

IMPROVING STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN HISTORY LECTURES: SUGGESTIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL QUESTIONING

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For years I have worked with beginning history and social studies teachers at both the K-12 and college levels. Hundreds of observations have illustrated for me that one of the most difficult and common problems faced by novice teachers is motivating students to participate in lessons. Indeed, the beginner who does not have difficulty with student inertia or even apathy is the exception rather than the rule. Student passiveness is particularly manifest and troublesome when the teacher attempts to use the lecture/discussion technique of instruction so prevalent in history classes. There are two facets to the quandary of how to engage students. First, beginning teachers must sort out confused thinking about the responsibility of both teacher and student for learning. The second is that they must add to their meager beginner's repertoire specific tactics that stimulate student participation.

Using Questions to Transform Lecture into Discussion

For years, critics have assailed lecture as an ineffective teaching technique. They contend that lecture encourages passive learning and, thereby, inhibits mastery and retention of content.¹ Apologists rebut that lecture is a sound instructional technique especially appropriate for quickly structuring large quantities of information. In the field of history where economy of teaching is frequently required, especially in survey courses, the debate about lecture has had little impact on teacher choice of technique. Lecture has a long tradition and continues to be the primary presentation method used by history teachers at both the secondary and post-secondary levels.²

Teachers use various techniques to transform lecture from formal monologue into discussion, which moves students from passive to active learning. Perhaps the most frequently used method for engaging students is to ask questions that induce them to think and talk about the content being studied, to process information rather than just listening to it. The use of questioning is both documented and encouraged by the

¹For discussion of active versus passive learning, see Charles Bonwell and James Eison, *Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom*, ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 1 (Washington, DC: The George Washington University School of Education and Human Development, 1991).

²For the most recent and best overview of instruction in secondary education, see John Goodlad, *A Place Called School* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984). The use of lecture at the university level as well as the arguments of its advocates and opponents are detailed in John Penner, *Why Many College Teachers Cannot Lecture: How to Avoid Communication Breakdown in the Classroom* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas Publisher, 1984).

professional literature (see resource list on the lecture method). For example, there is evidence that more effective teachers ask more questions and elicit greater and more successful participation from their students than do less effective teachers.³

Most teachers, even beginners, know to and do ask questions. The problem is that many teachers, especially beginners, are unable to use the technique successfully. This problem is examined by Maryellen Weimer, who identifies questioning as the most common, widely used, and universally accepted instructional strategy. But, she asserts, the common use of questioning is problematic because it is "too much taken for granted and too much used without insight or conscious awareness."⁴

There is abundant literature about what kinds of questions invoke the deepest learning and about how to formulate good questions. However, there is scant discussion of what teachers should do when those well formulated, important questions fall flat. It is easy to ask questions. It is not easy to ask good questions. Nor is it easy to ask questions well, and beginners have a particularly difficult time developing this expertise. But asking questions effectively is a skill that can be taught and learned. My objective here is to relieve the poverty of discussion about practical application by focusing on how to think about and plan for successful questions and then how to actually ask them in ways that successfully engage students in the lesson.

Problems Beginning Teachers Have With Successful Questioning

The snag for beginning teachers is not asking questions but getting students to answer those questions. In the typical classroom scenario, the teacher asks questions and then allows students to volunteer answers. The results of this strategy vary. A student might volunteer the correct answer, and most novices have little difficulty executing the affirmation that should follow. The volunteered answer might be partially correct, thus allowing the teacher to give the student positive feedback with some correction. However, the answer might simply be incorrect. It is at this point that novice teachers begin to fumble. It is accurate to say the answer is incorrect, but how can this negative feedback be given without making students feel implicitly chastised and too deflated to risk answering further questions? Novices intuit that further voluntary student participation hinges on the students' feeling of safety, but they do not know what steps to take to maintain a high level of scholarship as well as the students' willingness to engage.

³James Henderson, Nancy Winitzky, and Don Kauchak, "Effective Teaching in Advanced Placement Classrooms," *Journal of Classroom Interaction*, 31 (Winter 1996), 29-35.

⁴Maryellen Weimer, *Improving Your Classroom Teaching* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1987), 49.

A similar situation can occur with the student who answers every question. The preferred learning style of this student might be a type of personal dialogue with the teacher. But the teacher is aware that, if one student volunteers and is allowed to answer every question, other students will no longer volunteer. There comes a crucial moment when the teacher must curb one student's monopoly without intimidating other students.

The response with which novice teachers have the most difficulty is when no student volunteers. It is difficult to discern whether students are not answering because they cannot or because they will not. The teacher might then call on a student to answer, a maneuver that changes the tone of the classroom interaction. Now control of the choice of whether to participate has shifted from student to teacher. When questions are voluntary, the teacher, deliberately or unconsciously, gives that decision to students. When the teacher asks questions of a specific student, the teacher is in charge of whether and when students participate. The student has been put on the spot, and the whole class observes how the teacher deals with the respondent. As with volunteer answers, there is usually no difficulty with a correct or mostly correct answer. Again, the uncertainty occurs with an incorrect answer or refusal to answer.

Student Inertia

Consistently, beginning teachers are surprised and frustrated at the inability or unwillingness of students to become engaged with lessons. This is not what they expected. Their disillusionment is expressed in observations such as, "I expected discipline problems, and I was ready for them. But I was not prepared for this incredible apathy."

Actively engaging in a lesson requires effort before as well as during the lesson. Students prefer to be in charge of the decision about whether to expend this effort. Low performing students are particularly resistant. They might even exhibit hostility if the teacher is persistent about engaging them. They seek, sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously, to "teach the teacher" not to expect or demand participation with such evasions as answering every question with "I don't know." At times the answer is so immediate and emphatic that it clearly goes beyond "I don't know" to "Leave me alone." Or they might play the waiting game by just saying nothing even if the teacher tries to lead them through the question. Feeling pressed to move the lesson forward or not to embarrass the student, the teacher usually yields.

Beginning teachers usually interpret apathy or resistance as laziness. But as they gain experience in the classroom, they come to understand that sometimes what looks like laziness is really inability. Students might simply not know the answer to the question. Sometimes what looks like apathy is fear. Students might fear speaking in front of others or fear being wrong, especially if that is often the case. This phenomenon is documented by Bonwell and Eison who report that, when students are

successful at learning, they have a reduced amount of stress toward any method of teaching. But for students who have not been successful at learning, the lecture method is extremely threatening most of the time.⁵ Some students have been unsuccessful in the classroom for so long that they have developed mechanisms for survival. For these students, there is more dignity in appearing unwilling to answer than appearing unable to answer.

Who Is Responsible For Learning?

Teachers begin to realize that the problem here is more complex than just learning to ask good questions. This problem requires some serious thought about who is responsible for learning. I was once impressed with the perception of a speaker who described school as a place where students come to watch teachers work. Beginning teachers discover the real meaning of active learning through lesson preparation. Preparing for class as teachers rather than students, they master content more completely and understand it more deeply. They work harder and learn more than they ever did as students. Thus, they realize that learning is work, and that whoever is doing the work is doing the learning. Active learning goes beyond having students do non-lecture activities. Active learning means being responsible for one's own learning no matter which teaching model is used.

The function of the teacher is to manipulate the learning environment so as to increase dramatically the likelihood that learning will occur. Teachers are not encyclopedias; they are master students who design activities that guide the study of their pupils--activities that get students to do the work of learning. Students are responsible for learning, but the decision to hold them responsible is made by the teacher, often without conscious thought. Most teachers are diligent about their own preparation for class but hold students responsible for very little.

Requiring Participation

The teacher's philosophy about who is responsible for learning affects the function of asking questions in the classroom. If students are to be held responsible for learning, questions become more than a mere stimulus for class discussion to which students respond if they choose. Questions have multiple purposes. They can be used as exercises to stimulate student thinking, which means having them analyze, interpret, or manipulate information in some other way. They also can be used to review, practice, and check student mastery as teaching and learning progress. Using questions this way, teachers ask students to demonstrate what they understand rather than asking

⁵Bonwell and Eison, 4.

if they understand. The use of questions for exercises and evaluation is common, but those usually come after the teaching rather than during. That is, we use questions for summative evaluation, which occurs after instruction, rather than for formative evaluation, which occurs during instruction.

When used formatively, questions are not voluntary. Beginning teachers often realize they need to hold students responsible for answering questions but do not know how to do so without appearing, and being, harsh. If a student answers incorrectly or does not respond, the teacher might ask for volunteers or call on another student to "help out" the unsuccessful respondent. In this case, the first student was not held responsible because the teacher simply moved on to another student. Since the first student was not held accountable, the teacher's action indicated that an incorrect response or a non-response is acceptable.

Tactics for Requiring Student Participation

Holding Students Responsible for Preparation for Class

When deciding to hold students responsible, the teacher must first examine what students should know. Students should be able to answer questions about content previously covered in class, content included in outside assignments, and that currently being covered in class. Also, students must come to class prepared to participate. For example, they cannot answer questions about an outside reading if they did not read the assignment. In addition, they need to have the text with them for reference. Also, students cannot answer questions about a previous lesson if they do not have their notes or other materials from that lesson.

Holding students responsible for answering questions in class begins before class. Teachers learn that the preparation students do for class predetermines their ability and willingness to participate in class. How can they be active learners and answer questions, much less engage in meaningful dialogue, if they know nothing about the subject under discussion? Teachers then begin to manipulate the learning environment by designing activities so that students actually will do them. For example, history teachers typically require students to prepare for class by reading. But students do very little of that reading because it is not tested consistently. Students discern very quickly what counts and what does not (in other words, what they are responsible for) by observing what is tested.

Making Questions Mandatory

Now the teacher can determine whether students are not answering because they cannot or because they will not. The student should know the answer. If she does not, the teacher needs to know immediately, in time for the problem to be corrected. The final exam is a poor time to discover that students did not understand or master the content because the time for further explanation or reteaching is past. At this point,

questions are not voluntary. They are used constantly to ascertain the understanding and mastery of all students. They are like "mini-exams" used to gauge progress, and they are no more voluntary than exams are.

In fairness to students, required participation is unusual. Their reaction is often surprise and discomfort, which is genuine and understandable. Much of what goes on in school encourages, if it does not require them, to be passive. For example, teachers discourage students from giving serious consideration to questions. The amount of time a teacher pauses after asking a question is called "wait time." Extensive research on effective teaching reveals that the average wait time allowed by teachers after questions is five seconds.⁶ Five seconds is certainly not long enough to formulate the meaningful answers we expect from our students. So, if the student cannot think of an answer quickly, the assumption is that they do not know. Intentionally or not, teachers train their students to fire back either the answer or "I do not know." The insinuation, however unintentional, is that speed is more important than accuracy. Therefore, students are confused and uneasy with the concept of thinking before answering and of being held responsible for knowing.

The best way to minimize students' feeling of intimidation is to set the precedent for student responsibility early in the course. Before asking the first question, the teacher can explain the procedure. All students will be asked questions, and they are responsible for the answers. Since the classroom is not a quiz show, students will be allowed to look up in notes, text, etc. what they cannot recall. Therefore, they must bring these materials to class. The questions are review and practice of content previously or currently under study, so they can recall or find the answers. "I don't know" is an incorrect and unacceptable answer. The student will be given time to think because serious consideration is more important than speed. It really is okay to be wrong, and we honestly do learn by mistakes. But eventually we must get the information right. While the student prepares the answer to the question, the teacher will change the focus to another point. This strategy mollifies the pressure on the student and circumvents the "waiting game." The student will acknowledge when the answer is ready.

A couple of suggestions will help teachers think about how to use this technique without leaving some students behind. First, several students can be asked different questions about previously studied information at the same time. This sort of mini-test is used often to review at the beginning or end of a topic or lesson. The answers can be taken as students find them. Any student who cannot find the answer by the end of this exercise clearly will have the same problem finding that information to study for the test. If this student still cannot find the information after instruction about where

⁶Weimer, 50. Also, Kenneth Tobin, "Role of Wait Time in Higher Cognitive Level Learning," *Review of Educational Research*, 57 (Spring 1987), 69-95.

it should be located, it is time for reteaching. All students should be instructed to look in this location and amend notes as the teacher explains the concept again. The concept might be unclear to other students too. But even if it is not, this strategy relieves the pressure on the single student who was asked the question, and thereby on his classmates. There is no value judgment, just faulty information that needs to be corrected. Finally, the original student should be asked to restate the concept so the teacher can make sure it was explained clearly. In the end, the student was held responsible for getting the information right. Another technique is to ask all students to consider the same question with the stipulation that they will have a certain amount of time to find the answer. Then one person will be called on to answer. Because every student must consider the answer, no one is left behind. From that point, the technique proceeds as in the former example.

Setting the Precedent For Successful Answers

It is important to arrange for student success in the beginning, to set the precedent for students to answer rather than to avoid answering. To increase the likelihood of successful answers, the teacher must design questions with care. Grigar outlines a hierarchy of questions that require students to think at graduated levels of difficulty.⁷ The hierarchy ranges from lower-level questions that require recall of information to higher-level questions that require analysis. The research on questioning recommends that teachers ask higher-level questions because they increase student retention. However, the lowest level of questioning should not be underestimated because, for several reasons, it is a powerful teaching tool. Recall is the foundation of more sophisticated learning. Students must master some basic facts about the American Revolution before they can analyze its causes. Also, as discussed above, recall questions allow the teacher continually to monitor the progress of learning. Finally, these questions pertain to information previously covered so students can be required to answer. Mandatory questions give students practice that develops the habit of attending and focusing, which improves both comprehension and retention.

Using questions at this basic level, teachers can manipulate the environment to let students experience responsible and successful participation. Student aversion to required participation soon is followed by the satisfaction of knowing, not only that they can survive it, but that they can be successful. As soon as the tone is set for all students participating at random and upon command, teachers can begin to incorporate the more complex questions that students need to learn to manage. These more sophisticated questions prompt them to analyze, speculate, extrapolate, interpret, or

⁷Louis Grigar, "Questioning Strategies in Social Studies," *Think About It (Vol. III, Pt. I): A Collection of Articles on Higher Order Thinking Skills*, REACH: Realistic Educational Achievement Can Happen (Austin, TX: Texas Educational Agency, 1988), ERIC, ED 298 141: 84-89.

manipulate the content in some other way that is informed and supportable in light of what they are currently studying.

Conclusion

Lecture as an instructional technique makes heavy demands on an audience for which most students are ill prepared. Many "class discussions" end up as "lectures" because teachers are focused on and prepared to deal with the teaching but not with the learning. Asking questions is a good way, though not the only one, to engage students actively in lecture. But asking questions is tough, or rather asking effective questions is tough. Again, according to Weimer, they are "too much taken for granted and too much used without insight or conscious awareness."⁸ Using them effectively requires that we understand the different types of questions, their purpose, and when and how to use them. But, more fundamentally, it requires us to examine our philosophy about holding students responsible for preparing and participating in class.

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⁸Weimer, 49.

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