

How to create a QUESTIONING CLASSROOM

Looking for ways to get your students talking? Try these strategies and soon you'll be asking how you persuade them to stop...

Today's curriculum is characterised by content-rich lessons, where young people are required to understand, remember and recount large volumes of information. As part of the teaching process, the effective use of Q and A can bring those sessions alive, giving our pupils a more engaged learning experience and a better chance of really knowing their subject. However, without careful management, it's easy to end up with the same few learners making all of the contributions, with more reticent (or apathetic) students staying silent. If you're struggling to get your whole class engaged in purposeful dialogue, here are six approaches that could give you a way in...

Get them chatting

This is a simple, five-minute starter activity to get a group talking and confident. You give your class an answer (one word works best) and ask them what the question is. In small groups they come up with as many plausible suggestions as they can. There can be a competition to see which team has the longest list, to add a sense of rivalry and further engagement. For example, an answer could be London. The questions could be factual, such as 'Where is parliament held?', or personal, e.g. 'Where did I visit last Easter?' Both are encouraging talking and the sharing of ideas. And if you can get students talking you can get them into Q and A.

Hold the cards

First, consider how many questions you will want to ask for a Q and A session. This is likely to be an approximate calculation, as additional questions will flow as student confidence grows and so in turn does the discussion. Count up the number of students you have. Divide the number of questions by the number of learners, rounding up or down accordingly. You may think you only have ten questions for a group of 25, in which case just give each student one card and if appropriate expand the discussion as you go.

The aim is for the students to get rid of their card or cards and to do this by answering questions. As students respond to a query you take their card away from them; once they have no cards left they can't answer any more, but everyone needs to answer something. This means the longer you hold your card, the fewer questions will be remaining, and so your choice of which you answer becomes increasingly limited. This encourages students to get involved from the start and to know that they will have to engage.

Offer an incentive

Another approach is to give students tickets for answering questions, either correctly or for giving it a go, which is up to you. This requires more attention to ensure all the students get involved, but works well across a whole session. For example, later on in the lesson tickets can be given out when you don't want to interrupt students' working but you do want them to know that you have noticed they are focused and on task. At the end of the session, you draw a winner. The more the student has engaged with the lesson the more tickets they will have, and so a bigger chance of winning a small prize.

Pass the mind-map

Q and A doesn't have to be oral, but it does need to ensure that students are actively considering a topic and offering up their thoughts. 'Pass the mind-map' allows you to create information rich pieces across a whole group in a relatively short time.

Place students in groups. Twos or threes work best but it will depend on the size of your class and the number of mind-maps you want to have completed. You will need a number of different questions or starting points, one per sheet, so that as they are passed from group to group each mind-map offers something new to consider. To begin with, answers are relatively easy to come up with, as there are no points added, but as the sheets are passed, and the most obvious responses already filled in, students need to go further in their discussions. They also need to read the mind-maps before adding their own comments to ensure ideas are not repeated.

When I do this I then use either use the work as a display or ask students to photograph the information, which they then use as references for their own pieces of work.

Who likes McDonalds?

Many students feel they can't analyse. They may struggle to break down work into when, why, what and how – but most of them can talk about McDonalds, apparently indefinitely. So start by questioning them on a topic they feel confident about – one that doesn't scare them. When did you last go to McDonalds? What did you eat? Why did you pick that? Are there any bits you don't like? What about the gherkins? And did you have a meal deal? What drink? And why did you pick that? But what about KFC? How do they compare?

Before you know it you have a detailed piece of analysis, and a clear demonstration for your students that they *do* have the skills they need to engage with your subject, too. Then tell students the subject-based Q and A follows the same process. Do one related to your subject immediately if you can to embed the process and the belief that they can answer questions and talk about a subject effectively within the group.

Randomiser PowerPoint

While Q and A can offer us subtle ways to add differentiation into a session, with questions aimed at certain students according to their level of ability and engagement, sometimes we can overthink things, or unintentionally not push those we believe to be weaker.

A randomiser PowerPoint removes you from the process of allocating the questions, selecting the student who is asked to respond for you. This keeps everyone engaged, in the expectation that they will have to answer a questions sooner or later. Some programs offer you the opportunity to mark answers as correct or incorrect, meaning that those who get a question wrong will come up more often until they start answering correctly. This can have issues if a particularly weak learner is in your class, but if used well can give students a real incentive to be clued up on your subject, ready for whatever questions the process might throw at them.