

Standard LESSONTM

Here's a Question . . .

Stimulating Discussion in the Classroom

by Brent C. Amato

Howard Hendricks said, "It's not what's taught, but what is caught." Such a statement begs the question, "How do I determine whether my students are connecting with me and learning from my teaching?" If I do nothing more than lecture in my class, it will be very difficult to evaluate how much my students are connecting. Something more is needed. Questions are part of the answer!

Before we dig into the *what*, *which*, and *how* of questions, keep in mind that there are two overarching questions that every lesson must answer. The first is *So what?* Nothing will be "caught" unless learners see relevance. The second question is *Now what?* This will help the students move toward an obedient response to the lesson. Without it, nothing might change!

What Is Communicated

What can questions communicate to your students about you? First of all, they show that your focus is on the students. Learners understand that you came to class with them on your mind. We teachers often get consumed by our teaching and our lessons—so much so that we may overlook our students! Your questions can communicate to your students that they're important, and they count for more than attendance. They show you're sincerely glad they came, and maybe even that they are appreciated.

Questions are an effective way to draw out the less vocal, energize the disinterested, direct the disruptive, and affirm all the students you teach. Questions are not so easily ignored as affirmations. When a teacher links several statements together in a running monologue, it's easy for a student to tune the teacher out. But a question snaps the student back to attention; a question demands an answer. Students will form answers in their minds even if they are not called on to speak their answers aloud.

Which Questions to Use and Not Use

Some questions are more effective than others. Less effective questions are closed (requiring only a yes/no or brief answer), overly complex, vague, "leading" (based on a hidden or not so hidden agenda of the teacher), confusing, or insignificant (detracting from the main idea of the lesson). Such questions may stifle the learning process.

Well-designed questions stimulate thought, with no "pat" answers. Better questions often are application-oriented; they force the learners to consider their own situations and see what the lesson text says about that. Such questions will be answered differently in a class of young adults, most of whom are single, from the way they will be answered in a class full of grandparents. Good questions take time to develop, so they should be prepared in advance.

Standard LESSONTM

Standard LESSON™

How They Help

Questions were a large part of Jesus' teaching style. What can we learn from him? Jesus, the master teacher, used questions to determine desires (John 5:6), stimulate thinking (Luke 9:25), restore a relationship (John 21:15-17), challenge customs (Matthew 15:3), and encourage faith (Mark 4:40). Are you doing this in your classroom with the questions you use?

Jesus also used sequential questions to clarify attitudes and convictions. Consider these: "Who do people say the Son of Man is? . . . But what about you? . . . Who do you say I am?" (Matthew 16:13, 15). These simple yet profound questions helped the disciples move beyond public opinion to personal confession.

Further Questions

But I'm sure you still have questions about questions. How do "declarations of truth" fit with questions? You need both. How long should you wait in silence for an answer to your question? For adults, 60 seconds (maintaining eye contact and restating the question, if necessary) is not too long. If there is no answer to your question, should you answer it? Try not to. Can you answer a question with a question? Why not? Should you always allow time for questions? Yes.

If there are no further questions, start preparing to ask some good ones. Then watch what happens to your relationships with your students, to class interaction, and to "what is caught"!