and multiple questions then students might be willing to ask those questions that they are interested in but just don't feel comfortable asking. In teaching students how to be critical thinkers it is important that we teach them that in order to come to any decision they have to gather as much information as possible. One of the ways to gather information is to ask questions. And, questions can be useful when trying to figure out someone's point of view.
- 4. Model questions that students can ask.** In every discussion, in the classroom, there are questions that we can ask of our students. For example, one day in class, as part of the daily writing prompts, we were discussing the safety of our streets because they were full of potholes. One of the students pointed out that one of the reasons our streets were always breaking down was due to the types of material the city uses to patch them, which is not the best, because it disintegrates in bad weather. I, then, asked if there was other material that could be used instead. He

proceeded to give examples of other cities who have the same temperature as our city and why the compound they use works better.

Note, I did not ask him if there was only one solution to the problem. This led to quite a discussion of how plastics might be a better alternative to asphalt because plastics can be used for many things like jackets, blankets etc. I learned a lot in that class since this is not my area and my students learned how to ask and answer questions, and how to critically analyze a topic. This worked better than if I had spent the hour discussing why students had to get more information before they could make a decision about what kinds of evidence would work well in an argumentative essay if they were trying to convince someone of their point of view.

Learning happens if we are not afraid to ask questions and are not afraid to let students explore answers for themselves. We do not have to be the sage on the stage. What we have to do is facilitate discussion about topics which might not, at first, appear to be relevant to our topic. In the example above I was able to bring the conversation back to my topic of the importance of looking for evidence to back up what it is the students would be discussing in their essays.

This discussion took about ten minutes but what the students learned, in class that day, stayed with them for the rest of the course. After that when students gave their opinion on a topic, the other students would often ask them if they had any evidence to back up their thinking.

- 5. Don't be afraid to show you are not an expert in everything.** My comment above about instructors trying to show they know absolutely everything about a

topic is not realistic. Even though we are experts we can't possibly know everything especially because there is always more information coming out and new ways of approaching a topic. We must not be afraid to tell our students that we do not know everything but that we can find out more information and then discuss it in class the next time. I will often, point out someone who doesn't appear to be paying attention and ask them to do some research on the spot and report back to the class. This works well in showing our students that they can also uncover information for themselves and make decisions about that information. When I ask a student to research on the spot, I ask them where they are getting the information from. If they say Wikipedia, I ask the class what the problem is with using a source like Wikipedia. If they are getting it from a news source, I ask the class what the problem could be with using news sources. This leads to a discussion of bias, authority of the author, and the decisions news people use to write about a topic. These would be categorized as teachable moments. If we expect our students to think fast so must we.

Conclusion

Instructors ask questions of their students but do not often allow them enough time to answer those questions. Students do not ask questions for a myriad of reasons. If we want to engage our students in the process of learning, not just acquiring knowledge, we have to teach them to think about what they are learning. We have to restructure our classrooms to open up a dialogue. Knowledge is taught and learned and anyone can acquire knowledge but not everyone takes the time to analyze the knowledge they are learning. Critical thinking is a process of learning based on asking and answering questions. One of the ways that students learn how to

think is through the process of writing. When students are required to formulate questions they are obliged to think about the material, to analyze it based on what they already know and what more they need to know. They learn how to evaluate the information based on evidence.

The art of asking questions is one that we need to pay more attention to in our classrooms especially today when students are inundated with information. We must teach them that asking questions is the only way they will learn to think for themselves and not just accept what it is they hear and see. This skill can be developed by encouraging students to engage with the material they are being taught and to ask their instructors questions that are designed to get more information. If we really want our students to think for themselves we have to give them the opportunity in our classrooms to develop this skill.