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The 'Washing Hands' of Learning: Think Pair Share

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A blog about something really obvious but worth spelling out.

After 25 years of teaching, I've been through a fair amount of dodgy INSET/CPD. As a result I am something of a 'visiting speaker' sceptic. However, it hasn't all been bad; far from it. Some ideas have been very influential such as the ideas behind CASE (Cognitive Acceleration through Science Education) developed at Kings in the 1990s; also the principles of formative assessment that have trickled into our collective consciousness as teachers since 'Inside the Black Box'. Whilst some ideas have helped me to frame an overarching philosophy for teaching or have augmented my armoury of teaching tools, **there is one simple strategy that has transformed the way I teach every lesson, every day:**

Think, Pair, Share.

I used to be a 'hands up' merchant just like a lot of people. Then, at an INSET session about 10 years ago, delivered by a superb trainer from Haringey LA (employed through National Strategies – imagine!) the seed was sown that 'hands up' might not be such a great idea. It is so obvious when you think about it. In fact it is rather alarming that such a poor and even harmful strategy is still so deeply ingrained in pedagogical practice. For years I'd fought my way through the forest of hands- "Oo, oo, oo, me, me, me!!!" OR faced the tumbleweed of deathly silence; those 'blood out of stone' moments when you scan the room desperately looking for someone willing to give you an answer and everyone is staring at the floor. And of course there would often have been kids at the back wishing 'please, please, don't ask me, I haven't got a clue.'

But the solution came: Every time you ask a question, get the students to think first, then discuss it in pairs before they answer. Lightning bolt. This simple strategy has transformed how I teach – and helped develop an entirely new way of thinking about teaching. I've since often referred to this as the 'washing hands' of teaching. This is the hospital analogy where the single simplest act with the greatest impact is to ensure every hospital worker washes their hands after each patient contact; i.e. changing something that you do all the time every day has an enormous impact.

I think it is worth revisiting just why 'hands up' is such a poor strategy:

- Only one person gets to answer at a time so you have no idea what most people are thinking.
- The answer can be offered before others have had a chance to work it out for themselves.
- Students can opt out of answering or thinking altogether if they choose to. They can hide.
- It is difficult to express confusion or simply to say that you don't know the answer.

- In the 'forest of hands' scenario, the competitiveness inhibits less confident students (and there are gender-specific behaviours here that can't be ignored).
- In the 'blood out of a stone' scenario, you can't tell if students are really stuck or just too unsure of themselves to offer a public answer.
- Very often 'Hands up' goes together with closed questions with very short 'think time. We are not comfortable with silence –and expect responses within seconds of asking a question.
- Ingrained patterns of behaviour develop; students who always put a hand up and students who never do.

An everyday hands-up moment..

So, what changes when you ask routinely, 'in your pairs, discuss.....':

- Crucially, in doing this you are creating a small bubble of security around each pair; a safe space where they can think for a while and say whatever they like. 'I think X', 'No, I think Y'...'I haven't got a clue', 'I wasn't really listening' 'It is more complicated than that... maybe it is X except when it is Y?'
- In this bubble it is safe to admit you don't understand and the pair can pluck up the courage together to report this back. Easier to say 'we don't get it' rather than 'I don't get it'.
- Every single student can engage in answering the question; they are all generating answers simultaneously – and there is less chance of hiding. Shy students will speak to their partner; the blood comes out of the stone! It has an immediate effect.
- Two heads are better than one. If the question is a good one, pairs can debate their answer. They can then rehearse it and feedback to each other..'yes, that sounds good but maybe also say this...'
- When the teacher brings the class together to hear answers, the students are repeating something they have rehearsed. It is easy to report back 'we thought that maybe it is XYZ' when you have already thought this through... compared to being put on the spot with a cold question. It is crucial in the report-back phase to ask selected pairs directly to share their discussion; it means everyone needs to be prepared to report back in case they are asked. Using a building process is also key here – anything to add, to challenge, any better or different answers? And so on. (It is not always time-efficient to get each pair to share their answer.)

I could go on.... it is just such a powerful change. Still now, it is by far the most common piece of feedback I give after lesson observations: 'If you had asked them to discuss in pairs, the learning would have been better'. The question is, why do teachers still ask for hands up or accept it when students take them down the 'hands up' cul-de-sac? What are the barriers to adopting 'in your pairs' as the default mode of questioning?

- For some it is about behaviour management. To repeatedly stop and start a class –full of kids talking is more difficult than keeping a lid on them and taking one answer at a time. Good stop-start strategies need to be developed and rehearsed.
- It can be overwhelming dealing with all the answers that are generated. After 15 paired discussions – what do you do then? The key is to encourage active listening and the process of building on previous answers as you sample the responses. Sampling is valid – and much much better than only taking a couple of cold hands-up responses.
- Students default to hands-up themselves and have to be trained out of it – which can be a drag. Yes, it can, but it soon works if you ignore students with hands up and get the pair discussion going. If you reward 'hands up', that is what you'll get.
- It can feel like a sledgehammer to crack a nut if you only want to know 'what is the capital of Spain' 'or 'what is 3 x 4'. Well it is. But is that a good question in the first place?

This is the crux; think-pair-share forces us to ask better questions. There is room for a few sharp closed questions in a lesson but if we are looking for higher order thinking, answers that model literacy skills as well as content and, generally, are probing to a deeper level of understanding, then 'hands up' with closed questioning, is never going to be enough.

Once you are into the groove of routine 'in your pairs' questioning, you find yourself asking better questions –it all flows.

So, thank you to Alison from Haringey for showing me the light! I've never looked back.... My hands are clean – are yours!??

(Thanks to Paul L for providing the illustration...)

Discussion

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