

Chapter 87

Questioning: Transitioning to Learner- Centred Questions

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ABSTRACT

Questioning and dialogue provide a framework for sharing educational objectives with students and for charting their progress. However, such an approach can generate feedback information that can be used by students to enhance learning and achievement. Moreover, the feedback generated from good “questioning and dialogue” could help tutors realign their teaching in response to the needs of learners. Organisations or institutions of learning, which integrate productive questioning and dialogue as part of their classroom practices and commitments to students, provide enhanced meaningful connections between what their students are studying and the relevance both their thinking and their knowledge has in comprehending life issues and solving problems. Drawing on qualitative research perspectives and adopting an embedded case study strategy, this chapter addresses the following questions: What are the connections between good questioning and student learning and achievement? What conscious knowledge and beliefs do tutors hold about productive questioning in their classes? The study findings indicate that learners need to be motivated to ask questions and encouraged to get involved in discussions. Tutors should consider “think-pair share strategy” in their classroom delivery.

INTRODUCTION

Extant literature indicated that tutors’ questions are of little value unless they have some impact on the performance of students (Beyer, 1997; Gall, 1970; Dantonio & Beisenherz, 2001; Collay, 2011; McDonald, 2010). For example, Hunkins (1995) suggests that effective tutor questioning is believed to focus the attention of students on understand-

ing learning outcomes, arousing their curiosity, stimulating their imagination, and motivating them to seek out new knowledge. Implicit in this assertion is that effective questioning and dialogue are invariably essential tools for formative assessment. Formative assessment aids learning by generating information that is of benefit to students and to tutors in further education. Questioning and effective dialogue in class or work-based settings enables

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students to restructure their understanding/skills and build more powerful ideas and capabilities. However, extant literature indicates that feedback information is not the sole province of the teacher (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Ecclestone, 2004). For example, Ecclestone (2004) noted that teaching in higher education is considered to be substantially different from teaching in primary and secondary education classrooms. Teachers' questions establish ways of operating in the classrooms and provide a means by which knowledge, particularly traditionally 'accepted' knowledge is contested. In addition, teachers' questions can help students to make connections between classroom knowledge and their individual experiences. This study aims to examine the extent to which questioning could be used to promote classroom practices and to meaningfully expand the involvement of students in their learning environment. This paper discusses the issues confronting classroom teachers and in doing so it reveals the tensions classroom teachers face as they do their work. In making these issues explicit, the study aims to encourage teachers to reflect more comprehensively over their classroom practices and to shape beliefs about student learning and teaching.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONTEXT

It is a truism that a tutor's questions play an important role in shaping classroom interaction and learning; however, it is a complex area of study. The complexity of the concept has undeniably made it difficult for researchers to agree on what classroom questioning is. Research indicates that questioning is second only to lecturing in popularity as a teaching method and that classroom teachers spend anywhere from 35 to 50 percent of their teaching time facilitating question and answer sessions (Dillon, 1988; 1990; Hunkins, 1997; Kerry, 2002). Wilen (1992) defines a question as "a specialised sentence possessing either an interrogative form or

function. When raised by teachers, questions are instructional cues suggesting to students content, elements to be learned and ways of learning or experiencing said content" (p. 3). Hyman (1979) argues that when students employ questions, they serve as guides to particular actions and as sentences that invite thinking and behaving along particular lines. Similarly, Aqvist (1980) classifies questions as special types of commands in which the questioner's desire for knowledge can be met. It is accepted that people ask questions so that they can obtain information and in order to satisfy their desire for knowledge. Implicit in questions as commands is the acceptance of the belief that what is questioned is known or is possible to be known.

Several researchers who have studied classroom questioning have argued that questions and their nature really cannot be grasped by just looking at their forms (Dillon, 1985; Dantonio & Besienherz, 2001; Sattes & Walsh, 2005; Ornstein & Lasley 2000; Dantonio & Beisenherz, 2003). For example, Dantonio and Besienherz (2001) argue that questions are special kinds of declarative sentences that require consideration of the potential answers. Dillon (1988) suggested that in considering questions one must also consider that which is entailed within them, their presuppositions and potential answers. Implicitly, such thinking about questions confirms an age-old axiom that 'in a question well-phrased, we have two-thirds of the answer' (p. 13). Dillon identifies presuppositions as sentences that precede the question sentence, and answers as sentences that follow the question sentence. It may be the case therefore that tutors, knowing about the presupposition of questions, allow for a reading of the student's level of knowledge and understanding. Also, for students to know this allows them to assess their present state of information and denotes possible future directions for the enquiry. Tutors, in responding to students' questions, serve to validate students' knowledge and encourage them to continue questioning.

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