What Stops Students Answering Questions?

Don’t let the silence beat you! Teachers who ask good questions, and who have the skills to get students to respond, create better learning opportunities for their students. There are many reasons why students don’t answer questions in class. Some reasons lie with the students, and others may lie with you.

You can develop your skills so that students will feel comfortable and confident in responding to the questions you put to them.

Asking Questions: Good Practice

✓ Ask questions on the first day of class. Explain why you are doing so, e.g., “I need to know if I am clear.”
✓ Start off with questions that most students will be able to answer and increase the difficulty as the semester progresses.
✓ Ask one question at a time.
✓ Display your questions to help the students focus.
✓ Decide who you will direct the question to. Questions that require group answers are less threatening than those directed to individuals. As students learn to trust you, call for individual responses, or nominate someone to answer.
✓ Tell students that “I don’t know” is an acceptable (and sometimes excellent) answer. From there, learning can happen.
✓ Give students time to think.
Getting Students' Answers: Practices and Activities

Planning Good Questions

Plan questions before your lesson to interest your students and help them learn. When you plan, it is important to:

Recognise the difference between open and closed questions
Open questions demand students to think more and provide an opportunity for productive interaction. Consider the difference between: “Does PolyU view plagiarism as a serious disciplinary offence?” and “Why do you think PolyU views plagiarism as a serious disciplinary offence?”

Think about the purpose of any question you ask
Don’t fall into the trap of only asking factual questions. Design questions that will help students achieve the intended learning outcomes of any lesson.

For guidance in planning questions, see: http://cte.uwaterloo.ca/teaching_resources/teaching_tips/Other/asking_questions.pdf

Keep in mind the level of your students
Students can be discouraged by questions that are too hard. Questions that are too easy may seem patronising. Recognise diversity amongst your students by varying the level of difficulty of the questions you ask.

Check the wording of your questions
Make sure the question is clear. Make sure you are not asking a leading question where the wording indicates the answer you want.

Responding to Students’ Answers

✦ Don’t interrupt. Use gestures to show you are listening.
✦ If the class is large, repeat the students’ answer so that everyone can hear. If necessary, clarify meaning by asking probing questions or paraphrasing the students’ answers.
✦ Thank students for their responses whether they are right or wrong.
✦ Be sensitive to incorrect answers. You might prompt the student to revise or modify, or call for some help from a classmate. Don’t leave the class with misconceptions.
✦ Get students to expand on their answer when you think they can, e.g. “That’s interesting. What might that mean for…” Expand on their answer yourself if it is appropriate, e.g., “To follow up on that…”
✦ Praise good and interesting answers.

Four Activities to Try

Consult Your Neighbour
... good for large “lectures”
1. Display your question.
2. Ask students to discuss the question with their neighbours for one minute and agree on an answer.
3. Call for volunteers to present their group’s answer.
4. Ask for other insights or opinions.

Posting Answers
... for classes of any size
1. Distribute index cards to each student or group.
2. Ask the students to write their answer to a question you pose and then hand it in.
3. Select a sample of answers and elaborate or clarify as needed.

Pose, Pause, Pounce
... for classes of any size where there is a high degree of trust
1. Pose a question to the class.
2. Pause long enough for the students to think.
3. Pounce by naming a student to answer the question.

Study Questions: Use Online Discussion Groups
1. End your class with some questions rather than a summary (or post questions for online group discussion and have participation count).
2. Start your next class by returning to these questions. Students will have had a chance to think through their responses before class. The questions and answers will provide a good bridge between classes.

Contact Us

Educational Development Centre
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University,
Hung Hom, Kowloon
Phone: 2766 6292   Fax: 2334 1569
Email: eddept@inet.polyu.edu.hk
This issue of H.E.L.P! was written by Adele Graham and Sam Graham.

Read online at: http://edc.polyu.edu.hk/help