



# just ASK



## Can posing the right questions lead to better learning? The Philosophy Shop's Peter Worley thinks so...

Questions are at the heart of learning, so good questioning has a great deal to do with good teaching. Following a precedent set by the ancient Greek philosopher, Socrates, over 2000 years ago, successful questioning is best achieved by the use of dialectic, which is to say a two-way, collaborative dialogue between the teacher and the students.

In his Interim Report, Jim Rose asks for a curriculum that will "instil in children a love of learning and an

insatiable appetite to go on learning." Philosophy literally means 'love of learning', and an effective dialectic will help to nurture an enthusiasm for education that will stay with children for the rest of their lives.

The first step to good questioning is liberation. Liberation from the guess-what's-in-my-head school of teaching. Many teachers feel a certain security in having an answer that the children are seeking, but this is one of the greatest enemies of true learning.

## Fire away

### SIX DIFFERENT STYLES OF QUESTIONS...

- **Closed** – this is a rhetorical question where the teacher knows the answer and is seeking it. It usually elicits a short, one-word answer. "Do you know what a closed question is?"
- **Open** – this invites the students to say what they know on a topic. "What can you tell me about open questions?"
- **Socratic** – this is a type of open question that invites a broader discussion on the fundamentals of a topic. "What are questions and why do we use them?"
- **Leading** – these are questions that lead the student to a particular answer. There are many varieties and they can be very useful in the classroom, especially when teaching something specific. "Socrates: Now then, try to tell me how long each of its sides will be. The present figure has a side of two feet. What will be the length of the double-sized one?"
- **Embedded** – these are the further, implied questions that lie behind an explicit one. Explicit question: "Who is responsible for the outcome in the story?" Embedded questions: "When is something somebody's fault?" "Can more than one person share responsibility?" Etc.
- **Conditional** – this is where a question is expressed in the "if...then..." form. "What would happen if there were no rules?"

# What went wrong?

## CLASSIC QUESTIONING ERRORS...

### LIST MAKING

Teachers love mind-maps, but making lists of all the students' contributions draws the teacher's attention away from the unspoken ideas that lie behind the contributions.

### ASKING EVERYONE

The attention to making sure everybody has an opportunity to speak can sometimes be an obstacle to paying proper attention to what the children are actually saying, in other words, the ideas.

### CLOSED QUESTIONING

Too much of this can be like sprinkling water over a fire you are trying to light. Discussions never get off the ground this way.

### LACK OF CLARITY

Preparation of thought is as important as lesson planning. Have a clear idea of the question before you ask it and then you will express it clearly. Only then will the children understand the question.

### NO TIME TO THINK

Don't be afraid of silence. Responses, thoughts and ideas all need time to formulate. Children often forget what it was that made them put their hand up, so give them time and repeat the previous conversation if necessary.



## What motivates questions?

- Justification – “Why do you think that...?” “How do we know that...?”
- Implications – “So what would

happen if that were true?”

- Other view points – “What do you think someone might say if they disagreed?”

- Clarification – “Can you say that again using different words?”
- Evaluation – “Do you think that is right?”

So, though it may feel like swimming too far out into the sea, the teacher must sometimes let go of the answer in order to encourage real, valuable contributions from the class. This is done, first and foremost, by the use of a different styles of questioning.

### Leave children in the dark

Imagine a large, darkened room with a number of children or students standing at various, irregular places within it. The room also contains a number of randomly placed objects. The teacher stands at one end of the room; they know its layout, and the position of all the objects. The teacher can either communicate this information by reading from

the map, hoping the children will retain the information correctly, and then test them on this. Or they can ask the children to explore the room for themselves and share their discoveries with their fellow pupils. The first approach is too often adopted in teaching.

### Teach the curriculum with questioning

Much is made of open ended discussions by movements such as Philosophy with Children. But every teacher's natural response to these sorts of admonitions is to object that they still have to teach a lot of stuff to the children; pupils have to learn from the national curriculum and exploratory discussions just ain't gonna do it! However, questioning can also be

used to teach curriculum material as well as facilitate exploratory discussions. These are the starting principles that will generate more questioning in your teaching (notice: they are themselves questions):

- How can I use questions to move the student from what they do know to what they don't know?
- Is there a way of using questions to teach pupils instead of telling them?

Asking questions takes more time to impart information but once they have arrived at their own understanding then the information, and – importantly – the processes they used to get there, is more likely to remain with them. This results in less reiteration

and therefore is more efficient in the long run. So next time a child asks you a question about how to do something, stop before you answer. Consider whether you can get them to answer their own query by taking them through a series of step-by-step questions.

**The Philosophy Shop is a social enterprise company teaching philosophy in primary and secondary schools. Our consultants are formally trained philosophers and undergo further training with us to teach philosophy to children of all levels and abilities. Our sessions can be aligned with the national curriculum or school projects and we deliver Inset in questioning, thinking and discourse skills. For more information, visit [www.thephilosophyshop.co.uk](http://www.thephilosophyshop.co.uk) or call 020 8699 9314.**