Using questions in class

Well-placed questions are valuable communication tools. Questions stimulate students to do the thinking and the talking. They encourage interaction and direct the course the discussion. Most importantly, astute questions can assist students to think through the answer to their own question themselves, or come to see applications and contexts for an idea they might have.

Using questions effectively, from you and your students, engages, challenges and stimulates thinking. Questions improve student learning experiences by:

- refining understanding of concepts
- reviewing, restating and summarising what is important
- encouraging critical and creative thinking and discussion
- exploring deeper levels of thinking and understanding.

The impact of questions

Note the responses to your questions. Note the students' body language. You will be able to tell a lot about your students' response by paying attention to their facial expressions and the way they move their body. Questions have both interpersonal and cultural dimensions, particularly for international students. Be aware of the impact of asking students a question or expecting questions to be asked of you. Sometimes questions can be felt to be intrusive, abrupt, or pretentious if couched in highly conceptual or abstract language. Questions may also be experienced as an occasion of embarrassment or even humiliation for the student.

By noting the responses to your questions, you will develop the ability to use questions creatively – to open up discussion, facilitate learning and invite participation.

Effective questioning: tips and techniques

- Plan your questions. Embed key questions at strategic intervals in the structure of the session.
- Ask questions in a logical and sequential order.
- Start with easier questions first then move to more complex questions. As the difficulty increases, you can more readily gauge how well the students understand.
- Be sensitive to the fact that questions targeted at individual students can cause embarrassment, particularly those from other educational cultures.
- Build on student responses with probing questions.
- Create an environment where 'wrong' or 'unknown' answers are opportunities for learning.
- Allow time for thinking after you pose a complex or probing question. Avoid immediately rephrasing or answering your own questions.

- Set students activities where they generate questions to identify key information on the topic. Allow them to question each other or share them with the whole group.
- Phrase your questions clearly and explicitly. Ambiguous, vague, loaded or compound questions may discourage students.
- Use different question types, levels of complexity and variety of contexts – individual, pair or group.

Question types and purposes

Use a combination of question types to help students explore complex ideas and issues, identify problems, uncover assumptions, analyse concepts, follow logical implications and act as a model of critical thinking.

Open and closed questions

Closed questions reduce the response options. For example, to the question 'Did you enjoy the lecture?' a speaker can simply answer 'yes' or 'no'. This means that there is no depth of information. It confirms or refutes a simple fact. Closed questions can be useful for simple clarification but do not encourage elaboration.

Open questions encourage the speaker to give more specific, precise and revealing information and show you are really interested in their ideas and responses to the material.

Clarifying questions	
When you are unclear about a person's statements or questions. Clarify by rephrasing what you think is the statement or question and then ask for elaboration.	What do you mean by? Could you explain that in a little more detail? Can you give me an example? Anything else you'd like to add to that? Are you saying ... or …?
Probing questions	
Help students genuinely interact with the material by clarifying it for themselves, thinking critically, putting it into their own words and relating it to other knowledge and concepts. Probing questions assist the student to arrive at a new and deeper level of understanding through their own thought processes.	How do you relate to this …? That's a really interesting idea. What makes you think that?? Explain why/how ... ? What would happen if ... ? Do you agree or disagree with ... ?

Questions to develop critical awareness	
It can be really helpful for a student to be asked to reflect on their point of view or a claim they are making. Questions can be asked which encourage the student to develop a critical awareness not only of what they are thinking but also how their thinking is dependent on certain assumptions or evidence.	How do you know this? Can you give me an example of that? What do you think causes ... ? Are these reasons good enough? What evidence might support that claim? How could we investigate the truth of that? How might someone argue against that point?
Reframing questions	
Questions which focus on relationships can help students to see a concept or an idea from another perspective. Such questions reframe the idea providing a new or different context for it.	How do you relate to this …? What is the difference between... and ...? How does that tie into …? How does that compare with …? If that's true, what would happen if …?