Questioning

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It is the night before the new instructor's first discussion class. She has looked through the reading assignment one last time, has outlined the central points to be covered in class, and has checked some (if only there were more time!) of the relevant secondary materials. She is better prepared than she ever was for any class as a student. She is tired, but as she prepares to turn in for the night, she mulls over the last detail. "What questions should I ask so that we will cover the material in the most interesting and educational manner?" Suddenly she realizes she is stumped. What if the students don't respond to her questions? What if there is just silence? feels an anticipatory twinge of nausea. Her head feels and hollow; her mouth dry. For twenty years of formal education, she has been the one who answered the teacher's questions in the classroom. Suddenly tomorrow morning at nine o'clock she will be the one who asks the questions. And if the questions fail, the class fails; if the class fails, she fails.

Most college teachers were once good students, even stars, in their discussion classes. It is natural, then, that a new teacher would tend to stay with the pattern of class preparation that had always proven so successful as a student: the meticulous reading of the assignment, the determination of key points likely to come up in class and a listing of possible questions to raise should the opportunity present itself. As our anecdote implies, however, teaching a discussion class is different from being a student in one. The crux of the difference will be explained in terms of questioning.

I. Three Dimensions of Discussion

When a student asks a question, it is almost always "directed" to the content of the class, that is, to what the course "bout. This is only one dimension of a classroom discussion, however, albeit the most obvious to the student. A teacher's question is often more complex in its intention—the teacher may wish not only to raise a certain issue, but also to change the tempo of the discussion or to involve a quiet student in the dialogue. In other words, the teacher must be aware of, and responsible for, all three interrelated dimensions: the content (what the class is about), the process (how the class is functioning) and the persons (who is involved in the class). Let us briefly consider each.

Content is the most obvious facet of the seminar or discussion section and only a most irresponsible teacher would fail to give it due consideration. In fact, if anything, the new instructor is often too well prepared in terms of content. What new teacher has not zealously written up reams of notes, checked supplementary readings, worked out a lesson plan of things to be discussed—only to find that the actual class could cover but a tenth of the material? This enthusiasm for content is not accidental: one's entrance into graduate school depended on it and graduate training itself concentrates almost exclusively on content. So graduate-student-turned-instructors naturally fall into the trap of overemphasizing content, with its risk of neglecting students' legitimate learning needs.

A class is also a process, an independent organism with its own goal and dynamics. It is always something more than what even the most imaginative lesson plan can predict. The metaphors are revealing. How often have we heard someone say that the discussion "ran away from us" and the teacher had to step in to "kill" it? The teacher is responsible for not only what is discussed, but also how it is discussed. Are the students involved or just going through the paces? Do some students dominate others? Is the class too sedate or too argumentative? Is there a tendency for the discussion to wander off into empty abstractions or to muddle around in the anecdotal? Such concerns reflect the process of student-student and student-instructor interactions.

Since instructors are responsible for the interactions of the seminar or discussion section, they should be as conscientious in preparing for the class's process as for its content. How does one prepare for process? One technique is to have a process plan to accompany the lesson plan. As one considers which issues should be covered first and which later, one should give forethought to how each issue should be discussed. For the first point in today's class, would one prefer dialectical controversy or group consensus building? For the next topic, would one like to encourage a free exchange of ideas or an analytic, systematic approach? Often teachers know quite well that their classes tend to be lively but
One strategy for avoiding the overuse of leading questions is simply to distribute a set of such questions to the students ahead of time. Then they will be able to study the material with that line of thought in mind and will come to class ready to start from there. The "manipulative questions" have thereby been transformed into useful "study cues." For the teacher, this means that the students will cover material at home that formerly had to be handled in class. This allows more time for open-ended discussion.

There are at least five ways in which questions can be specifically designed to accomplish a change in the discussion process. First, a question may be intended to create a break, to start over, or to mark the transition from one point of the discussion to the next. From my own college days, I recall a professor whizzing us through a proof in mathematical analysis, then stopping, turning to his gaping, awestruck undergraduates and saying, "That was proof one. James, what shall we call the next?" "Proof two?" "Excellent, James. You show promise for doing advanced work in number theory." Obviously, the question was purely rhetorical. It was not intended to teach us anything at all. But it did return us to square one, giving us a chance to catch our breath before a new assault. Similarly, simple factual questions can be used as a quick review of where the discussion has gone, as an ice-breaker at the beginning of a class, or as a tempo quickener when the class has drifted off into the doldrums. A series of short, quickly answered questions that are not too simple tends to make the class more alert and ready to tackle more difficult issues. Such questions are, in fact, almost purely within the dimension of process. Their purpose is not really to elicit information, but rather to accomplish something in the classroom dynamics.

A second way a question can facilitate the process of discussion is by including a specific qualifying instruction with it, such as, "In a few words..." or "If you had to pick just one theme, ..." Such questions are obviously designed to elicit something other than a definitive analysis. They set a lively tempo for the discussion and establish a cornerstone on which the class can build. Sometimes they may mitigate the fear of criticism, since everyone recognizes that any brief answer is likely to be flawed in some respects. Questions with built-in limits are very effective in bridling the loquacious and in getting several students involved in the discussion within a few minutes.

A third way questions serve-process is in giving an instruction as to level of abstraction, as in, "If you were to generalize..." or "Can you give some specific examples?" Such a question may radically alter the energy level of a discussion. If the class has become cerebral and abstract, for instance, one may want to bring it back to the concrete. If it is heated and explosive, one may want to talk in terms of general principles, something less volatile than the too real particulars. There is no universal rule about whether it is better to start with the specific and move to the general or vice versa. The sudden transition from one level to the other does have an important impact on the classroom dynamics, how-
The art of questioning involves a similar cultivation of skills. For a few classes, one may work on personalizing sessions. One can develop one’s technique, for instance, by videotaping classroom situations and working out appropriate responses. Then one can try the new skill in a real classroom discussion. Finally, one should review the particular session (videotapes can be invaluable) in order to see how one can improve that technique. When the skills become second nature, they become part of the grammar and vocabulary of the teaching. They become potential forms of expression, communication tools to be used as the situation dictates.

One final point about questioning. The more sensitively the teacher can use three-dimensional questioning, the more efficient he or she will become. If the discussion is too abstract, say, the teacher does not have to intervene by explaining, “We’re getting too theoretical. Let us try to bring the discussion back to specifics.” Instead, knowing from previous classroom performances that Joe is an especially pragmatic thinker, the teacher might simply ask, “Joe, can you see any practical applications for these theories?” In other words, the more successfully the teacher directs the discussion, the more it seems the discussion directs itself. Chinese Taoist believes that the ideal ruler is invisible. Large governs in such a way that the people think they do the work for themselves.

Skillful discussion leaders use questioning in such a way that they seldom have to lecture; they become part of the medium of the discussion. The ideal is, perhaps, seldom realized, but it still serves as a goal for anyone involved in the art of questioning. The Taoist master, Lao Tzu, recognized the principle and the problem over two millennia ago:

To teach without speaking, to benefit without doing—rarely is this achieved in our world.

—Tao Te Ching, Chapter 43

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The Faculty Teaching Excellence Program thanks the Parents' Association for their support of Memo to the Faculty.
relationships (comparisons and contrasts) between the text and another, usually the most recent one. Make the instructions explicit: “Identify three themes common to both texts.” “Suggest the two most obvious differences between the two texts.” “Which did you like best and why?” “Make a list of as many comparisons (or contrasts) as you can in ten minutes.” In this case, in order to benefit from the richness of diversity, as well as to confirm similar insights, it is probably best to check in with each pair.

2. Concrete Images: It is obvious, of course, that discussions go better when specific references are made. Yet I think we often need help remembering the content of our text. A few minutes at the beginning can guarantee that the sophisticated analysis we seek will be based on specific facts.

Go around the table and ask each student to state one concrete image/scene/moment from the text that stands out. No analysis is necessary—just recollections and brief description. As each student reports, the collective images are listed on the board, thus providing a visual record of selected content from the text as a backdrop to the following discussion. Usually the recall of concrete scenes prompts further recollections, and a flood of images flows from the students.

A follow-up question is to invite the class to study the items on the board, and ask: “What themes seem to emerge from these items?” “What connects these images?” “Is there a pattern to our recollected events?” “What is missing?” This, obviously, is an inductive approach to the text. Facts precede analysis. But also, everyone gets to say something early in class and every contribution gets written down to aid our collective memory and work.

3. Generating Questions: We have our own important questions to ask about a text. And we should ask them. But students also have their questions and they can learn to formulate better ones. Being able to ask the right questions about a particular text may be the first way of coming to terms with it. There are many ways of generating questions:

a. Ask students ahead of time (Wednesday for Friday's class) to prepare one or two questions about their reading. One can vary the assignment by specifying different kinds of questions: open-ended, factual, clarifying, connective and relational, involving value conflicts, etc.

b. As students walk into the classroom, ask them to write down (probably anonymously early in the term) one or two discussable questions about the text. “What questions/issues/problems do you want this group to explore in the next hour about this reading?” Hand all questions to one student (a shy one, perhaps) who, at random, selects questions for class attention. Do not expect to get through all of them, but the discussion of two or three questions usually will deal with or touch on almost every other one. Students, like all of us, ask questions they really want to answer themselves, and they will make sure their point is made somehow.

c. Same as b, except the teacher (or a student) takes a minute or two to categorize the questions and deals with them more systematically.

d. Ask each student to write down one or two questions (either ahead of time or at the start of class), but in this case the student owns his/her question and is in charge of leading the discussion until he/she feels there has been a satisfactory exploration of the issues. Start anywhere and go around the table. This obviously works best in smaller groups with longer periods than 50 minutes.

e. Divide the class into pairs or small groups and charge each group to decide upon one salient question to put to the rest of the class.

4. Finding Illustrative Quotations: We do not often enough go to the text and read passages out loud together. Students, we are told, do not know how to read any more. If so, they need to practice and to see modeled good old-fashioned exposition de texte. Ask each student, either ahead of time or at the start of class, to find one or two quotations from the assigned text that has the flavor particularly significant.

There are many ways in which the instructions may be put: “Find one quotation you especially liked and one you especially disliked.” Or “Find a quotation which you think best illustrates the major thesis of the piece.” Or “Select a quote you found difficult to understand.” Or “Find a quotation which suggests, to you, the key symbol of the larger text.”

After a few minutes of browsing (perhaps in small groups of three to four), the students will be ready to turn to specific passages, read-out loud, and discuss them. Be sure to pause long enough for everyone to find the right spot in their book. “Starting with the middle paragraph on page 51—are you all with us?” Lively and illuminating discussion is guaranteed because not all students will find the same quotations to illustrate various instructions, nor, probably, will they all interpret the same passages the same way.

It is during this exercise that I have had the most new insights into texts I had read many times previously. And there may become more exciting (or modeling) experience than for students to witness their teacher discovering a new insight and going through the process of refining a previously held interpretation. “Great class today! I taught Doc Frederick something he didn’t know.”

5. Breaking into Smaller Groups: No matter the size of a class, six or sixty or one hundred and sixty, it can always be broken down into smaller groups of four, five, eight, fifteen, or whatever. This process, quite simply, is to enable the people to say something and to generate more ideas about a text or topic. Also, groups lend themselves usually to a lively, competitive spirit, whether asked to or not. We are interested not only in the few people we are grouped with but also in what they’re doing over there. Furthermore, reticent students often feel more confident in expressing themselves in a larger group after they have practiced the point with a safer, smaller audience. There are three crucial things to consider in helping smaller groups to work well.

First, the instructions should be utterly clear, simple, and task-oriented. Examples: “Decide together which of the brothers is the main character in the novel.” “Which person in the Had best represents the qualities of a Greek hero? Which person, the same or different, best represents a hero by your standards?” “Why did the experiment fail?” “What would you suggest changing?” “Identify the three main themes or this text.” “What is Picasso’s painting saying?” “Identify three positive and three negative qualities of King David’s character.” “What do you think is the crucial turning point in Malcolm’s life?” “If you were the company treasurer (lawyer), what decision would you make?” “Generate as big a list as you can of examples of sex-role stereotyping in these first two chapters.” “If you were Lincoln, what would you do?” In giving these instructions be sure to give the groups a sense of how much time they have to do their work.

Second, I believe in varying the ways in which groups are formed, in order to create differentiated groups with different constituencies. Pair off (“with someone you don’t know”) one day; count off by fives around the room; group forms of “about eight” around clumps of students sitting near one another on a third day.

And third, vary the ways in which groups report out when reassembled. Variations include:

- each group reports orally, with the teacher recording the results (if appropriate) on the board;
- each group is given a piece of newsprint and felt pen upon which to record its decisions, which are then posted around the room;
- space is provided for each group, when ready, to write their results on the blackboard;
- each group keeps notes on a ditto master, which the teacher runs off and distributes to everyone for continuing discussion the next meeting;
- no reporting out is necessary, or reactions are invited from several groups, but not necessarily from all of them.

Further possibilities for small groups are described in the suggestions that follow.

6. Generating Truth Statements: This exercise develops critical skills and generates a good deal of friendly rivalry among
Even having said that, I have still found that I am capable of breaking my own contract and intervening or, more likely, affecting the class by non-verbal signals. I tell my students that I find it extremely difficult to stay uninvolved, and that I need their help in making sure I stay out of the discussion. They are usually happy to oblige. If possible, adopt an utterly non-evaluative observer role and take descriptive notes on the course of the discussion. To read your notes back to the students may be the most helpful feedback you can give them.

10. A Tenth Way to Start: As the term progresses students will have experienced many different exciting ways to start a discussion, most of which, we hope, enhance their understanding of a text or issue. Once the expectation of variety has been established, there is even a legitimate place for the following strategy: stroll into class with your book, sit on the edge of the table, hold the book up, and ask: "How'd you like it?"

Although it has not been my primary purpose in this article to extol the many values of discussion, I assume that my bias has been implicitly clear. The key to effective retention of learning, I believe, is in owning the discovery.

Emerson wrote in his journals that a wise person "must feel and teach that the best wisdom cannot be communicated; (but) must be acquired by every soul for itself." My primary strategy as a teacher is to structure situations in which students have as many opportunities as possible to acquire wisdom for themselves, that is, to own the discovery of a new learning insight or connection and to express that discovery to others. In this way their substantive learning is increased and their self-esteem is enhanced.

How we plan the start of class is crucial in achieving this goal.

"Hey, roomie, I now know what Emerson meant by self-reliance. What I said in class about it today was that..." Which translated means: "Hey, I'm OK, I understand this stuff. I said something today others found helpful." Which translated means: "Class was good today; he let me talk."

For Further Reflection and Action...

1. Have you ever experienced some of the fears in facing a discussion to which Frederick alludes on the first page of his article? How did you handle or cope with your fears? Were you pleased with the strategies you used to overcome your fears?

2. Do you accept Frederick's assumption about discussion? What would you change or add to his list of principles? Why?

3. Do you encourage students to generate their own questions about your assignments? Of the five methods suggested, which do you think lend themselves best to your discussion style and course content?

4. Consider the small group approach in your own classes. Do you adhere to the three crucial elements of small group work as advocated by Frederick? How can you improve the small group discussions?

5. How many of Frederick's structured situations for facilitating discussions have you used in your classroom? Through them, are you able to effectively allow your students to acquire their own wisdom? What can you do to enhance the learning insights of your students?

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