

# Asking better questions makes for better answers

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Photo: Sakti Prasanna Mohanty  
Courtesy: DAV Public School, Pokhariput

Is there a teacher who does not employ questioning as a way of drawing out responses from students? Indeed, ask any child to play 'teacher-teacher', and the first thing the child will do is to point out to a fictional student in the class and ask a question! Yet, how effectively is this tool used by teachers? How can questions be used more effectively by teachers, so as to engender vibrant discussion, critical thinking and joyful learning?

This month, I dipped into a research paper that examines the ways in which four science teachers use questions. Indira Vijaysimha observed four science teachers in different schools in Bengaluru: two government schools (GA, GB), a private unaided English medium school (PU) and a private unaided

international school (PI). Not surprisingly, she noted the inadequate facilities for laboratory exploration in the government schools, as compared to the private schools. Since GA, GB and PU were all affiliated to the Karnataka State Board, she observed also that the pedagogic processes employed by their teachers were quite similar. Here, teachers mostly drew the attention of their students to important facts in the textbook that needed to be memorized. The degree of classroom instruction was less compared to PI, where the pedagogic processes employed by the teacher were different, as this school was affiliated to an international board.

Using a conceptual framework that was formulated by Bernstein (2000), Vijaysimha describes the two

kinds of discourse that generally take place in a classroom:

1. Instructional discourse – is the sort of discourse that intends to develop specific skills in students.
2. Regulative discourse – is the sort of discourse that intends to maintain a certain order in the classroom.

I am pretty sure that the reader can figure out some examples of each of the above types of discourse. This paper describes examples of both, in the four schools.

Instructional discourse helped the teacher keep a check on content already covered, and content yet to be taught (e.g. *Have we done cells? What is a cell?*) Interestingly, this sort of practice was more prevalent in the government schools than in the private, perhaps, the researcher surmises, indicative of a more mechanical approach adopted by the teacher in the government schools. Transaction of the lesson in these schools was more often than not limited to reading out content from the textbook and then paraphrasing it.

In common parlance, the second is referred to as classroom management (*Why are you still talking? Don't you want attendance?* Etc.), while the first is basically a means to 'complete the portion' (A machine is defined as ..., What are the typical properties of metal? Etc.) The greater the presence of a hierarchical structure in the school, the less the usage of regulative discourse – as the very culture of the school demanded a certain submission of students to the higher authority of the teacher. This researcher, for instance, found that the teacher in GA, GB and PU did not need to call the students to order too often.

This paper then goes on to describe different types of questioning employed by the four teachers:

1. Conversational
2. Sarcastic
3. Scolding
4. Cuing
5. Quizzing/Interrogation

The conversational style was observed more in the international school than in the other (more formal) classes, and had a friendly, not-too-purposeful tone to them. Sarcastic questioning was resorted to when a teacher's attempts to elicit the 'right' answer from students failed. (In my own experience, I have noticed a tendency to be sarcastic when I feel the need to cover up my own helplessness!) Scolding

## Teachers' Questions in the Classroom

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questions were of course, the next step when sarcasm was deemed to be inadequate! Cuing questions involved a change of tone and the right pause, for a teacher to get a student to complete an answer in the expected way (*Chromatin is made up of ...?*). Finally, quizzing was used as a means of revision, so that students come up with right answers and thus indicate their preparedness for further testing.

One teacher acknowledged that she used questioning as a means of gauging whether her students had 'got it'. In between the lesson, teachers also used questions as a means of sustaining the attention of students, by asking questions like: *Have you understood? Does anyone have doubts?* Questions were also used to monitor students' progress, like: *Have you finished? Can I see your notebook now?* Sometimes, questions were used as a means of setting the stage for the teaching of new content. Recall of prior content was done through questions asked by the teacher. In a similar vein, the manner in which questioning can be used to emphasize key concepts or elicit the expected right answer is described in the paper – all too familiar to most teachers, no doubt!

What I found most striking was the following statement in this paper: "Teachers everywhere tend to maintain control over the discourse in the classroom."

And this set me thinking ... why does a teacher need to hold on to control so tenaciously? What is the teacher afraid of? Could it be that the teacher feels vulnerable about 'not knowing' the answers to questions that students raise? Or is the teacher so full of tension about completing portions on time? This paper states that *Active student verbal participation in a lesson may frustrate the teacher's wish to get through the planned material*. If that is so, who – I wonder – is *truly completing the portions?* The teacher? Or the students?

Is there an alternative path to the usage of questioning – that is not interrogative or

## Now bring it into the classroom!

1. Begin observing carefully how you use questioning in your class, by either having a trusted peer observe your class, or audio recording your class (with the school's permission).
2. See how often there is **instructional discourse** and **regulative discourse** in your class.
3. Now **examine the nature of questioning** in your class: how often is it conversational, sarcastic, scolding, cuing, quizzing/interrogation?
4. Notice your usage of each – when do you feel compelled to use each of these? Why?
5. How often is the enquiry open-ended in your class? What allowed this to happen? What prevented it?
6. How often is it student-led? What allowed this to happen? What prevented it?
7. When – if at all – does questioning lead to exploration or experimentation in your class?
8. What can you do to shift your class towards more open-ended enquiry, which leaves you – the teacher – less in control and the *student more empowered*?

Send in your findings to  
[thinkingteacher22@gmail.com](mailto:thinkingteacher22@gmail.com).

authoritative? In the single instance of student-led questioning that is described in the paper, there is a description of a teacher going through the trouble of performing an unplanned experiment in order to convince the enquiring student.

The paper ends by declaring the need for enquiry to be open-ended, student led, enabling exploration and experimentation. Teachers and students need to have actual conversations, rather than engage in relaying and reproducing knowledge that needs to be spouted out during the examination. How can this be engendered? Research is needed towards this end, says this researcher.

Why don't we begin that research, readers?  
Try out the suggestions in the box and send in your responses!

**Reference:** Bernstein (2000) *Pedagogy, symbolic control and identity: theory, research, critique* (Revised edition). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

The author is Founder Director of Thinking Teacher ([www.thinkingteacher.in](http://www.thinkingteacher.in)), an organization that networks with teachers across the country. Thinking Teacher aims to awaken and nurture the reflective practitioner within each teacher. By taking (action) research out of the classroom, Thinking Teacher develops the (action) researcher in the teacher. And then, by bringing research into the classroom – as in this series – Thinking Teacher's goal is to help build deep inquiry and rich learning into the teaching process. The author can be reached at < [neeraja@thinkingteacher.in](mailto:neeraja@thinkingteacher.in) > .

## Getting past the plastic: can you help us?

Subscribers who receive *Teacher Plus* in the post would know that we moved a few years ago from paper to plastic covers. The reason to move to plastic was that the paper covers often tore in transit through the postal system, often damaging the address label, so the issue never reached the intended subscriber and when the magazine was returned to us, we had no way of knowing which subscriber had missed the issue! During the rainy season, magazines were soaked through and damaged beyond recovery. So the obvious solution seemed to be to move to a sturdier packaging material, and this has indeed led to fewer returns and almost no damage in transit. But as we all know, plastic use has its own very serious problems, and we would like to find a way to avoid using it. Our current stocks of plastic covers will last us for another 5 to 6 months, and in the meantime, we would like to explore other ways of packing and mailing the magazine – one that will take into account weather-beating and other kinds of damage. If you have a suggestion that is sustainable and inexpensive (we are a small operation with very limited funds), do write to us! If you know of innovative folks who could help us, do let us know!

