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## CHAPTER ONE

# Introduction

Welcome to *How to Use Questioning in the Classroom*. Contained within are a wealth of practical ideas, activities and techniques which teachers can pick up and begin using immediately, no matter what age group they teach, or what area of the curriculum they specialise in.

It is a book which will help you to improve your own classroom practice, as well as the learning experience of your students.

Everything has been written with the busy teacher in mind. The strategies, techniques and activities which follow are all ready to use and take account of the practicalities of day-to-day teaching.

In addition, there are over 1,200 generic, classroom-ready questions which you can adapt to fit whatever topic you are teaching.

This is a book which will help you to be a brilliant teacher.

It is a book which will help you to raise achievement.

It is a book that will help you to make your classroom an engaging, motivational environment in which learning and critical thinking are at the top of everyone's agenda.

The book is divided up as follows.

### **Section One – Questions: Strategies, Activities and Techniques**

**Chapter 2** – An introduction to the nature of questions

**Chapter 3** – Fifteen ready-to-use questioning strategies and techniques

**Chapter 4** – Twenty ready-to-use questioning activities

### Section Two – Exemplar Questions

**Chapter 5** – Introduction to the exemplar questions

**Chapter 6** – Comprehension questions

**Chapter 7** – Application questions

**Chapter 8** – Analysis questions

**Chapter 9** – Synthesis questions

**Chapter 10** – Evaluation questions

**Chapter 11** – Philosophical questions covering each area of the curriculum

**Chapter 12** – Plenary questions

**Chapter 13** – Examples of questions around a theme

**Chapter 14** – Conclusion

Chapter 2 analyses the nature of questions. It provides a theoretical underpinning for all that follows. If you prefer to focus on that which is immediately practical, you can skip the chapter and head straight to chapters 3 and 4. These contain a wide range of strategies, activities and techniques which you can put into practice directly. All are clearly explained in the context of classroom teaching.

Section two presents more than 1,200 ready-made questions which you can adapt to fit into any lesson. In these questions, the letter 'X' is used to represent whatever you want the question to be about.

So, for example:

'How might X be different in the future?'

Could become:

'How might democracy be different in the future?'

'How might worship be different in the future?'

'How might our school be different in the future?'

And so on.

By presenting the questions in this way, I have ensured that you can make use of them no matter what topic you are teaching.

Chapters 6 to 10 cover questions connected to Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives.

Chapter 11 provides philosophical questions connected to each subject on the curriculum.

Chapter 12 provides ninety plenary questions which can be used in any lesson, regardless of what content has been covered.

Chapter 13 gives an example of how to create a set of questions around a theme.

Chapter 14 offers a brief conclusion.

Of course, it is up to you how you use this book. My own suggestion is to see it as a compendium of ideas which can be taken on and embedded in your own pedagogy or used to plan engaging, inspiring and enjoyable lessons. However you choose to use it, I am sure that it will bring significant benefits to your professional practice and also to the learning experience of your students.

## CHAPTER TWO

# What Is a Question?

In this chapter we will analyse the nature of questions. This will provide a theoretical underpinning to the practical activities, strategies and techniques, together with the sample questions, which are to follow.

If you prefer to focus on that which is of immediate use in the classroom, you can skip ahead to chapter 3.

To begin, we can highlight a number of traits those things classified as questions share:

1. In writing, the presence of a question mark. In speech, a specific inflection.
2. The purpose of eliciting information in the form of a response.
3. The use of one or more directional words. That is, words which direct the respondent in how they ought to frame their response.
4. The undertone of command (think of the phrase, 'a question that demands an answer').
5. The desire for reciprocity.

These traits can be said to be present in most questions (rhetorical questions are, of course, a special case). Let us explore each in turn so as to understand them a little better.

Consider this:

- 1.1) What is a question
- 1.2) What is a question?
- 2.1) How are you
- 2.2) How are you?

- 3.1) Where might be the best place to position a wind turbine
- 3.2) Where might be the best place to position a wind turbine?

The question mark has the primary function of indicating that the text which precedes it ought to be treated as a question. In cases **1.1**, **2.1** and **3.1** it is natural for us to assume that the collection of words is indeed a question. This demonstrates how accustomed we are to the general form which questions take. It also demonstrates that we are able to use our knowledge of questions to make inferences about items which appear to have most of the elements of a question, though not all of them.

Equally, if we were to say statements **1.1**, **2.1** and **3.1** to someone, it is likely they would assume that we were asking them a question. We would probably find it difficult to say the statements without adding an inflection to indicate the fact that they are questions. The listener would probably think it odd that something which sounds like a question has not been clearly signalled as such.

There are two conventions then, one written and one spoken, which act as signals to the audience that a question has been asked. The functions of these are as follows:

1. To minimise ambiguity.
2. To (in so doing) define that which has been said or written as a question.
3. To close a sentence (in lieu of a full stop).
4. To signify command (a question is asked, it is not said. Consider the difference in the connotations of those two words).
5. Through the combination of points i-iv, to indicate the desire for reciprocity.

Imagine we are interacting with a very young child, one who has not yet developed language. It would be quite natural for us to ask this child questions: ‘Who’s a good boy then?’ ‘What is it? What’s up sweetie?’ ‘Who likes a tickle? Is it you?’ These questions do not draw a response in language – other than from the speaker, who might choose to answer themselves – but they may draw a physical reply of some sort. If so, this is not a response to the question as a user of language would respond, but a response to stimulation; the brute information of the senses, before any coatings of culture (and therefore of meaning) have been layered on top.

The act of asking questions of another being who cannot possibly respond in kind throws up a number of interesting points. First, it suggests the centrality of questioning in our use of language. Second, it points to

the importance of the child acquiring an understanding of the practice of question-asking during their development. Third, it intimates the reciprocal nature of our experience, both outside and inside of language. We will look at this final point in more detail.

Language is a tool which allows humans to communicate with one another. Words signify things. As do collections of words. Speaker and listener understand (perhaps exactly, perhaps loosely) what these significations are. If I say to you 'I saw a dog yesterday', you know that:

'I' is a term used to refer to the self. In this case the self is the speaker in question – Mike Gershon.

'Saw' is the past tense of 'see', meaning to take in visually the sight of something.

'A dog' means that there was one thing of that class which we refer to as dogs (the class being defined by a series of aspects which are common and which have to be found in something for it to be specified as belonging to that class).

'Yesterday' means the day before today (today meaning the present period of time, between the hours of 00.00AM and 11.59PM, which we are in – that itself being defined by the mechanical measure of time we have put in place through the use of clocks. Yesterday meaning the same as today except one full cycle of the clock previous).

We could further analyse each of the words in order to reveal that an understanding of the simple sentence I spoke to you actually relies upon and contains an even greater range of knowledge. What we have shown is sufficient to make the point however. That being, that language is a shared tool which exists independently of any one individual human and which acts as a means to share that which is inside of us (thoughts, sensations and so on) – this includes our experience of that which is outside of us (for example: I did not share with you the dog itself, but my experience of having seen the dog).

Getting back to the fact of asking questions of a child who cannot respond, we can see that the reciprocal aspect of questioning – which is clearly bound up with the nature of language as we have just briefly outlined – is to the fore.

The parent is interacting with their child. They are including them in the language community. They are modelling for them what the speaking of language is. This is not just through the words though – it is also through the functions and conventions of how those words are put together.

Questions then, are by their nature reciprocal. Language is a bridge between the separate minds we all possess. Questions play a key part in language. One of their main functions is to provide a starting point for the building of a bridge (the answer is the end point. There may be many bridges, millions in fact; there is, after all, so much we might connect).

We have considered briefly points (i) and (v). Let us now think about point (ii) – that questions are asked in order to elicit responses.

Based on what has been said so far, we are working under the assumption that when a question is asked it is done so with the expectation of reciprocity and that it is known as a question through the use of a commonly understood convention.

We can deduce from these premises that questions will be asked with the intention of evoking a response. If all questions are imbued with a sense of reciprocity, and if all collections of words which are questions are signified by a convention, then inevitably the onus is placed on the audience to offer some kind of response. This need not be spoken or written – it could simply be thought. Consider for example, when one reads a textbook containing questions. The author has clearly intended that the reader should take account of these, though it is likely they will do so in their mind, rather than through speech.

The traits of reciprocity and response-elicitation are closely linked. Both point to the fact that questions reach out to other minds. The difference, however, is that reciprocity refers to the general nature of questions, and response-elicitation refers to the specific act that a questioner is seeking to induce. Let us look at some examples in order to make this clearer:

1. What did you buy today?
2. How much are these?
3. I'm worried about Johnny, what do you think we should do?

In case (1), the questioner is seeking to elicit very specific information. They want to bridge the gap between their own mind and the mind of



the person they are speaking to regarding what has been bought. This may be for a number of reasons, for example:

- ◆ They may be worried about money.
- ◆ They may be interested or may want to give the appearance of being interested.
- ◆ They may want to create an opportunity to talk about something they themselves have bought.

The list of motives we could ascribe to such a question is long. Suffice to say, whatever the motive, there is contained within the question a general sense of reciprocity: 'I am asking this. I am signalling that it is something that is being asked through my use of the convention. Therefore, I am showing that I want to create something with you – a conversation, an exchange, an airing of views or whatever.' At the same time, the particular elements of the question combine to request a response; in this case, what that is will probably prove to be quite specific.

Here, we will do well to connect point (iii). That is, the use of directional words – words which give the person being questioned an idea of what sort of a response is being requested. Let us exemplify this, as well as continuing to distinguish between reciprocity and response-elicitation, by looking at case (2).

'How much are these?' is a statement which is likely to be used in a shop or market. It is underpinned by a sense of reciprocity – the questioner has not just picked up the item and placed it in front of the seller. Nor have they gesticulated at it while pointing at their wallet. Having said that, you may be prepared to argue that the nature of the question militates against reciprocity; the questioner is seeking a highly specific response; they are after a small piece of information which they can use in conjunction with other things they know about or feel towards the item in question. Any question is only one half of a bridge though. In this case, it is still open to the person being asked the question to take it as an opportunity to talk at length, ask another question or provide a narrative which explains the price which is being requested. This gives us a sense of how reciprocity and response-elicitation exist at one and the same time. It also further supports the contention that they share some aspects as well as having points of difference.