

## Top Ten Questioning Strategies

*"Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow. The important thing is to not stop questioning." Albert Einstein*

Most research indicates that as much as 80% of classroom questioning is based on low order, factual recall questions. What we must do is put questioning back to the centre of our pedagogy and planning - we need to create is a *culture of enquiry* and engagement in high quality, high order questioning if formative progress is to be identified effectively.

**1. Key Questions as Learning Objectives:** what better way to foster a culture of inquiry than to spark the whole shooting match off with a big question that gets students thinking critically about what they are going to learn? By asking a big question you can initiate thinking and group discussion that immediately engages students in their prospective learning. By framing it as a question, it can raise motivation, as students feel like they have invested choice in their learning - and by getting students to subsequently formulate the learning objective they really begin to think about the nuances of what they are to learn and why.

**2. 'If this is the answer...what is the question?'** Taken from 'Mock the Week' show, this simple little technique sparks the inquisitiveness within students - just by quickly reversing the standard question and answer dichotomy it can deepen their thinking. It could be a relatively closed answer, like '3.14159265359' (the numerical value of pi); or something more open like 'religion'.

**3. Thunks:** These little gems are great to initiate deeper thinking, with seemingly simple questions opening up a complex array of higher order thinking. Thunks, such as: "If I ask if I can steal your pen and you say yes, is that stealing?" or "Can I ever step on the same beach twice?" are great fun and thoughtful starters. These clever questions (see Ian Gilbert's excellent 'Little a book of Thunks' or the website: <http://www.thunks.co.uk/>) can simply be used to spark thinking or dialogue, or they can be more targeted towards the topic or subject at hand. As the students become familiar with thinking (they really enjoy it in my experience) they can begin to formulate their own thunks - a great way to get them to think about higher order, open questioning.

**4. 'Just One More Question...'** Given any topic or subject, they have to work collaboratively in groups to create an array of quality questions. They can then be given a series of challenging question stems to broaden their range of questions, using the following question stems: *What if...?; Suppose we knew...?; What would change if...? Suppose we knew...?* If they write the questions on post it notes then they can be collated and saved - with the teacher returning to them further down the learning line. As the topic develops students can add 'just one more question', as well as answering the initial questions as their understanding grows. By following this method you can continue to foster the crucial culture of inquiry in the classroom - encouraging questions as a matter of course. Generating a range of such questions is a great way to initiate a topic, as it helps highlight miscomprehension immediately; it can foster collaboration and can give the teacher precise and immediate formative feedback to shape their subsequent planning for the topic.

**5. Questioning monitor:** Once more, this technique constructively involves students in the evaluation and reflection of the questioning process. A monitor, or a pair of monitors, would be given the responsibility to track and monitor the frequency of questions: teacher and student - open or closed: factual or conceptual. You can have them monitor for a given task, or relate more cumulative research by making it over a week or two of lessons. By exploring the evidence you are signaling to the students that you value evidence, and you are diagnosing the quality of your questioning, and that of the students. You will then have the evidence to know whether you really have a culture of enquiry - and if not, what steps you need to take to develop one. The activity sends very powerful messages to students about how highly you value quality questioning.

**6. Socratic questioning and Socratic Circles:** The old dog really can teach us new tricks! Socrates himself believed that questioning was at the root of all learning – and it is hard to disagree. The six steps of Socratic questions create a critical atmosphere that probes thinking and once more gets the students questioning in a structured way. There are six main categories:

Q1. *Get your students to clarify their thinking, for instance: “Why do you say that?” .... “Could you explain that further?”*

Q2. *Challenging students about assumptions, for instance: “Is this always the case? Why do you think that this assumption holds here?”*

Q3. *Evidence as a basis for argument, questions such as: “Why do you say that?” or “Is there reason to doubt this evidence?”*

Q4. *Viewpoints and perspectives, this challenges the students to investigate other ways of looking at the same issue, for example: “What is the counter argument for...?” or “Can/did anyone see this another way?”*

Q5. *Implications and consequences, given that actions have consequences, this is an area ripe for questioning, for instance: “But if that happened, what else would result?” or “How does... affect ....?” By investigating this, students may analyze more carefully before jumping to an opinion*

Q6. *Question the question, just when students think they have a valid answer this is where you can tip them back into the pit: “Why do you think I asked that question?” or “Why was that question important?”*

The ‘Socratic circles’ strategy is a great way to strategically organize such questioning involving the whole group - **see: [http://www.corndancer.com/tunes/tunes\\_print/soccirc.pdf](http://www.corndancer.com/tunes/tunes_print/soccirc.pdf)**.

**7. Pose-pause-bounce-pounce:** This is a brilliantly simple but very important strategy. The thinking time at the 'pause' point is crucial - there is a great deal of evidence about how the quality of responses, and the confidence levels of students, is raised by even a short amount of thinking time. The 'bounce' is also crucial in that, once again, students are expected to constructively build upon the ideas of one another, which gets students focused on a consistent basis when trained.

**8. Question continuum:** The continuum involves the students first devising questions, in pairs or groups, on any given topic or idea. Then the continuum is created very visibly, either on the whiteboard, or more semi-permanently on a display board (great to resume the strategy in future lessons) – with student questions being on post it notes for added flexibility. The horizontal axis would represent the ‘*Interest Level*’ generated by each question – that is how likely the question is to inspire new thinking and new possibilities. Then the vertical axis could be flexible in a variety of ways, should you wish to include a vertical axis. The vertical axis could represent ‘*Complexity*’ (from ‘closed factual questions’ to ‘open, conceptual questions’). Students could feedback their opinions, shaped by the teacher, to identify the best questions – which then could be the subject of further exploration. Having the questions very visible means you can also flexibly rearrange, such as selecting the 'best' nine questions and creating a new 'diamond nine' formation.

**9. The Question Wall:** (a design upgrade for a well-used technique) The 'Question Continuum' clearly overlaps with regards to pedagogy with a question wall, so I would be wary of trying both concurrently with groups, as not to confuse them. The 'Question Wall' in this instance is a working space for students to communicate questions about their learning. By giving students post it notes and asking them to commit questions to writing typically eliminates those questions that reflect 'learnt helplessness' - the 'how does you spell such and such', when they have a dictionary; or, 'what do we have to do', in response to your lengthy and erudite explanation of the task at hand. To add a level of nuance to the wall, consider creating simple sections with simple labels; for example, closed questions are placed on the left hand side of the wall; more open questions are placed progressively to the right hand side.

**10. Hinge point questions:** These questions are potentially simple, closed questions which give you immediate feedback on student understanding, but which may determine a ‘hinge point’ shift in the direction of the learning – you may need to revisit aspects for example. It is handy to colour code these key questions in your lesson plan, with the aim of creating genuine flexibility in your planning.