

COMMUNICATING THROUGH QUESTIONS

By Luanne J. Bauer

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We are more interested in producing graduates who can ask good questions than in producing graduates who can just give good answers," said the director of my graduate program at Northwestern University. This piqued my interest because it fit with something Elaine Giddings, founding chair of the Communication Department at Andrews University, had stated years earlier in her course, "The Teaching of Speech." One of us, while practice teaching, was amazed that no one responded to a question posed for discussion. The deadening silence from a

normally vociferous group was powerful.

"People tend not to respond to 'Poca-who?' questions—as in 'Captain John Smith married Poca-who?'" said Dr. Giddings during the critique session. "You have to engage their minds in order to tempt them to answer."

But it is precisely the "Poca-who" questions that get asked most frequently in classrooms. In reviewing eight studies between 1912 to 1967, Meredith Gall found that questions requiring the lowest level of cognitive thinking were the ones most frequently asked.¹

Unfortunately, that situation hasn't improved. Quoting a 1986 study by

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Delva Daines, Robert Kloss reported that 93 percent of the questions asked by elementary and secondary teachers were at the literal level of comprehension. Likewise, 88 percent of the students' answers were also at the lowest level of cognitive skills.²

As Adventist teachers, these dismal statistics cut across the grain of our core beliefs, for we want our students to be more than "mere reflectors of other men's thoughts." Furthermore, we see teaching as more than coaching lackluster answers from reluctant students. In this article I would like to suggest three ways to use questions to enhance learning—and to achieve better communication among our students: (1) Create non-factual questions to stimulate thinking and communication; (2) Ask questions that engage students in the higher levels of cognitive thinking; and (3) Develop a series of questions for small-group discussions.

Non-Factual Questions

Elaine Giddings suggested several alternatives to "Poca-who" questions.

One was a series of non-factual questions. In a Bible class about the messages proclaimed by the three angels of Revelation, for example, why not ask, "What are some things you'd like to do when you get to heaven? I'd like to take my skis and zip off to another planet where they have high mountains with fresh powder snow. Then I'd ski for miles where no one has ever skied before, and fly back to the top of the mountain and do it again. What about you?"

The beauty of non-factual questions is that students feel safe in answering them. Because the questions are not factual, no one can say, "That's wrong." Therefore, students give longer responses, use their creativity, get excited about possibilities. And more students participate—especially if the teacher probes for additional responses. These probes should be short and primarily non-verbal so as to keep the focus on the students.

Higher-Level Questions

Non-factual questions relate closely to certain types of higher-level questions. Imogene Ramsey and her colleagues suggest that teachers use terms

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Anthony D. Fredericks believes that "What if . . . ?" questions stimulate creative as well as critical thinking. He suggests using these types of questions across the curriculum. His sample "what if" questions include:

What if the American colonists had settled on the West Coast first? (History)

What if our school were located on an earthquake fault line? (Science)

What if newspapers could report only opinions? (Reading)

To encourage participation, he reminds the class that their objective is to think of as many "what if" answers as possible. He then writes their brainstorming ideas on the blackboard.

After Fredericks' students become accomplished at answering, he gets them to ask their own "what if" question of the day for each subject. After listing the facts they have learned that day, then think of a "what if" question based on each fact. On the following day, the class discusses answers. Fredericks has found that this helps students take more responsibility for their own thinking and learning. It has meant more thinking, more learning, and more fun for students.⁴

Another way to stimulate students' higher-level thinking and willingness to communicate is to admit (along with the king in *The King and I*), that something is a "puzzlement." When someone admits to being perplexed, to not knowing all there is to know, this often stimulates others to find answers and help solve the "puzzlement."

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tions, students will have their thinking and creativity stimulated. They will also be more likely to participate in class discussion.

Before leaving the topic of higher-level questions, a final point needs to be made. Dale Dean points out that simply because a wealth of studies indicate that most questions require only a low level of knowledge to supply answers, it does not mean that low-order questions are not important. However, he urges that teachers systematically raise their level of questions by using Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives. This will allow them to plan their

questions and to include questions that stimulate all levels of cognitive thinking.⁶ Robert Kloss gives clear examples of how to do this and provides a model that can be adapted across the curriculum.⁷

Questions for Small-Group Discussions

One of the most effective strategies for stimulating thinking at different cognitive levels and for helping students learn to communicate is the well-planned small-group discussion. According to Pamela J. Cooper, the small-group method of teaching enhances student motivation and fosters positive attitudes toward the subject matter; it develops students' problem-solving and decision-making skills; and it helps students share their ideas for critiquing and comparison.⁸

Unfortunately, these outcomes don't arrive by magic. (A teacher once mentioned in the hall that since he hadn't had time to prepare for class, he'd have to use small-group discussions. Later, a student in that class was overheard complaining that the class was "awful"—it had no organization, no focus, and no one knew what they were supposed to learn.)

My five-year-old niece, Jennifer, came to visit one summer. The neighborhood families included her in the nightly softball game in the nearby vacant lot, and everyone conspired to teach her to play. Her excitement grew night by night. In addition to the thrill of learning to play softball, she could hardly wait to get home to teach her dad how to play!

That experience made me wonder why we so seldom give our students the opportunity to teach us something. When they do get the opportunity to teach the teacher, they have a sense of joy and accomplishment. They feel they have made a real contribution.

After noting that perplexed questioning is not the norm in the classroom, J. T. Dillon observes that "theory teaches us that these are the questions that stimulate thought and eventuate in knowledge."⁵ Given the complexity of today's world, there are certainly more things than our philosophies have dreamt of, and we should be curious, puzzled, or perplexed about a number of them.

Currently, for example, I might ask a business or social studies class, "A recent Sunday paper stated that new businesses

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fail at the rate of 60 percent, but that new businesses started by women have a 70 percent success rate. I wonder why that is." Students can tell when we are truly curious and not just asking a "teacherish" question. I'm willing to bet that if I asked that question in class, some students would help me find the answer, for I really want to know. In the process of finding answers to such ques-

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To be successful, each step of the task must be planned carefully. Students must be instructed about small-group process so that they can learn to function as productive members of a group. Following are sample instructions for a small-group discussion in a communication class.

Task: Work together to present the concept of perception checking to the

class. To do this you should:

1. Explain the process of perception checking.
2. Give an example of perception checking in a demonstration.
3. Evaluate your example according to the criteria stated in the text.
4. Explain how the process of perception checking can affect daily life in the classroom and at home.

Directions for working together:

1. While planning the presentation, ask each person at least one question.
2. Each member of the group should participate in the presentation.

Time Frame: 10 minutes

Using small-group discussions as a method of instruction allows teachers to plan questions that involve students in various levels of cognitive thinking and engage them in vigorous communication.

Conclusion

Even though most of the questions heard in classrooms ask for answers that require little thought and less enthusiasm, it is possible to prepare carefully planned, well-crafted questions that stimulate creative thinking and zestful communication. Ways to accomplish this include creating non-factual questions, asking questions that demand higher levels of cognitive thinking, and developing a series of questions for small-group discussions. These questions will engage students' minds and tempt them to answer. The answers may surprise you! ✍

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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