

Handling those unexpected questions

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It's one of those days. You prepared very thoroughly for this class. You bounced into school and sailed into that classroom, all set to knock your students out with the beauty of your well-planned lesson.

And in fact, you very nearly did ... until that back bencher (who hardly ever raises his hand) stopped you midway in your lecture and asked a terrific question.

Indeed, the question was so good that it simply blew your mind away. Literally.

You stood in stunned silence – with 40 pairs of eyes boring through you, exposing your vulnerability and revealing your ignorance.

Has this ever happened to you?

If it has, then this month's research paper will make very pertinent reading. Although the reference is in the textbox below, it is a copyrighted paper which you will have to purchase. So if you wish to just read the gist of it, here is a link that you can easily access: <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/how-do-you-respond-to-unexpected-student-questions-teachers-weigh-in/2017/11>

I loved every bit of this paper! The only critique I have of it is that while it claims to be a study of the way six teachers handled unexpected questions posed by their students, it barely gives the reader a whiff of each teacher's experience.

Unexpected Questions: Reflecting on the Teacher's Experience of Responding in Class

Author: Ellen Watson

Source: **The High School Journal**, Vol. 101, No. 1 (Fall 2017), pp. 49-61

Published by: University of North Carolina Press

However, this void is more than compensated for by the gems that this paper contains, in the form of insights into teaching and a teacher's lived experience.

And so, these are the main bits that I am going to share with you here.

The author asserts that there is substantial literature about the sorts of questions that teachers ask students, but that there is very little on teachers' *responses* to questions that students ask them. So I wondered if there is a volcano ready to erupt here: what if we teachers, in India, set about documenting the questions that our students asked us, *along with our responses to them*? Particularly the *unexpected ones*? Wouldn't that be a treasure? She later goes on to say something which I found very impactful:

The student posing a question in class may be asking the teacher to assist their processes of seeking an answer.

Don't we automatically assume that a student asks the teacher a question with the hope of *getting the answer*? But look at what she says here: the student may well be seeking assistance in their *process* of getting an answer. Look how we have switched from our focus on 'the answer' to 'the *process* of getting an answer'. Isn't that what lies at the heart of learning? The process? But how often do we pause to savour the process, rushed as we are to 'cover the syllabus' and put the right answer out there for all to retain?

The next valuable observation that I picked up from this paper is that a teacher's uncertainty is experienced in full view of a class, unlike that of another professional – like, say a nurse or a doctor. These professionals are not in full view of *an entire audience* when they feel uncertain about something – as indeed they must, at some time or the other. A family doctor, the author points out, has a moment or two to reflect on the diagnosis or treatment, when seated before the patient, free from worries about the curriculum, the next class, the portion to be covered that day or living up to the expectation of knowing all the answers. A

doctor can make a tentative diagnosis admitting that this is an initial guess, which will reveal itself to be accurate/inaccurate as the treatment is monitored and reviewed. A teacher, on the other hand, is frequently under scrutiny: of a class full of students. It is almost impossible to hide this uncertainty, especially considering how perceptive children are. This renders it all the tougher for a teacher to openly acknowledge: “I don’t know” or even step back quietly to reflect on the best response. For, as the author rightly points out: Unlike many other professionals fielding questions, the teacher is constantly in a changing moment, not offered the time to step back and reflect.

No teacher would deny that her day is full of *changing moments*! Moments that swing between structure and flow, planning and surprise, teaching and learning, deciding and implementing ... the list is endless! (This is partly what makes the job so challenging.) But the downside is captured in the last phrase of the above quote: “not offered the time to step back and reflect”. With the day’s ‘portion to be covered’, the bell about to ring to signify end of class, the pile of uncorrected notebooks waiting in the staff room – reflection? You must be kidding!

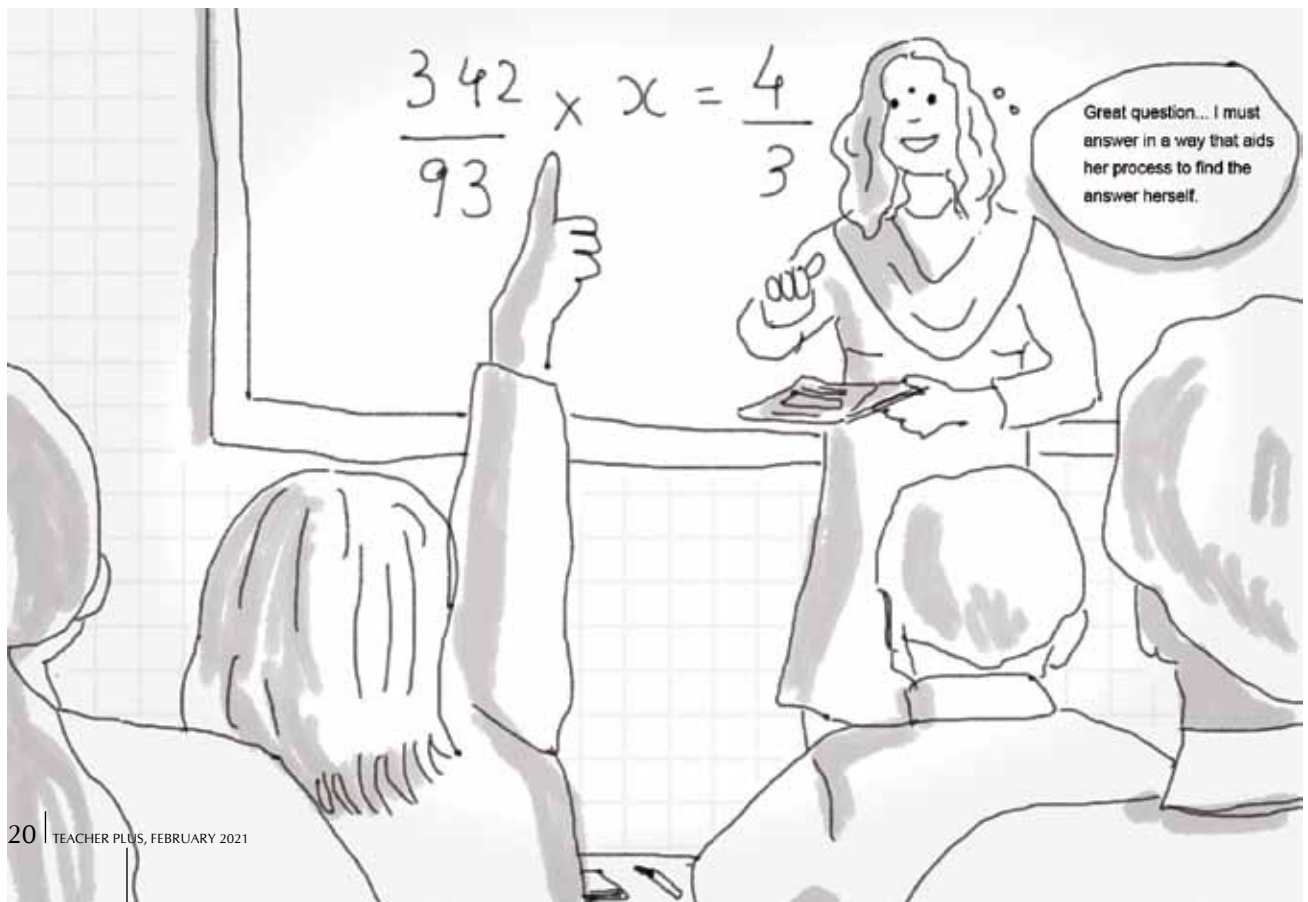
So let’s get back to the scenario that we began this article with – the teacher standing before a class, uncertain about how to answer a question posed by a student. What are the options? As this author points

out, a teacher could choose to enter into a discussion of the question, not entirely sure where this will go, or politely defer dealing with it by saying: “Let me get back to you on this tomorrow, ok?”

Whatever the finally selected course of action is, the author points out that “the unexpected problem hangs in the classroom awaiting an answer.” This made me wonder: why must the unexpected problem *hang*, like a Damocles sword? Why can’t it open up rich possibilities – of discussion, exploration, wild guessing and hypothesizing? Is it the conditioned expectation that *the teacher must be the expert who knows all the answers* that converts the unexpected question into that sword?

It is probably due to this stereotypical description of a teacher’s role that the unexpected question can momentarily shock the teacher – and cause a role reversal: *of a teacher turning into a learner*. One of the six teachers studied by this researcher confessed to feeling like ‘a fraud’: especially as the answer to the unexpected question was *not* in this teacher’s field of knowledge. Another experienced an “Aha!” moment, as the answer slowly dawned on the teacher, even as the question was being turned over in the mind. This teacher clearly experienced the truth in the statement:

Teaching is not about holding large stores of information, but teaching is about letting learning happen (Heidegger 1968).



Now bring it into the classroom!

1. For a month or so, make a note of the questions that your students ask you during (or after) class.
2. Document the strategy that you employed to respond to these questions: such as, 'gave the answer', 'nudged further thinking' or 'hinted at the answer'.
3. Now sift the list of questions noted in Step 1 above, by categorizing the UNEXPECTED questions separately.
4. Examine the strategy employed in responding to these: how did you tackle each of the unexpected questions?
5. What does your response in each case reveal about your own location vis a vis uncertainty in the classroom? How (un)comfortable did you feel? How did this level of (dis)comfort manifest itself in the strategy that you employed?
6. How can you use this revelation to your/your students' benefit in future?

Send in your findings to
thinkingteacher22@gmail.com.

What prevents us from 'letting learning happen'? Why do we feel the pressing need to remain fully in control? In staying within this paradigm, perhaps we are missing some golden opportunities for new learning. For, as the author so succinctly puts it:

In the unexpected question, the teacher may have the opportunity to exemplify that to learn one must seek information not previously known, even when our authority is questioned and at risk.

The only way that we can do this is to flow along with the *publicly viewable uncertainty* that our

profession brings. No doubt, this is easier said than done. But if we were to try it, who knows what would be the gains? Admittedly, the student who poses the unexpected question *unwittingly shifts the teacher from the role of an expert to a learner*. And learning, as we so glibly (and frequently) tell our students, almost never happens without discomfort.

How ready are we, as teachers, to embrace the same discomfort that we advocate our students welcome?

Doubtless, there is great comfort in the well-planned lesson. But there is also boredom: in practising the same routines that flow into one another like the turning wheels of well-oiled machinery. But then –

It may be in struggling with the unknown that we begin to learn pedagogical tact as we make instinctual decisions instead of proceeding according to plan. Perhaps, it is in these unexpected and unpredictable moments, in the uneasiness of not immediately knowing the answer, in standing in a place of unknowing with students, where one learns to teach.

Reference

Heidegger, M. (1968). What is called thinking? (J. G. Gray, Trans.). New York: Harper and Row.

The author is Founder Director of Thinking Teacher (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>.

Home Economics Special in May-June 2021

A subject relegated to the margins, Home Science or Home Economics has recently gained recognition as an important domain of understanding, generating interest and leading to further study in areas as diverse as child psychology, nutrition, hospitality, landscaping and interior design. The curriculum has grown beyond its stereotypical and limited understanding of three decades

ago, to include important elements of economics, finance, and gender studies.

In this issue of *Teacher Plus*, we invite contributions that discuss the different facets of Home Economics and innovative approaches to teaching it. We welcome classroom experiences, background pieces, activities, and anything else you have to offer that can expand how we

think about and teach Home Ec. **The word length for all articles is around 2000 words inclusive of hands-on activities. Photographs in hi-resolution and/or illustrations can be sent along with the articles. All contributions must reach us before March 10th, 2021. Please email your articles to editorial@teacherplus.org.**