

FAST^{AND} EFFECTIVE ASSESSMENT

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1

More Effective Questioning

Teachers who want to reduce the amount of time they spend correcting and grading student work often ask me, “Where do I start?” Intuitively, most teachers want to begin by looking at their marking practices. But a lot of the work associated with correction is actually generated long before students put pen to paper. The way you set up and run a learning activity can have a profound effect on how much correction you have to do at the end of it.

Instead of turning to grading practices, I usually start with questioning technique. Questioning is the basic building block of assessment. Teachers ask, on average, 200 to 300 questions a day (Brualdi, 1998). They use questioning to gauge prior learning, to check for understanding, to elicit evidence, to monitor individual performance, and to encourage whole-class groups to share their insights and learn from one another. Refining your questioning technique, then, can help you improve all levels of your practice.

What does this look like in a classroom? Compare the following exchanges:

Exchange 1

Teacher: Li, is 19 a prime number?

Li: Yes.

Teacher: Tom, what about 119?

Tom: No.

Exchange 2

Teacher: Li, 19 is a prime number. Why?

Li: Because it is only divisible by itself and 1.

Teacher: Can someone rephrase that? Tom?

Tom: It has no other factors—other than 1 and itself.

Essentially, these exchanges explore exactly the same thing. However, in the second exchange the teacher elicits a more sophisticated response simply by asking the student to justify his answer (“Why?”). Similarly, “bouncing” the question to a second student (“Tom?”) is another way to elicit a more thoughtful answer.

When I coach teachers, I like to show them how being more *deliberate* about their questioning can generate better student responses. Questioning is a subtle and, for many, intuitive practice. Many teachers I work with have never been trained in specific questioning techniques. They are unaware of what really effective questioning sounds like. Others I encounter use these techniques so frequently that questioning is an innate part of their practice. These teachers often find it difficult to articulate precisely what these techniques are and how they are using them. Being *deliberate* about questioning means you can name each specific technique. It means that you can use them in a targeted way. And it means that you have the vocabulary to discuss with your colleagues how to best use these strategies.

The key advantage of this approach is that it doesn’t require teachers to use up more of their limited class time or undertake further preparation. Making a few subtle adjustments in how you query your students takes little additional planning time but can substantially change how

your students respond, revealing to you more about what they know and ultimately saving you time over the long term.

Questioning for Fuller Participation

A teacher once told me that she felt like a ventriloquist when she ran class discussions: “I answer so many of my own questions I feel like I’m having a conversation with myself!” Another characterized his class discussions as “sort of a play,” which he and “a handful of students put on while the rest of the class watch like an audience.” As teachers, we are familiar with what has generated these responses: the challenge of running an inclusive class discussion. The aim is simple: we want to create a classroom where *all* students take an active part in the learning and we don’t have to do all the talking ourselves.

This is not as easy as it sounds. Indeed, a small number of students volunteer the majority of answers teachers get to hear (William & Leahy, 2015). In fact, some studies have found that only around 25 percent of students regularly answer questions in class (Black & William, 2014). Students who don’t take part in this aspect of your lessons are missing out; question-and-answer sessions are an opportunity for them to demonstrate the extent of their knowledge, try their ideas out loud, and learn from classmates.

Obviously, we don’t want our students to become spectators in their own learning. What strategies can you use to include more students in class discussion? “Cold calling” and “thinking time” are among the most effective.

Cold Calling

Teachers cold-call students when they ask them a question without first checking whether they know the answer. For example, instead of asking the whole class, “Who can tell me what a zone defense is?” you might cold-call a specific student: “What is a zone defense? Piers?”

Many teachers I have coached are uneasy about cold calling in class discussions. They worry that it puts students “on the spot” and can embarrass them or make them feel anxious. (This concern is heightened if they are working with students who have learning disabilities or are not confident using the target language.) Teachers are also concerned about students “switching off” if they are targeting their attention to an individual student.

These are legitimate concerns but not reasons to avoid this technique. With a few subtle adjustments, you can avoid these outcomes. Take, for instance, the example just provided. If you place the student’s name at the start of the question, then other students do tend to fall into the role of spectator, watching to see how that student answers *his* question. By contrast, pausing and then adding the name at the end of the question (“Piers?”) gets a very different response. Asking the question this way means that the whole class is more likely to do the mental work of thinking of an answer—the question, after all, might be coming to them. Here are some other techniques and approaches that help you get the most out of cold calling.

Telling students. Cold calling is most effective when students are aware that you are going to use this style of questioning and understand why you are using it. Make it clear that you ask questions not to find out who can get it right but to discover what each of them is thinking. Explain that cold calling encourages everyone to be involved in class discussion. Make sure that they know that you are well aware of their abilities and that you won’t unfairly put them on the spot. Such an explanation could sound something like this:

OK, guys. We’re going to have a class discussion to explore what you think the answers might be. I’m going to include everybody by cold calling. I just want to hear what you are thinking, so don’t worry if you don’t know the answer. Guessing and making mistakes is how we develop our understanding. Remember our motto: Being wrong is not the opposite of right; it is the *pathway* to being right.

2

Clear Learning Goals

In my experience, teachers spend an inordinate amount of time and effort clarifying for students what it is they are meant to be learning. As a classroom teacher, I often encountered students who worked really hard to finish a piece of work, only to be told that they had misinterpreted what was required of them: “You have written a good *summary* of what happens in this scene, but you were asked to *analyze* what happened.”

This confusion is an issue for many teachers. When I am coaching a colleague, I usually finish classroom observations by asking the students, “What did you learn today?” Many students don’t really answer the question. Instead of explaining what they *learned*, they tell me what they *did*. Once a student, for example, told me earnestly, “I learned questions 8, 9, and 9B!”

It is not that they have misunderstood the question but that they don’t have a clear understanding of the *purpose* of the lesson. This bewilderment makes the whole process of feedback and assessment problematic: How can your students measure their progress toward a learning goal if they don’t know exactly what it is?

Of course, the simplest way to address this problem is to make sure your students know at the start of the activity *precisely* what skills or knowledge they are aiming to gain. I discovered early in my teaching career that this is harder than it sounds. You can't simply *tell* students what they are learning—they need to *understand* this learning goal.

Many schools, for instance, make it compulsory for teachers to start each lesson with a clearly displayed learning intention or explanation of a learning objective. The test, though, is whether or not students *internalize* these goals. A teacher might explain a lesson objective, but doing so doesn't mean that all students have listened carefully or comprehended what was said. A school might put a premium on displaying learning intentions, but that doesn't mean that in the busy classroom the teacher is able to refer to this intention throughout the rest of the lesson.

I don't want to just give my students learning goals; I want them to take up these goals as a reference point. This is a significant challenge in the hectic environment of the everyday classroom. This chapter explores practical ways to help students take some ownership of these goals. The strategies have been selected because they do not add to a teacher's workload. In fact, once they are established, they reduce it.

Models and Exemplars

It is easier to be successful when you know what success looks like. Providing your students with model answers helps them develop a clear picture of what they are trying to learn and offers a reference point against which to check their progress.

I know a lot of teachers feel that rubrics and criteria sheets already give students this information, but model answers and exemplars have some advantages over both of those approaches. It is worth some time to consider these advantages.

First, models give your students an intuitive sense of what high-quality work might consist of—even before they can articulate what

makes it high quality. I often use photographs of pool-filter plumbing to make this point with teachers. These educators have no training in this trade, but when asked to identify the best layout of pipes from a series of examples, they readily pick the most professional example. They don't know the technical terms for the principles of an effective pool-filter setup, but the orderly and logical design of the highest-quality model is nonetheless evident to them. Developing this "nose for quality" (Claxton, 1995) is especially useful if you teach younger students or those who struggle with wordy criteria.

Second, studying work other than their own gives students greater perspective. They tend to find it easier to evaluate other people's work and are better at recognizing flaws in this work than in their own. ("It is hard to hear your own accent," one of my colleagues used to say to students when explaining the value of peer marking.) Moreover, when "students notice mistakes in the work of others, they are less likely to make mistakes in their own work" (William, 2015).

Finally, models exclusively offer advice about what to *do*, whereas rubrics tend to be used for advice *and* appraisal. Because rubrics often feature grades and are structured around levels of achievement, students often associate them with evaluation. When I told one of my students that rubrics were a "road map for improvement," he responded by asking, "Then why did teachers at my old school only say stuff about them at the start and the end of projects and not all the way through?"

Of course, it is not enough to just give students these sample answers. I often see teachers spend their limited preparation time working up a model response or selecting past student work as exemplars only to find their students give these responses cursory attention. One teacher I coached sought my help because she would labor for hours on models that a quarter of her students left on their desks when they headed off to their next class.

Students must explore and evaluate models for them to be effective. They need to discover what the elements of great work are ("they used

quotes to support their argument,” “they showed how they got their answer”) and note the things to avoid that they see in weaker work. The following techniques are effective ways to achieve this goal.

Ranking Work Samples

One of the simplest ways to encourage your students to investigate sample answers is to ask students to rank them. Even just comparing two samples and identifying the stronger is a quick way to get them thinking about what makes an answer successful.

This kind of comparative judgment works well for teachers (Pollitt, 2012), but you can use this approach even with very young children because it requires students to make a *relative* comparison. Your students are not being asked to recognize excellence in isolation, but to investigate a sample answer with their reference point right beside it. I worked with a team of teachers who found that giving their 7-year-olds model answers to compare produced a better understanding of the assigned task than giving them a detailed rubric sheet—and that it took half the time to prepare.

The older or more able students are, the greater the number of sample answers you can get them to rank (William & Leahy, 2015). Three to five models seems to work best with middle and high school students. This number is manageable in terms of teacher preparation time devoted to sourcing past work samples and class time required for students to get value from the task.

The most important variable, though, is how close the samples are in terms of quality. If you teach a group of young students, you can give them a very strong response and ask them to compare it with a very weak one. However, if you are working with senior students or those with experience doing this sort of task, you can provide them with several high-level responses and get them to identify the features that subtly distinguish a great answer from very good ones. Even if your students end up ranking the model answers in the wrong order, speculating about an answer means they are invested in hearing which model is stronger and why. They are