

# Teaching Tips

A Forum for discussion and tips for advancing teaching and learning at Mona

Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning



November, 2018

Volume 11, Number 3

## Special points of interest:

- The **Teaching Tips Newsletter** is a publication of the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) at the UWI, Mona.
- The newsletter is published three times during each semester and once during the summer. It provides tips for improving teaching and learning in higher education and is available online (<http://myspot.mona.uwi.edu/cetl>) as well as in the office of the CETL.
- If you need additional teaching tips on specific classroom practices, please contact us.

## Using Questions in your Teaching



As teachers, we often use questions to foster interaction in our classes. For some teachers, an interactive lecture means engaging in questions so that we can get responses to our teaching. Of course, real interaction will entail more than mere questioning. In fact, in many classes, we get the same set of students asking and responding to questions. Students will ask questions pertaining to the activities of the course or more administrative and practical details. Whilst these are good, you will want them to be asking questions driven by intellectual curiosity and the burning desire to learn more. We want provocative and stimulating questions that clearly indicate that they are thinking deeply about subject matter content and the implications of the material that they are learning. Certainly, as teachers, we also want to ask questions and have activities in our classrooms that promote real engagement but the focus of this article is on asking questions and how we can do so effectively.

One major concern that we must take into consideration is that of planning our questions. Too often, we do not plan the questions we will be asking our students and so, we do not use the questioning time in our classes to really advance learning. At a time when critical thinking is a big conversation in higher education, it is important to think carefully about our questions and use them effectively and efficiently to elicit responses from our students pertaining to the content taught and where we are seeking to take them, in terms of our overall learning outcomes.

### Why ask questions?

Most teachers ask questions in pursuit of feedback. We all know that formative assessment is an important element in our teaching. We ask questions as we engage in formative assessment activities to gauge our teaching, “to see if our students are really getting it”. Asking the right kinds of question oftentimes promote dialogue about the content we are teaching. In cases where the content might be quite dense, questions usually cause our students to be more attentive and more engaged with the content. We also ask questions to keep our students focused on the content. Further, we might ask questions to find out who did the reading.

Sometimes we ask questions when we see that the student is disengaged, gazing or being inattentive in some way shape or form. Those questions are usually designed to get them focusing on the weighty matters at hand, that is, learning the subject matter content.

Questions are also used to stimulate the intellectual curiosity of our students. They might generate various perspectives concerning the issue at hand. However we need to ensure we are asking the kinds of question that will really stimulate intellectual curiosity and advance learning and not merely cause emotive responses.

### Good Questions



In all our classes, I believe we want our students to be asking good questions. We want them to demonstrate that they are thinking deeply about the content and showing high levels of critical engagement with the content. In this way, we communicate to our students that good questions are a major driving force behind learning. Some questions are asked to promote discussion or the ventilation of multiple perspectives on an issue. Others are asked to derive the answer or the appropriate answers to that particular question.

In many instances, students ask questions and we respond “that’s a very good question”. But what really is a good question? Is it a question that promotes or advances learning? Is it a question that is focused on interaction? Is it a question that wasn’t heard before? Is it a question that stretches the individual (to whom it was posed) intellectually? Berger (2014) calls attention to what he terms “beautiful questions.” These are questions that challenge assumptions, call us to look at things with multiple lens, consider new possibilities, and those that are catalytic in relation to action and changing situations. Are these the kinds of question that we ask in our classes or are these the types of questions being posed in our classes by our students?

# Using Questions in your Teaching

Cont'd

I believe most of us would readily agree that we want to ask questions that promote interaction in our classes. Following Berger (2014), these questions might be carefully prepared and artfully deployed. In order to ask higher order questions, we need to prepare them. So, we need to come to terms with Berger (2014) admonition that good questions promote interaction. *The Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives* (Bloom, 1956) might be a guide or framework that we might employ as we think about our questions in relation to the critical level of engagement that we want to have in our classroom discussions. Questions should be asked in relation to the six cognitive levels. Many authorities recommend that we think carefully about the questions we want to ask and write them in our lesson plans or lecture notes. In fact, some suggest that we anticipate responses to questions and prepare to ask additional questions that focus the attention of students on issues that might be problematic. Questions really serve the educative function of "drawing out".

Berger (2014) also points out that good questions are open questions. It is important for us to differentiate between closed and open questions. Closed questions usually have a right or wrong answer. Closed questions usually give facts, are easily and quickly answered and oftentimes, the questioner posing the closed question will control the conversation with the closed question. In contrast, the open question solicit responses or opinions. In fact, the open question elicits longer responses. Open questions are usually answered in multiple ways and oftentimes will lead to additional questions. In many instances, open questions hand control of the conversation to the respondent. Typically, they require some thought and they are very useful in classroom situations since they oftentimes create opportunities for students to engage with the content on many different fronts. Hence, they facilitate interaction in the classroom.

In discussing good questions we should also note that for many they involve knowing the answer. We respond to our students with the statement "that's a good question" because

we know the answer or we believe we do. However, there is a place for a question that just pushes us to think outside the box. When a question pushes thinking outside the box, it does not allow the teacher to use predetermined answers. With this type of question, there is a possibility for learning to be advanced in amazing ways since all learners in the class can engage in exploring responses, critiquing responses and creating their own response that is unique and contextually appropriate.

## Improving questions



Earlier we mentioned planning our questions. That is definitely an approach you will want to embrace to make significant improvements to your questions. Some authorities feel that when we ask questions in our classes, we must allow wait time for students to reflect on the questions and construct their responses. This is an approach that might improve responses and lead to a better set of questions too. Developing effective questions is important but not sufficient. Questions should encourage, direct and extend thinking. Therefore, the response to the question and the follow-up questions are extremely important.

## Reference

Berger, W. (2014). *A more beautiful question: The power of inquiry to spark breakthrough ideas*. New York: Bloomsbury Press.

## Check us out at:

**Our website:** [myspot.mona.uwi.edu/cetl](http://myspot.mona.uwi.edu/cetl)

**Facebook:** [www.facebook.com/cetlmona](http://www.facebook.com/cetlmona)

**Blog:** <http://cetlmona.blogspot.com/>

**Contact:** 876-935-8341 extn 2341, 2730

**Flickr:** [www.flickr.com/photo/cetlmona](http://www.flickr.com/photo/cetlmona)

**Twitter:** [cetluwimona](https://twitter.com/cetluwimona)