

The Art of Asking Questions

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Raising two intelligent sons was quite a learning experience at times, challenging us to be very clear in how we communicated with them. We learned early on that instructions, explanations and questions had to be specific. If we failed to be specific and they exceeded the limits we set or the information we wanted or avoided giving us the information we needed, our boys often responded by saying, “You didn’t tell us that” or “We didn’t know that was what you were asking.”

Learning to be specific with our sons has helped my wife and me become more effective teachers because we have sharpened our skills related to how to ask questions in teaching-learning situations. We discovered that the quality of the answer depended on the quality and nature of the question. So here are some teaching tips for how to ask good questions in teaching-learning experiences.

- **Ask open-ended questions**—Learn to ask questions that require more than a memorized response. Too often our questions can be answered with yes, no or Jesus, reflecting only an objective, right-or-wrong answer. Questions that require some personal reflection or drawing a conclusion challenge learners to think and make decisions.
- **Ask one question at a time**—Avoid confusing learners by asking several questions without allowing time to answer them. Learners need to know what you are asking. If you ask three or four related questions, they may not be able to decide what you want.
- **Address everyone with your question**—Questions should be open for anyone to answer. Granted, sometimes you need specific answers or want to involve specific individuals, but for the most part, questions should be addressed to the group at large. If you ask subjective questions, this also contributes to good discussion as several people may have different points of view.
- **Provide feedback to responses**—Acknowledge answers in some way that lets learners know you have heard and accept their answers. Even when several people provide answers, make sure each person knows you appreciate their contribution.
- **Follow some questions with questions**—Sometimes the learner is not entirely sure of his or her answer, or may not provide the right answer. Asking questions that help learners clarify the initial question or help them think more clearly about their answers can get learners back on track. At other times the answers may let you know that this is a good time to take learners deeper with a specific idea, so more questions offer you the opportunity to continue the learning at deeper levels.
- **Wait for answers**—Waiting for five seconds may seem a long time. Failing to wait often sends a message that you don’t really want learners to answer. Your questions are merely rhetorical. Learners often need a few moments to formulate thoughts or ideas before answering. At other times the answers might require considering between options, both of which might be correct but not of equal value. Allow time for learners to think and respond.

- **Challenge learners to answer their own questions**—If learners ask probing questions or questions that suggest they are thinking about something, turn the question back to them with comments such as, “What do you think” or “Why do you think this would be the case?” Some of the best learning comes from questions that we really can answer ourselves.
- **Affirm all people**—Every person is significant in the class. Affirm each person for questions asked or answered. Make an effort to affirm each person for offering a thought. Each learner wants to know that he or she is important and of value to the teacher.
- **Accept all answers**—Although some answers may be incorrect, no answer is unimportant. New Christians or persons who are not familiar with the Bible will offer ideas that may not be quite on target. If someone gives an incorrect answer, accept and affirm the comment and continue asking for other answers. Use comments such as “Okay, that’s one possibility; are there others?” or “What do the rest of you want to suggest?” or “Thanks for that answer, but I still haven’t heard the answer I’m looking for yet” can help refocus content so you can get to the correct answer.
- **Admit it when you don’t have the answer**—One way to short-circuit discussion based on questions is to make a stab at an answer without knowing what you are saying or whether you have the right information. One of the most important statements a teacher can make is, “I don’t really know the answer to that question, but I’ll call you this week with the answer.”

Learning to ask the right questions and developing good habits in how to use questions will come with practice. While this might be intimidating at times because you release control to learners by allowing them to ask questions, the value of your teaching increases greatly because you affirm learners as contributors to the learning experience. Remember also that using questions liberally in your teaching will require a little extra effort in preparation because you never know when someone like one of our sons will hit you with the most disturbing question of all: Why?

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