

# Beyond the serve

Colin Foster explains why the secret to overseeing great classroom discussions is attentive listening...

**O**n a typical day in the classroom, a teacher will ask lots of questions – perhaps hundreds. Over the course of a whole career, the amount could potentially top a million.

Questions are our natural mode of operation. Certainly, teachers do other things too – including a fair amount of telling in order to communicate important

information – but we are *forever* asking questions to check what students know and how they think, and using questions strategically to deepen students' understanding.

Because of this, professional development for teachers will often focus on questioning, in an effort to help teachers improve their skill at '*asking great questions*'. Lesson plans will frequently contain lists of the 'key questions' that the teacher should be planning to ask, with getting correct answers to those questions from students seen as a key marker of success.

But I believe that asking 'good questions' is really only quite a small part of generating good classroom discussions, with the other elements of this puzzle currently garnering far less attention than they deserve.

## The limits of questioning

I'm not much of a linguist. I know just enough German to ask, '*Please could you tell me the way to the railway station?*' but unfortunately not enough to actually comprehend the answers I'd probably receive. Should the answer happen to be '*Gleich da drüben*' ('It's right over there'), then I'm good. I can say thank you and be on my way.

But if, as seems more likely, the answer is something closer to the German for '*Take the second road on the left and head towards the Post Office. Then catch the 201 bus, heading for the city centre, before changing to the overground and head for...*' then I've got no chance. I've learned that there's no point in asking a

question unless you're fully prepared to handle the kind of responses you're likely to get in return.

I think something similar often happens in the classroom. Within the comfort of the staffroom, the teacher may devise a promising open question with the express aim of sparking a lively discussion. So they duly ask their question in the lesson, whereupon the students respond with *all sorts* of things. And then what? Everything that comes after the asking of that initial question will be infinitely harder to plan for, and yet the value of the ensuing discussion will depend far more on how the teacher follows up what's said.

We've all seen political interviews where the interviewer will ask a question, which the politician dodges, followed by the interviewer simply moving on to their next question. Either they're too nervous thinking about their questioning to actually listen to the politician's answer, or they aren't sure how to follow up on an answer that's

irrelevant, incomplete or in some other way unsatisfactory.

So it goes in classroom discussions – *everything is in the follow-up*.

## 'Question tennis'

The way I like to think about discussion is to draw an analogy with playing tennis. The initial question is like the opening serve – and we can all call to mind the type of player who'll endlessly practise their serves, but can never return the ball.

As soon as their opponent hits the ball back, our player simply doesn't possess the skills required to return it. Once they've made their initial serve, the game is effectively over. I therefore think it's helpful to focus less on the initial question, and more on developing the kind of *listening* that enables effective follow-up.

I've previously seen some great classroom discussions in which the opening question was nothing spectacular, or especially worth writing down. Questions such as '*So, what*

*do you think?*' or '*Any thoughts?*' look lacklustre when written down on paper, but if deployed at just the right moment, they can open the floodgates to rich, thoughtful discussion.

## Listening is key

What probably matters more than our initial question is the climate the teacher engineers in the classroom – ideally one in which students feel free to volunteer their thoughts, and in which both they and the teacher are interested in listening carefully to what everyone else says. If students don't feel that their peers, or even their teacher are taking what they have to say seriously, they'll soon lose interest.

For that reason, we can't observe rigid, formulaic rules for handling discussions. Sometimes it's simply best to just pause, or invite someone else to comment. Sometimes it's better to jump in and provoke, offer a fact, suggest an alternative point of view or make a link with something that someone else said earlier.

The moment-to-moment details can't be carefully planned out, but we can resolve during our planning to be attentive in the

moment, and not think too much about ourselves and what we're going to say next.

## Taking an interest

It's easy to spot those students who are so busy thinking of what they're going to say next that they fail to notice when someone else says the very same thing. When it's their turn, they make a comment that directly repeats another student's, often without even realising it.

From the privileged vantage point of a lesson observer, we can sometimes notice opportunities the teacher has missed to pick up on and develop a student's contribution. To me, this is where the real skill of handling discussions lies – not just in keeping momentum going and trying to involve as many students as possible, but in helping students develop and build on each other's thoughts.

This isn't easy, but the key to managing it has nothing to do with having some magical 'perfect starting question'. It's far more about taking sufficient interest in students' contributions, as we seek clarification of any points that are unclear, task one student with summarising what another student has said, ask if someone can compare one point with another and so on.

## The 'second sentence test'

A colleague of mine used to say that their test for whether a classroom discussion was going well was the 'second sentence test' – those moments during a whole-class discussion when one of the students begins a second sentence as part of their contribution.

It's a surprisingly rare occurrence in practice, but if students are going to develop the ability to craft sophisticated contributions and arguments, there will probably be times when they need more than one sentence to do so.

Another marker of involved discussions is to break away from constant teacher interventions – i.e. 'teacher → student 1 → teacher → student 2'.

Ideally, you want interactions that are closer to 'teacher → student 1 → student 2 → student 3 → teacher', with students picking up on what their classmates are saying. That way, the ball can stay in the air without the teacher needing to touch it every time – which is when you know that something powerful is happening.

So, don't just work on your serve – work on your rally!



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