

Expert Insights

Stephen Brookfield, PhD, John Ireland Endowed Chair, University of St. Thomas, Minnesota [00:00:00]

Instructors ask questions to help students learn. In fact, the only reason instructors do anything should be to help students learn. So when you ask questions, you're able to check for understanding and allow students to establish their understanding. You are able to engage them and bring up their energy level and increase their attention, and you're able to deepen their thinking. A good question really invites the student to go deeper into a topic.

Narrator [00:00:32] What makes for a good question? Given that students learn more when they're engaged, few techniques are as effective or timeless as the thoughtful use of well-designed questions. But as no two classes are alike, it's likely more precise to ask, what's the best question for a given circumstance? Knowing requires the judgment that comes from trial and experience, as well as having a variety of questions at the ready.

Stephen Brookfield, PhD [00:00:58] The benefit of planning in advance the questions you're going to ask is because you're trying to support different kinds of learning. So asking general questions such as, well, "Does anyone have any questions?" or "Are we all clear here?" or "Are you running with me on that?" really is not supporting student learning. Different kinds of questions support different intellectual skills, and that's why you ask them.

Narrator [00:01:25] Bloom's Taxonomy is a useful guide to develop different types of questions across six categories. Questions about knowledge require students to remember information or facts that they've mastered, while questions about comprehension probe for understanding of a larger meaning. Asking to apply a formula, framework, or theoretical approach promotes more critical thinking, as does analysis through questions that prompt comparisons, classifications, and inferences about causality. Finally, asking students to evaluate evidence to advance and defend judgments with persuasive arguments or synthesize prior knowledge to create new constructs helps to develop higher order skills. Think about the questions you often pose. How do they sort into Bloom's categories?

Stephen Brookfield, PhD [00:02:15] Ultimately, when you go into a classroom, you have two or three kinds of questions that you want to raise. And you do that in a backward planning way. You want to make sure students are at a certain point at the end of that particular class session. And so the questions that you ask are designed to get them there. But questioning is an art. And even with backward planning, there are going to be questions that pop up in the moment that will support some students' understanding or help enhance their skill at giving evidence. So the mnemonic "CLOSE UP" is a short one that keeps in mind different kinds of questioning that we can draw on in the moment.

Narrator [00:02:59] The CLOSE UP approach is another framework to deepen discussion. By asking, "What do you mean by that?" or "Can you put it in another way?" help students clarify their ideas. Questions that explore how something is similar to an earlier reading makes links to prior knowledge. Both types are open ended without an obvious correct response, allowing you to gauge students' understanding. Questions that promote synthesis of different ideas, such as, "What are the broad lessons we could take from those two viewpoints?" or require students to present evidence, like "What evidence can you provide to support your generalization?" probe for deeper understanding and help to develop critical thinking skills. Finally, asking students to prioritize data, concepts, and events, asking, "What are the most important points from our last discussion?" develops their ability to weigh the strength of evidence.

Stephen Brookfield, PhD [00:03:55] I think the benefit of having these different kinds of questions (a) is that it engages people, (b) the questions are actually getting at different kinds of things, unearthing different kinds of skills, and encouraging different kind of learning. So a prioritizing question is not the same as a linking question or a question asking for evidence or data.

Narrator [00:04:18] Having students generate questions can also serve to deepen and refine their thinking. In small groups, ask them to brainstorm questions about a topic. And all those questions should be recorded and then prioritized, focusing on what the group determines to be the most important or interesting questions. Then have the group respond and answer the two best questions.

Stephen Brookfield, PhD [00:04:41] I grade students for participation in class, and I give them a participation rubric, which lists the behaviors I'm looking for from them as evidence of good participation. And in those behaviors are a lot of questioning items. So I'll say, good participation is when you ask another student to elaborate on something they've already said. Good participation is when you ask another student to explain or give an example of, of something that they're talking about. Good participation is asking a question that opens up a new area of explanation, of exploration for us. So I'm trying to train the students as they're thinking about how I can get my participation marks in this class, trying to train them in the skills of asking different kinds of questions for different purposes.

Narrator [00:05:36] A similar activity is, If You Could Ask Only One Question. This offers students an example of how one question can build deeper understanding or even open individuals up to new perspectives. Then following your introduction of a new topic, have each student prepare a question that they believe will stimulate a deep discussion. These can be submitted as classwork or used for small-group discussions.

Stephen Brookfield, PhD [00:06:02] One of my favorite things to do when students come back after doing some small-group activity is, I don't have them summarize what they did. Instead, I have each group bring back one question that was raised in their small-group work that we then might consider as a whole class. So if I have 10 small groups, the reporting back will be students disclosing 10 questions that were raised. And then I'll list those or I'll talk about them. And then hopefully I'll be able to use one or two of those questions as the lead-in to the next chunk or the next task that we're doing in class.

Narrator [00:06:44] Even with a host of insightful questions and engaging activities, it takes time and practice to learn how to weave questions together to move students from foundational to higher order analysis. With that said, there's some common missteps to avoid right from the start. For example, it's best to avoid fuzzy questions that are too vague or broad. Chameleon questions that can continually change focus can leave students confused, as do shotgun questions, asked in a rapid way, that can be overwhelming. Also, try to avoid programmed-answer questions that may sound open ended, but are posed in a way to suggest a "right" answer. Finally, put-down questions, introduced with comments like, "Well, now that I've explained this," can be unintentionally discouraging. In the Academy, the Socratic method is one of the most storied approaches, imagined as students and instructors diligently probing to the heart of a matter. But this method is not merely the responding to questions with more questions. The type of questions matter.

Stephen Brookfield, PhD [00:07:53] So Socratic questioning really is a flow. You ask a question, the student responds, and then based on their response, you ask the question to say a little bit more about the response or to talk about the assumptions or evidence that informed the response. Or you say, "What would be your response to this criticism or this information that's given?" So it's very organically developing.

Narrator [00:08:20] And a mix of foundational and higher order inquiry can lead in time and with diligent practice to rewarding discussions that will stay with students long after the end of class.