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Improving the quality of students questions

Jill Brattan—Science Teacher

Asking questions is natural and intuitive. Teachers ask questions from the start of the lesson until the end. Asking questions forms part of any lesson because it invites the student to think, and even within a 'lecture' style lesson, rhetorical questions are used to invite silent agreement or begin the organisation of ideas to present a response. Research suggests teachers ask over 400 questions a day.

Teachers use questions to engage the students and sustain an 'active' style to the learning. The teacher also uses questions as part of the assessment of learning in order to determine how they best structure, organise and present new learning. However, research has found that many teachers wait only for 0.9 seconds before seeking an answer. Developing questioning approaches, requires much greater emphasis on the time provided for students to think individually, collaboratively and deeply to enable them to develop answers and to share better answers. This will improve their thinking and engagement.

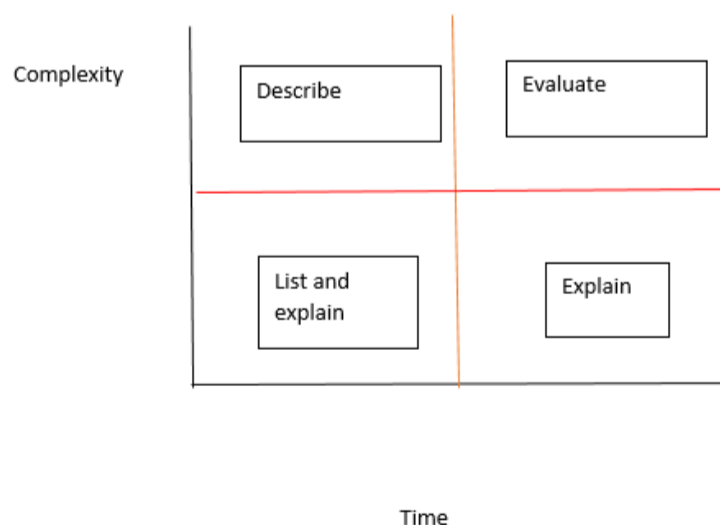
Historically, teachers have asked questions to check what has been learnt and understood, to help them gauge whether to further review previous learning, increase or decrease the challenge, and assess whether students are ready to move forward and learn new information (factual checks – ie 'Closed' questions). This can be structured as a simple 'teacher versus the class' approach (Bat and Ball), where the teacher asks a question and accepts an answer from a volunteer, or selects/conscripts a specific student to answer. These approaches are implicit in any pedagogy, but teachers need a range of 'Open' questioning strategies to address different learning needs and situations. Teachers must also pitch questions effectively to raise the thinking challenge, target specific students or groups within the class.

How and why do we use Questions and Talk in the classroom?

Teachers use questioning as part of their teaching for many reasons, but often to:

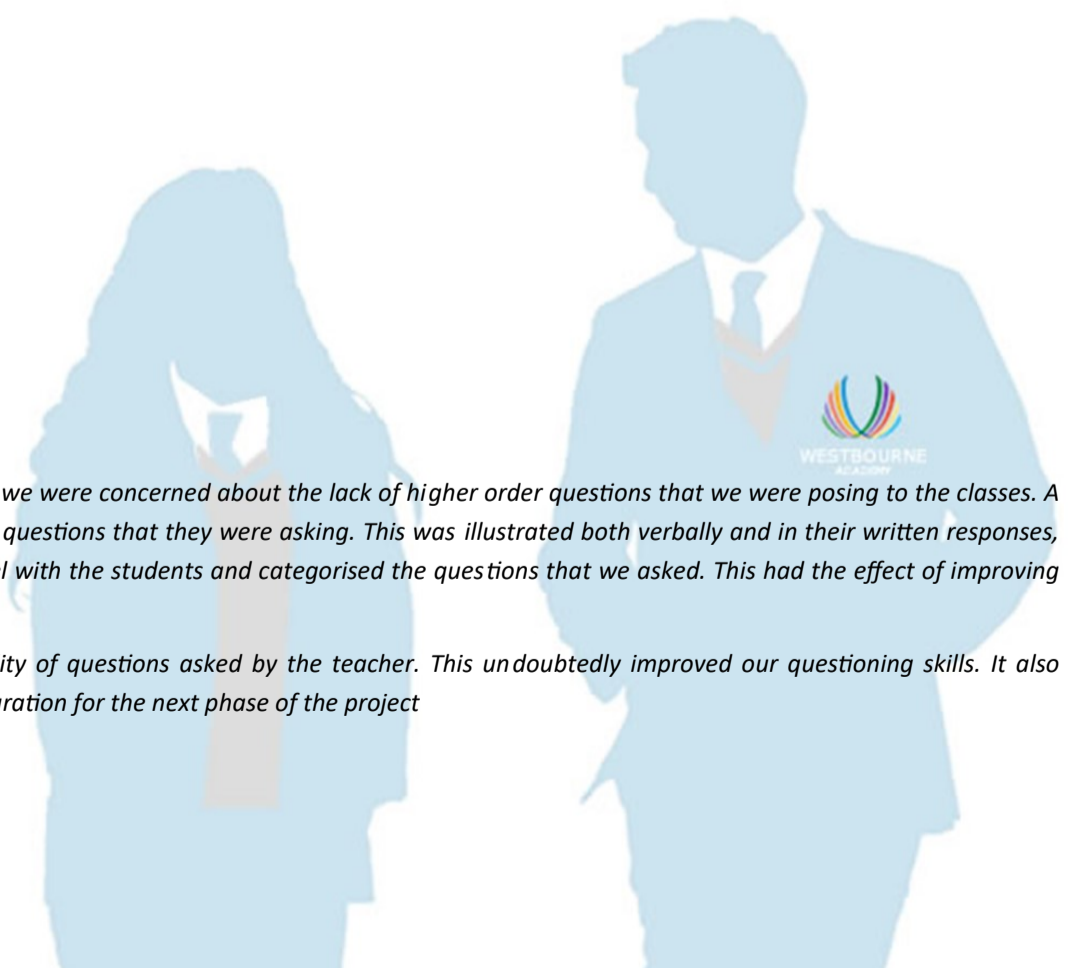
- **maintain the flow** of the learning within the lesson;
- **engage** students with the learning;
- **assess** what has been **learned**, and **check** that what has been **learnt** is **understood** and **applied**;
- **test** student **memory** and **comprehension**;
- to initiate **individual** and **collaborative thinking** in response to new information;
- **seek** the **views and opinions** of pupils;
- **provide an opportunity** for pupils to share their opinions/views, seeking responses from their peers;
- **encourage creative thought** and **imaginative** or **innovative thinking**;
- **foster speculation, hypothesis** and **idea/opinion forming**;
- **create** a sense of **shared learning** and avoid the feel of a 'lecture';
- **challenge** the level of thinking and possibly mark a change to a **higher order** of thinking;
- **model** higher order thinking using examples and building on the responses of students.

The Question Grid



Initially, we developed this model to improve the quality of teachers questioning, as we were concerned about the lack of higher order questions that we were posing to the classes. A secondary consideration was the students lack of perception as to the complexity of questions that they were asking. This was illustrated both verbally and in their written responses, as evidenced by low order answers to higher level questioning. We shared the model with the students and categorised the questions that we asked. This had the effect of improving the quality of the answers received.

During this project we observed each other and feedback with a focus on the quality of questions asked by the teacher. This undoubtedly improved our questioning skills. It also modelled for the student how to improve the quality of questions they asked in preparation for the next phase of the project

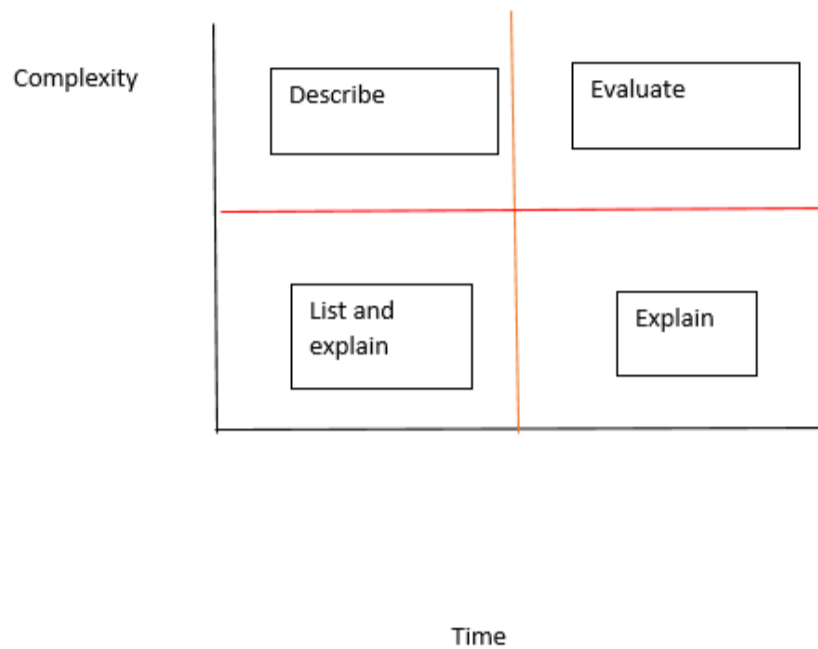


The Question Wall Student version

The 'Question Wall' in this instance is a working space for students to communicate questions about their learning. By giving students post it notes and asking them to commit questions to writing typically eliminates those questions that reflect a sense of 'learnt helplessness' – the 'how does you spell such and such', when they have a dictionary on their table; or, 'what do we have to do', in response to your lengthy and erudite explanation you have only just imparted! The question wall helps foster independence and, once more, makes the students think a little more about their questions. To add a level of nuance to the wall, I created simple quadrants with simple labels: students can be advised that closed questions are placed on the left of the wall, whereas more open questions are placed progressively to the right hand side. A vertical axis could indicate the timer he student would expect was needed for explanation: placing questions that need a high degree of support, and therefore time, higher up the wall than those shorter, typically more closed questions. This simple visual representation of their questions allowed me to make a quick visual judgement about what questions I had time to address, or may want to prioritise.

It helpfully indicates the level of 'stuckness' of the student, which is important feedback. It also made the students pose higher level questions.

I further developed this by initially placing list and define in one quadrat, describe in another explain in another and evaluate in the final quarter.



I used this model to improve student questions and Leanne used it to improve teacher questions and also for the students to realise the difference in complexity of questions.

