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TEACHING & LEARNING @ CCHS

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Great Teaching: The Power of Questioning

In my Learning Rainforest and Evidence-informed practice CPD sessions, a core element is a focus on the power of questioning. In my view, good in-house CPD and feedback from lesson observation should put teachers' capacity and confidence with questioning at the centre. In my experience, great questioning is the hallmark of a really effective teacher and sits right at the top of the list for things teachers can and should improve. It's far more important to support teachers with questioning than, for example, to fuss about the quality of their marking or accuracy of their data entry.

As I've explored elsewhere, there is good evidence for the role questioning plays in securing strong outcomes. It's the frontline of formative assessment and the key tool in responsive teaching. Teachers need feedback to them from multiple students in order to gauge how successful they have been in securing learning from their teaching. As Rosenshine explains, effective teachers ask more questions from more students in

greater depth, checking for understanding, involving all learners and exploring thinking processes and misconceptions as well as correct answers.

See: Rosenshine [Exploring Barak Rosenshine's seminal Principles of Instruction: Why it is THE must-read for all teachers.](#)

See: Teaching Fundamentals [Teaching Fundamentals: Checking for Recall and Understanding](#)

Based on my reading and work with teachers over the years, I have found a particular repertoire of questioning strategies useful for teachers to work on and this is the list I usually work through in my training.

In combination, these seven strategies unlock the full power of questioning, each working on a different principle. The idea is to work on one or two with deliberate practice until they form a set of organic, default modes for engaging in responsive teaching.

Cold Calling: (Based on Lemov, TLAC)

Principle: All students should be involved in engaging with the teacher-student dialogue with time to think, and not be allowed to hide, dominate or be overlooked.

Practice: No hands up. Teachers ask questions and then select students to respond based on their knowledge of the class, avoiding the pitfalls of hands-up or calling out. This is an inclusive process that conspicuously involves all students, front, back, in the corners, shy, confident.. everyone. It's not a one-off strategy; it needs to be the default mode for most questions; absolutely routine.

No Opt-Out: (Based on Lemov, TLAC)

Principle: Students should feel safe in answering when unsure but, if they don't know or get things wrong, they should be given the opportunity to gain confidence by consolidating correct or secure answers. Also, students should not be allowed to opt out by saying 'I don't know'.

Practice: If a student or several students get an answer completely or partially wrong or they say they don't know, move to other students or provide the correct answer. But then go back to all those students who made errors or couldn't answer giving them a chance to now say the right answer. This gives them an opportunity for practice but if done routinely, it also means that students soon learn there is no value in offering 'I don't know' as a defence, in the hope of being left alone!

Checking for Understanding:

Principle: Teachers should not assume that knowledge aired and shared in the public space of the classroom has been absorbed; learned, by any individual. It's necessary to check for understanding from students to determine whether they understood what you meant? Do they now have the level of understanding you are aiming at?

Practice: After any exposition or question exchange with a particular student, ask a number of other students to relay back what they have understood. Even if they are answering a question that someone else has already answered, it's valuable for others to be given a chance to offer their version, showing what they have understood and, in so doing, giving the teacher feedback about how successful the teaching has been. It's especially powerful to ask multiple students, often yielding various different responses which throw up subtle points for further teaching.

Probing:

Principle: In order to explore a student's schema in any depth, you need to ask them several questions; asking several students one question each provides shallow responses compared to when each student has to provide multiple responses.

Practice: Make it the default that, in any given exchange, you are asking each student, 3,4,5 questions before moving on, probing for understanding, checking for misconceptions, adding extra challenge, providing scaffolding to engineer success. See Probing.

Great Lessons 1: Probing

Say it again, better:

Principle: It's normal for first responses to be half-formed as students think aloud and formulate ideas. A second opportunity to respond allows them to finesse their answers, adding depth, accuracy and sophistication. It's important not to inhibit students when they are unsure; it's also important not to allow them to assume mediocre answers are good enough.

Practice: When students offer a short, half-formed or partially incorrect answer, say, 'thanks, that's great....now say it again better. Try again but make sure you add in X and link it to idea Y' giving them an immediate opportunity to give an improved response.

Think, Pair, Share:

Principle: In pairs, all students have space to think, to air their initial thoughts, to confess their lack of knowledge and to prepare to give good answers, to rehearse. They are all involved and subsequent discussions then have lots of material to

explore. It prevents 'blood out of stone' silences inhibiting discussion and it prevents 'forest of hands' or calling out cultures taking hold.

Practice: Give the class a specific time-cued task – e.g. to decide on four main points in order of importance, in three minutes – get them all talking in pairs and then, on time, bring them back together with a signal. Then engage in probing, cold call questioning asking them to report back what their three points were.

The 'Washing Hands' of Learning: Think Pair Share

Whole-Class Response:

Principle: Sometimes is useful or even essential to get a response from every single student at the same time. This provides quick feedback to you as the teacher about the success of the relevant teaching and learning exchanges, identifies individuals who need further input and can help direct subsequent questions or exercises as you respond to the feedback you gain.

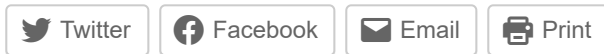
Practice: My preference is for using whiteboards over any technology: they are cheap and quick and allow for responses to multiple-choice questions as well as practice sentences, calculations, diagrams – a full range. You set the question, give some response time and then, on cue ...3,2,1 Show Me.... Students all show their answers at once. A simple A, B, C, D = 1,2,3,4 show of fingers also works very well for multiple-choice. It's vital to engage with the responses. and then to adjust your teaching accordingly, consolidating, re-explaining or moving on as appropriate.

THE Number 1 Bit of Classroom Kit: Mini-whiteboards

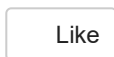
There are obviously other strategies too but I find that this set gives teachers all they need to engage in highly effective responsive teaching. It's a case of practising each

form of questioning deliberately and building up an ever improving default-mode repertoire over time.

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