

Questioning questioning

Questioning is one of our most versatile and most used teaching tools. Consequently, it is often assumed that everyone knows the difference between good questioning and poor questioning techniques. This assumption is not supported by practice.

The quality of classroom questioning can be enhanced in several ways. One of the simplest and most effective is through the notion of “wait time”. Wait time refers to the time allowed between the asking of a question and the naming of a particular student to respond, between the naming of the student and the student’s reply, and between the student’s reply and the next teacher utterance. **Typically teachers provide a wait time of between 1 and 2 seconds!**

This discourages student involvement and is usually sufficient for only the quicker students to formulate an answer. The wait time allowed a slower student is typically less than that allowed a more able student; since we do not expect an answer from the less able student we are far more likely to quickly redirect the question to another student. Such practices do a grave disservice to slower students, who may have a grasp of the content but are never allowed to give expression to their understanding.

The benefits of increasing wait time have been consistently demonstrated as leading to more probing questions and more thoughtful student responses. Increasing wait time needs to be consistently practised. Some teachers have practised mentally counting to five before seeking answers. Rowe (1978) found that increased wait time led to benefits for both children and teachers. Apart from pausing after asking a question, there are other ways of improving questioning methods. An excellent little book, *Every Minute Counts - Making your math class work* by David Johnson (1982), provides a range of suggestions to improve your questioning techniques.

Perhaps the simplest of these is to try to follow up student responses with the question “why?” This will help the student who could not answer the initial question to understand how the answer was reached.

Effects of increased wait time

... on children

1. Children gave longer responses and the contributions of “slow” children increased.
2. Children initiated more responses that were appropriate and also asked more questions.
3. Children gave more explanations, demonstrating speculative thinking.
4. Children made more and better connections among observations and inferences.

... on teachers

1. The teachers’ questions decreased in number but showed greater variety and quality.
2. The teachers’ responses were more flexible, reflecting a willingness to listen to diverse answers and reflect on their plausibility.
3. The teachers’ expectations of “slow” children improved as they began to listen to them and to recognise their capacities.

Adapted from Rowe, M.B. (1978). Wait, wait, wait ... *School Science and Mathematics*, 78(3), pp. 207-216