

Questions and Answers

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Introduction

Questions are everywhere in the teaching profession. Not only are there simple questions like “Can I go to the bathroom?” or “What time is lunch?”, but I also get asked more complicated questions - “Where do transgender people come from?” or “Don’t answer this if it will impact on my grade, but how should I structure this program?”

Questioning is something that is incredibly important to me as an educator, and has been important to me in my own studies in the past. I have always found that asking questions greatly increased my understanding of topics, so I encourage my learners to question me as much as I question them. I aspire to have a classroom that is open to all, and a safe space for questions to be asked, and answered, without judgment. Even if the questions aren’t always directly related to the topic at hand.

The problem begins when the questions veer too far off track, or come too close to guiding during assessment time.

“Professional” Questions

During one of my first observations with Hancine, she pointed out my great rapport with my learners. This lesson took place the day after a large games convention in the United States where a number of new games were announced, and I was enjoying a conversation with them about their passions. “Are you looking forward to the new Elder Scrolls, miss?” they asked me. Questions. And not the “subject related” kind. I responded and explained how excited I was to hear about it and asked them about the games that they were looking forward to playing (“OB3 Jess Peterson Observation Template 2 - Themes”, 2018).

It wasn’t until I sat down with Hancine later on that I realised that my lull in concentrating on classwork had gotten me into trouble. She recommended that I concentrate on keeping conversations in the classroom relevant to the topic, or at least the subject area. She told me that it’s fairly common with young teachers to be very friendly with their learners, simply because the age-gap (or lack thereof) make it easy to forget our roles and expectations in the classroom. Above all, she reminded me to focus on professional relationships.

Keep the questions related to the topic.

She was right, in a way. I've found that the closer in age that I am to my learners, the more casual of a relationship I have with them. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, but certainly something I need to ensure that I monitor. My job in the classroom is to provide an environment and activities to support my learners to succeed, and chatting with them about gaming is definitely not part of that job description.

I also know, however, that in the classroom, relationships are everything.

I spoke to my Head of Learning Area directly after my meeting with Hancine to discuss what had been said. My Head of Learning Area explained that, yes, professional relationships are integral to being an effective teacher - it's highlighted in *Our Code, Our Standards* (2017) ("engaging in ethical and professional relationships with learners that respect professional boundaries") - but relationships on the whole are important too. The *Graduating Teacher Standards* (2008) says that teachers need to "build *effective* relationships with their learners", but doesn't seem to elaborate any further on what an "effective" relationship looks like.

Ele told me that she often has off-topic conversations with her learners as a form of whakawhanaungatanga, and builds stronger relationships with them as a result of these conversations.

I look up to both of these people, and learning from their experience is one of the things that I value most about the Teach First NZ programme. I took both of their views into consideration and eventually concluded the following:

I think that *Ka Hikitia* (2013) puts it best when talking about relationships as "productive partnerships" - relationships that are mutually beneficial and based on respect. Relationships that are built on aspirations of a higher goal and an understanding that support will come from all parties to reach that goal. Nowhere in that section does it talk about gaming conventions, but I think it comes down to making sure that our interactions tend to be focused on that goal. The goal of supporting my learners to succeed, however that looks to them.

In order to continue developing as an effective teacher, I need to practice my questioning and answering skills. I need to focus on bringing conversations back to digital technologies when we get off task in class. I need to relate that gaming excitement to the gaming industry, something that we are developing skills for in our classroom already. I need to adjust my professional relationships to reflect the goal of success for my learners in digital technology. I need to change my *questioning and answering*.

“Understanding” Questions

I had another observation in mid-June with my Head of Learning Area. This was the first time she had ever observed me, as this is usually done weekly by my in-school mentor, but I relished the opportunity to show her what I'd learned in my first term of teaching and receive feedback based on her own experiences.

Again, I came head-to-head with questioning.

The lesson had been focused on a “I do, you do” activity which allowed learners to practice their Microsoft Access Query skills. Because we had done some learning in this area already, I was keen to share our progress. “Does anyone know what read-only means?” I asked. “What is a query?” “Can you tell me what a record is?”

So many closed questions.

Not only closed questions, but also directionless questions. In our post-observation meeting, Ele asked me *why* I had asked those questions. It was something that I had to think about. I knew as a teacher that I was *supposed* to ask questions, but I had never really considered what the purpose of that questioning was. I told her that I had been asking those questions to check for understanding (Griffiths, 2018).

It seemed like a sound answer to me, but when I really thought about it, I realised that there were so many better ways to check for that understanding. By asking one student in the class for their answer, I was checking that this one student, specifically, has the understanding that I'm looking for. It's not *unhelpful* to know this, but it also means that there are 26 other learners in the class who I have no idea if they're on the right page about the concept.

I was not using a range of learning experiences to support all of my learners to achieve. I was barely using *one* learning experience to support *one* learner to achieve (“Graduating teacher Standards: Aotearoa New Zealand”, 2008). It's important that I ensure that all learners are gaining success, and monitor their progress to achieving their goals (“Our Code, Our Standards”, 2017).

In the future, I'd like to address this by applying formative assessment skills and using tools such as kahoot or quizlet to monitor student progress. I'd like to utilise my exit ticket routine more often and ensure that everybody is handing them in as they leave the classroom. I'd like to ensure that my questions are built on supporting the entire classroom community to succeed, not just targeting a specific student.

“Don’t Answer this if it Will Affect My Grade But...” Questions

The final big “questioning” concern is one that I picked up on my own. I asked for specific feedback from my learning area advisor around questioning during assessment time.

One thing that surprised me in my studies so far was the lack of explanation around assessment expectations. To be honest, a fair amount of that probably has to do with my curriculum area. Digital technologies tends to be based around large portfolio assessments, and these portfolios are often completed with free access to course and internet material, with two weeks or more given to complete them.

This means that sitting these assessments can feel less structured, and in my experience, learners tend to take their time and complete assessments more casually than they would in traditional exam conditions. As a result of this more relaxed atmosphere, I get a lot of questions during the assessment. These are what I call the “don’t answer this if it will affect my grade but...” questions.

At first, I started answering most of these questions - a lot of them were simply clarifying the instructions of the assessment - and based on my understanding, these questions were 100% fine to answer. It wasn’t until my learners started asking me “Miss, how do I create a new query?” or “Miss, how do I mail merge in my data?” that I realised that I had a problem. I didn’t know how much guidance was too much.

I went straight to my in-school mentor who told me that as long as I wasn’t leading students to the answers I was fine. A colleague in my department told me that I should answer instruction-clarifying questions only. I had to call in my Learning Area Advisor for a special observation based around what questions were okay to answer, and which weren’t.

Overall, the feedback was positive. One of my biggest worries was that by guiding students in the general direction of the answer, I wasn’t displaying high expectations of my learners to find it themselves. This is something core to being an effective teacher that is highlighted in the Graduating Teacher Standards (2008), Our Code, Our Standards (2017), and Ka Hikitia (2013), as well as something that I’ve struggled with from the beginning of my teaching career.

Hancine reassured me that my answers were appropriate to assessment time, and suggested that I make the marking rubric more readily available to learners so that they are able to answer their own questions about it without my intervention (“OB5 Jess Peterson Observation”, 2018).

As a result of this feedback, I have looked at the remaining assessments for the year and focused on building a structure around them that gives my learners more resources and structure, but also (hopefully) will reduce the number of questions that I am asked during assessment time.

In order to do this, I will dedicate one lesson prior to starting the assessment on understanding the specifications of the student instructions, as well as any resources, and going through the marking rubric. I would like to accomplish this by providing learners with exemplars and allowing them to grade the assessments based on the rubrics. This should allow them to build a greater understanding of the rubric as they get to see it in action as well as implement it themselves.

Final Thoughts

Questioning is an essential skill that I need to develop as a teacher, but answering those questions is just as nuanced and difficult. I need to ensure that I develop my strategies and carry out my plans in order to continue improving in my journey as an effective educator.

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