

# Questioning



*To understand where students are in their learning, and to inform instructional decisions on where they are going to next and how to get there.*

## WHAT IS IT?

Questioning can be used to prompt students to think about what is being taught and to give the teacher information on where students are up to in their learning. Teachers can then adjust instructions to meet learning needs, and support students to progress towards their learning goals.



## WHY?

Students can develop misconceptions in their learning, so teachers need to find out what students know or believe at a particular point in time. The primary purpose of questioning should be to find out what students need to be taught next. Another purpose is to teach students to think critically through questioning requiring deeper analysis rather than a simple yes or no or recall of information.

## KEY ELEMENTS:

Questioning should provide information on students' current understanding with reference to: task or performance goals / an expected standard, prior performance and success or failure on a specific part of the task.

Teachers can use taxonomies to devise questions. For example, the SOLO taxonomy can be used to describe increasing levels of understanding of a given topic. These can be summarised as:

- Prestructural: no understanding
- Unistructural: able to name and identify one aspect, follow simple procedures
- Multistructural: able to describe and combine multiple aspects
- Relational: able to explain, identify causes and effects within structures, criticise and analyse
- Extended abstract: able to hypothesise, theorise and generate new ideas and knowledge.

## PRACTICAL TECHNIQUES:

- Focus on questioning as part of the lesson planning process, making sure they are clear and focused on the task or process at hand to avoid confusion or misunderstanding.
- Vary the types of questions asked, for example, asking students to recall information, to modify or correct an incomplete or incorrect statement, or to “turn and talk” to a peer.
- Consider using statements instead of questions. Responding to statements requires students to think critically about what has been said to provide a response.
- It can be more useful to ask students to modify or correct an incomplete or incorrect statement, as this requires students to use evaluation and explanation skills.
- Use a randomisation method to ensure that all students are answering questions and being attentive. Randomly drawing from a container of icy pole sticks, each with a student's name on them, is a simple way of doing this.
- Increased wait time gives students more time to consider and come up with meaningful answers. However, too much wait time can slow the pace of a lesson.
- If a student answers a question with “I don't know,” be sure to come back to them later after responses have been modelled to understand what further support they might need.
- Listen out for the questions students ask each other, as these can provide valuable information about what students know, need to know, and the way they articulate their understanding.
- After completing a lesson, reflect on which questioning techniques were most effective, and what could be improved for next lesson.

## THINGS TO CONSIDER:

- If students need to raise a hand to answer, they can disengage by keeping their hands down.
- Students' avoiding participation will likely result in the widening of any achievement gap.
- Focus on all answers, not just correct ones. Student errors provide valuable information about their misconceptions.
- Ensure that correct answers are a result of genuine student understanding, rather than an application of naïve / simplistic rules that will not work for more complex questions.

## WHERE CAN I FIND OUT MORE?

[The Power of Feedback](#) – Review of Educational Research  
[Classroom assessment: Minute by minute, day by day](#) – Educational Leadership  
[Assessment: Guide to Taxonomies of Learning](#) – University College Dublin

