

PARTNER WITH STUDENTS: Why do teachers ask questions?

Why do you think teachers ask questions in class?

- (a) *To find out if students know the right answer.*
- (b) *To encourage students to think.*
- (c) *To find out if a student is paying attention.*
- (d) *To assess whether students understand, and to help those who don't.*

What if you posed the above question to your students, asking them to respond individually—perhaps using clickers? How do you think they would answer? Asking this question can be a first step in partnering with students to create a quality questioning classroom—if you follow up by engaging them in a discussion that enables them to make personal meaning of your expectations for classroom questioning.

As you analyze student responses to this question, you might begin the discussion by asking a question like “What makes you think that the primary purpose for questioning is to find out if you know the right answer?” Listen to understand their thinking.

You may wish to affirm your students’ thinking, acknowledging that they chose their response (*a*, *b*, *c*, or *d*) based upon their classroom experiences. They have come to believe what their experiences suggest to be the reality. We hope you will invite them to cocreate with you a new purpose for questioning in your classroom—and that your new way of viewing questions will correspond to responses *b* (encourage students to think) and *d* (assess whether students understand, and help those who don’t). You may wish to write the following expectation on a sentence strip and share it with the students. Invite them to accept this as a classroom norm, a new way of doing the business of classroom questioning.

**Use teacher questions to prompt your thinking,
not to guess the teacher’s answer.**

As you talk about the norm, you may want to ask students, “*What is thinking? What do you do when you think?*” Listen to their ideas about what’s involved in thinking, and ask them when and how they developed these understandings. You might then share these two definitions of thinking: (1) making personal meaning, and (2) making connections. Again, let your students talk about what is involved in “making personal meaning” and in “making connections.”

Talk with students about how your questions help you assess their understanding. This will afford you an opportunity to (1) tell them that you think hard about the questions you ask them and that you design questions to assess where they are in meeting the learning

goals, and (2) assure them that you really want to know what they think they know about each question—that you’re not asking the question only to get the right answer “on the floor.” Most students don’t understand that when they don’t respond because they are not sure of the answer, they deprive the teacher of information he or she could use to help students learn.

By the way, we’ve asked hundreds of teachers how their students would respond to the opening question. Without fail, the vast majority of elementary teachers choose response *a*—to find out if students know the right answer. The majority of secondary teachers choose response *c*—to find out if a student is paying attention. Of course, when asked, these teachers are almost unanimous in stating that they wish their students would respond with *b* or *d*. We then ask teachers why students believe as they do—and if they ever discuss the purpose of questions and questioning with their students. It is unusual to find teachers who have intentionally engaged in dialogue with students about the purposes of questions as they relate to student thinking and learning.

If we want our questions to engage students and stimulate their thinking, we must listen to and value their responses. Students’ mindsets about the purpose and importance of questions will influence whether they really pay attention to our questions in the first place. So, we hope you’ll open a dialogue with your students about your reasons for questioning. Invite them to partner with you in quality questioning by thinking and responding honestly. This is the kickoff to transforming your classroom into a learning community where teacher and students alike are thinking about ways to learn from every response to every question.

Wolf affirms our view when she asserts that teachers need to view students not as objects to be questioned but as agents who can think together about the content under study. She writes,

The point is that there is not worthwhile questioning that isn’t footed in trust and shared respect. In other words, if questions are to lay the foundation for understanding, rather than obedient answers, we have to think about them not so much as cognitive interventions, but as sites for interaction in which people assign each other meaningful epistemic roles. (2015, pp. 178–179)

To what extent do your students consider themselves partners in classroom interactions that result in making meaning of the content for themselves and their peers?

The other five core questioning practices composing the 6Ps Framework will impact student engagement and learning to the degree that teachers help students understand the what, why, and how of each quality questioning practice and the changes in roles and responsibilities required for students and teacher alike.