

Ask the **right** **questions**



David Dunn looks at how a quizzical approach to Assessment for Learning can lead children to new discoveries...



In the last issue we looked at the basis of Assessment for Learning and its usefulness through differentiation. Now we're moving on to look at another big area – questioning. Most of us know how important quality questioning is and its positive effect on learning and assessment. But how often do we plan, or even just think about, the type of questions that we ask? Asking the right questions gives you the opportunity to make ongoing assessments and can have a big impact on learning in your classroom, so we need to make sure we do them justice.

Many of the questions that are asked in classrooms are recall questions, for example: **What is the capital of France?**
What is 32 divided by 8?

These are closed questions as they have a definite right or wrong answer. They are used as a way of jogging the children's memories or assessing what they know or can remember. But as a means of formative assessment, recall questions are next to useless unless they are asked of all children; one child's answer is clearly not reliable as a class indicator. These questions become more valid if the children are given a minute or two of paired talking before the answer is asked for, but even then they're not great. So what can we do instead? Many of you will be familiar with Bloom's Taxonomy and if you have had any questioning training then that name will have undoubtedly cropped up, but let's have a look at something else for a change – although there are some similarities.

Socratic questioning

As many of you will know, Socrates is the father of Western philosophy. But did you realise he was also most probably the earliest advocate of Assessment for Learning? He was a firm believer in *ex duco*, which means 'drawing out' or 'leading out' from the student. (It's where our word 'education' has its root.) So, let's have a look at his questioning strategy. Socrates aimed to challenge statements in a way that moved the learner towards a deeper understanding of the subject. Isn't that what we all would like? He achieved this by moving through different stages of questioning, with each stage questioning a different facet of understanding. It's extended further through the search for proof and reasoning. Let's have a look at what this all means.

Conceptual clarification questions

This gets the children to think in greater depth about what they are asking or thinking about in order to prove the concepts behind their argument. Basic 'tell me more' questions, such as those that follow, will bring out explanations.

Can you explain that?

What exactly does this mean?

How does this relate to what we have been talking about?

What do we already know about this?

Can you give me an example?

Can you rephrase that, please?

II Probing assumptions

Probing of assumptions makes children think about the assumptions and unquestioned beliefs on which they are founding their argument. This is about getting them to provide evidence for their thinking.

Why do you think that?

How do we know that?

Please explain why/how...?

What are your reasons?

Do you agree or disagree with...?

III Questioning viewpoints and perspectives

Most arguments are given from a particular position. Here, you are looking for an alternative viewpoint.

Can you put it another way?

What other ways of looking at this are there?

What is the difference between X and Y?

Why is it better than...?

How are X and Y similar?

What would...say about it?

IV Probe implications and consequences

This asks whether children's thinking can form a general rule that can be applied elsewhere. More probing questions!

Then what would happen?

What are the consequences of that assumption?

What are the implications of...?

Does it agree with what we said before?

Why is...important?

V Questions about the question

You can also get reflexive, turning the question in on itself. This leads to some very high-level thinking.

What was the point of asking that question?

Why do you think I asked this question?

What does that mean?

Are we any closer to answering the question/solving the problem?

You can see how these questions can build on each other and how you can get some really great thinking going on in your classroom. The Socratic questioning idea can be adapted for use in the classroom; obviously, much of this goes further than we would normally go in many primary classrooms, but there are parts of it that can be used effectively to deepen children's thinking, especially in upper KS2. It is important to keep those questions as open as possible (although it is possible to use closed questioning to great effect and they shouldn't be discounted). And don't be afraid to have a go at some of these types of questions; the children may well surprise you.

By using higher-order questioning strategies, and by having an idea of the type of questions you would like to ask, you are giving yourself a great opportunity to gain that vital formative assessment opportunity from your children. By doing this you are guaranteed to up the level of discussion and deepen the thinking and understanding in your classroom.

