



BRIAN D. JOSEPH, Ph.D.  
*Professor of Linguistics & Slavic  
and East European Languages  
and Literatures*  
College of Humanities

### **On Questions: Asking Them, Answering Them, and Learning From Them**

As teachers we are generally in the business of giving information, an act that typically takes the form of statements or assertions or demonstrations. At the same time, too, we also ask questions, in large part to stimulate students or to test their knowledge in some way. Finally, we receive questions, in particular ones the students throw our way in the hopes of gaining both clarification and knowledge. These two aspects of questioning both have considerable value in fostering learning, and thus there is another facet to consider with regard to questions, namely learning from them.

Although I am sure that no teacher actually discounts the value of questions, I would like to articulate here some of the reasons I see for the importance of the practice of asking questions, and at the same time review some useful techniques for successful questioning, ultimately tying questioning to active learning, on the part of both the students and the instructor.

Thus this brief essay is in part philosophical musings and in part practical ideas on questions as a form of classroom interaction. I am moved to write this piece since on a personal level, I can say that the ability to ask questions and to

engage in discussion in the classroom is in large part what makes teaching so rewarding for me; I would hope that by discussing it, I can bring into general awareness how questioning can play such a role for all of us involved in instruction.

I should start by making it clear that I am in a fortunate position, in that for the most part, my classes tend to be on the small side and thus quite conducive to asking, answering, and learning from questions. The graduate-only classes that I teach (e.g. advanced seminars) usually have between 4 and 8 students; my introductory-level historical linguistics classes have had as many as 25 students at a time, though more usually they have around 18; Sanskrit has always had a fairly robust enrollment at the outset (around 20 students) but with drop-off in successive quarters. I find smallish classes to be very stimulating, as the size offers the opportunity for give-and-take between the students and me; the discussions are often enormously interesting, with numerous good questions that keep me on my toes!

One thing about questions that I have always marveled at is that good, thought-provoking questions

can come at any level. Undergraduates just beginning to get a taste of linguistics often come into a class with more open minds than do graduate students, in the sense that they generally have not made the big step of devoting their lives to a field (such dedication being an essential ingredient for graduate school); the sense of discovery that undergraduates exhibit, therefore, can be heightened compared with what I observe in graduate students, who (quite properly) often take a more professional interest in the subject matter we cover. At the same time, though, graduate students bring a depth to the classroom, often in areas adjacent to the particular thrust of my material, and that gives them a perspective on my material that is informed by their detailed knowledge of other related topics (e.g., if I am talking about the ways in which sounds change over time, graduate students with expertise in the physical properties of sounds can share that knowledge with the rest of the class, and with me, for that matter).

Part of the trick here is drawing that knowledge or that fresh perspective out, and that is where judicious questioning can come into

play. I thus turn to my own classroom practices in this regard.

**The Art of Asking Questions**

I do not claim to be an expert in the area of asking questions and sustaining discussion, but I do believe that I have had some modest degree of success with keeping classroom interactions lively and moving along while at the same time covering some substantive material. Consequently, I offer here some pointers that I consider to be potentially applicable in **all** classroom contexts to the stimulation of thinking and discussion, and thereby to the promotion of learning.

Some of these points and practices are more "mechanical" in nature, in that they represent ways in which any classroom discussion can be made more lively and sustainable, regardless of the particular content, in my view. Some of these are linked steps that form a sequence, in that one necessarily follows another, while others have a broader application to discussion in general.

A first key point is that instructors should call on students by name when recognizing them to speak; it is a common courtesy and students seem to respond to this

small but important nicety of human interaction.

Once a student is called on and says something, either in response to a question by the instructor or as a question or even a comment on his or her own, and the instructor is not sure that everyone in the class might have heard—sometimes students talk very softly or talk as if they are addressing only the instructor, in a private dialogue, as it were—either have the student repeat the question or observation for the whole class or (better in my view), the instructor can restate the student's point him- or herself.

Something I like to do with a student comment or question is to throw things back at the student, seeing first if perhaps the student can answer his or her own question (often they can, even if they don't know it, and need only a bit of guiding or coaxing to draw them out) and seeing next if anyone in the class has an answer to a question raised by a fellow student.

Importantly, next, if the point the student is making or the question asked is a potentially provocative one or an interesting one that the instructor may want to refer to, discuss, or bring up later (one has to be quick about thinking ahead here, clearly), a useful once,

practice is to write it (or a brief summary of it) on the board (or on an overhead slide, as the case may be) so everyone can see it and potentially respond to it.

As a further flourish (so to speak) when writing a student's comment or question on the board, the instructor should consider attaching the student's name to the proposal. This not only allows for easy reference (e.g., "Class, consider Lucy's analysis of the facts in question") but it also gives students a sense of "ownership" in the idea. This is a practice I learned from one of my best teachers, Jorge Hankamer, back when I was a graduate student in linguistics at Harvard in the 1970s, and I have used it successfully ever since. I have had some students remark that they were pleased when they finally "got their name on the board", i.e. that they seemed to have the idea that I considered matters very carefully before deciding if a comment was worth naming and worth sharing (of course, they don't know my secret: that I am actually very easy about this practice and will even put outrageous statements on the board if they will provoke discussion!).

Back to the process of questioning: when I ask a question. I always look to see if there is a flicker of interest, some indication of understanding, some glimmer of awareness on the faces of the students, some answer beginning to be formed on a student's lips. If there is no such indication, yet I think the students ought to know the answer to the question. I repeat the question in more or less the same terms; if there is still no answer, I may try to draw it out of them by saying, for instance, "Come on, I know you know the answer to this one; why are you holding out on me?" or "I can wait you out on this one; my patience is greater than your silence" or the like. These statements may sound like they might be rude or snide when I write them out here, but I say them in a somewhat joking and non-threatening tone of voice so it is clear that I am trying only to coax an answer out of them).

If there is still no one volunteering, I restate the question but this time break it down to much simpler parts. I often employ a quasi-Socratic method, asking questions that have very obvious answers, ones that absolutely anyone in the class can answer —

when an issue of what the Latin verb *habere* 'to have' was related to, I said something like, "OK, let's assemble the relevant evidence — what is the English word for 'have'?" (which, as it happens, is most likely—*not* related to *habere*), obviously realizing that everyone was able to answer a softball, who's-buried-in-Grant's-tomb sort of question (in that case, I answered the question myself but just asking it seemed to get the class's attention). I do this as I consider very obvious questions to be a way sometimes of bringing shy students into the discussion, and thus feel that they serve a very real purpose in the classroom interaction.

More generally, if I can start a discussion of some point with some very obvious questions, I do so; I feel that this practice gets things started and means that the questioning does not fall flat right from the start. If based on some reading that the class is supposed to have done, I might start with a broad question like "What is the author's main point?" or "Why did so-and-so write this piece?" or "What can we learn from this?", but if those are too broad to generate much in the way of response, I might re-start with something

simpler, e.g. "What is the title of the work, and what relation is there between the title and the main topic?"

Sometimes, though, by way of getting the class involved, especially when a few different alternative formulations of ideas or analyses have been labeled and put on the board, in order to get a reaction from the class to them, I will ask for a vote (via a show of hands) as to which of the analyses or claims they favor. I make it clear that this is *not* the way to decide scientific debate, and often even tease the class a bit as to whether the topic in question is one can be decided just by a majority vote, or whether there are different standards that need to be called into play (i.e., if we are seeking the "truth" here, is it enough to just let the majority of the class decide the issue?). A vote often provides an opportunity to call on a student who has voted one way or the other to defend his or her vote, on the assumption that everyone who voted must have had a reason for casting a vote in a particular way.

Finally, this last point leads to the issue of calling on students cold. i.e. calling on students who have not volunteered to speak, as opposed to

calling only on those who have raised their hands or otherwise indicated a willingness to talk. Here, I am of two minds. I believe it can be *very* intimidating for students to be called on cold, but at the same time, if there are even a few very talkative students, they can easily come to dominate the classroom conversation. I usually let the talkative ones say something, but occasionally will say "OK, so-and-so has had a lot to say today — can we hear from someone else?" and if I ask a number of leading questions that have obvious answers (as suggested above), then it is possible to call on some of the students who are more timid and let them answer. Instructors should, I would say, keep mental notes about who has not spoken much so if one is actually able to get a rise out of otherwise quiet students and they have indeed raised a hand to volunteer something, on that opportunity should not be passed by; those students need to be called on first and the talkative ones especially should not be allowed to jump in with the answer when the instructor is about to let the timid one speak his or her mind.

To what end?

To pose a question myself here: Why is all of this worthwhile? I trust that this has an obvious answer, but I provide it nonetheless. For one thing, questioning from the instructor, in my experience, gets students thinking and involved; it is my firm belief that active learning — learning in which the students have a direct stake in the process and in which they are fully engaged with the material — is by far the most successful learning.

There is a selfish end too, since for my own part, teaching in a question-friendly and question-rich environment is particularly satisfying to me as an instructor. It provides opportunities for me to continue my learning — the simplest questions from the humblest undergraduate in my lowest-level class can set me off in pursuit of just the right example to clarify a point I was trying to make, and a sophisticated question from an advanced graduate student can make me rethink the bases for an analysis or hypothesis I was developing. In this way, teaching for me becomes a vehicle for my own continued development as a linguist and academic; that I can

continue to learn while imparting knowledge to others makes the whole academic enterprise all the more rewarding. Also, the more I develop intellectually, the more informed a teacher I become for my students, so that all of these

activities feed into and off of one another. Questioning, therefore, is at the heart of the learning experience, at the heart of intellectual pursuits, and at the heart of the quest for knowledge that frames classroom interactions.