CLASSROOM QUESTIONING CULTURE: BENEFITS, CHARACTERISTICS, OPPORTUNITIES AND OBSTACLES

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Abstract:
Regarding the importance of questioning as a classroom practice, this article aims to raise the reader’s awareness towards different issues related to questioning culture. It is based on a review of the literature on the benefits, opportunities, and challenges facing the development of more effective questioning culture. This review has showed that there are various benefits of creating and maintaining a good questioning culture. The review also includes a discussion of some challenges that can hinder the creation of such positive questioning culture. Finally, the article ends by providing a framework including some practical suggestions in order to effectively deal with those challenges.

Keywords: Questioning culture, Benefits, Characteristics, Opportunities and Obstacles

Introduction
Once I was reading an article, I came across a quote that triggered my attention to read more about questioning. The quote was meant to invite teachers to ask instead of tell. Reinhart (2000) reports his own experience as follows:

Never say anything a kid can say! This one goal keeps me focused. Although I do not think that I have never met this goal completely in any one day or in given class period, it has forced me to develop and improve my questioning skills. It also sends to students a message that participation is essential. Every time I am tempted to tell students something I try to ask a question instead. (p. 480)

Research affirms that teachers spend most of their communication time in class asking questions. It is suggested that teachers spend up to 50% of class time on questioning and that they ask between 300 and 400 questions a day (Levin and Long, 1981). Therefore, it is legitimate to discuss and analyze classroom questioning as it is a powerful instructional strategy. The article is based on a critical review of the literature on classroom questioning culture. The first section is about some major benefits of maintaining and fostering strong questioning culture, whereas the second section is meant to provide some characteristics of positive questioning culture. Regarding its importance, it is necessary to develop a positive questioning culture regardless of the various obstacles as shown in the fourth section. The article concludes by making some suggestions to create and support more effective questioning practice and culture.

Definitions
Floyd, as cited in Almeida (2010), has found that teachers ask about 93 percent of classroom questions. In order to benefit from questioning practice, teachers and students are invited to hold positive attitudes towards questioning in order to create and maintain a more positive questioning culture. Before defining questioning culture, what is a question in the classroom context? A question is any sentence which has an interrogative form or function. In classroom settings, teachers’ questions are defined as instructional cues or stimuli that convey
to students the elements to be learned and directions for what they are to do and how they are to do it (Cotton, 2001). A questioning culture is a culture in which responsibility is shared. And when responsibility is shared, ideas are shared, problems are shared and ownership of results is shared (Marquardt, 2014). This implies that learning is no longer teachers’ responsibility, but rather a shared responsibility of both teachers and students. Such a view of learning is in harmony with recent teaching and learning approaches which stress the importance of engaging and involving the learners.

**The importance of QC**

This section is reserved to highlight the importance of effective questioning culture. It does so by outlining the various benefits of developing a more effective questioning culture. An analysis of the literature on questioning reveals the following benefits. This section only includes those benefits relevant to the educational context.

Before discussing these benefits, it is crucial to provide an overview about some of the main reasons why teachers ask questions in class. Based on an analysis of literature, Cotton (2001) reports that a variety of purposes emerge including:

- To develop interest and motivate students to become actively involved in lessons
- To evaluate students’ preparation and check on their homework and seatwork completion
- To develop critical thinking skills and inquiring attitudes
- To review and summarize previous lessons
- To nurture insights by exposing new relationship
- To assess achievement of instructional goals and objectives
- To stimuli students to pursue knowledge on their own (n.p)

According to Brown and Edmondson (1985), teachers use questioning fundamentally to check understanding and knowledge to aid teaching, to diagnose students’ difficulties, to recall facts, to test knowledge, to direct attention and to maintain control.

Students can also benefit from teachers questioning if used strategically as suggested by Long, Blankenburg, and Butani (2015). They maintain that:

When used strategically, questioning can engage learners by stimulating active participation in the learning process, guide them toward the understanding of deeper concepts, promote peer–peer collaboration, and build their confidence. Moreover, through questioning, clinicians can stimulate critical thinking while actively modeling the process of inquiry and life-long learning. (Long, et.al, 406)

Although this quote identifies various benefits of effective questions in medicine setting, this does not mean that they are context specific. Teachers in other fields, including language teachers, can achieve these goals of effective classroom questioning. Hannel (2009) concludes that effective questioning can keep students interest and improve their learning.

**Some characteristics of QC**

The purpose of this section is to offer some basic aspects of questioning culture. In other words, the section answers the following question: How do you know if you are part of an organization or a school that has a questioning culture? Marquardt (2014) reports that a questioning culture has six hallmarks. When an organization has a questioning culture, the people in it:
➢ Are willing to admit “I don’t know”
➢ Go beyond allowing questions; they encourage questions
➢ Are helped to develop the skills needed to ask questions in a positive way.
➢ Focus on asking empowering questions and avoid disempowering questions.
➢ Emphasize the process of asking questions and searching for answers rather than finding the “right” answers.
➢ Accept and reward risk taking.
These points summarize the main characteristics of a strong QC.

Main obstacles to fostering a QC
This section is about the obstacles teachers encounter to foster QC. Before discussing these obstacles, it is vital to mention that asking questions is so difficult. Questions are central parts in teaching practice. Some assume that teachers find it easy to ask questions. There is nothing easier than asking a question, some would say. However, research has indicated that teachers face different challenges to ask good questions. In this regard, Long, Blankenburg, & Butani (2015) argue that questioning is a challenging teaching tool and even experienced, well-meaning educators occasionally make mistakes. These challenges can be related to the variety of variables linked to questioning practice.

Concerning the obstacles that may hinder the development of effective questioning culture, they can be summarized as follows:

Hannel (2009) argues that “For some students, the foremost obstacle to the challenge posed by questioning isn’t cognitive. The foremost obstacle is that they have not learned the culture of questioning” (p.66). This means that teachers need to consider the classroom climate before being engaged in any questioning practice.

Some suggestions to develop QC
It is obvious that developing an effective QC is very important regarding its unlimited benefits. However, classroom questioning can be harmful if not carefully planned and appropriately used. Hence, this section is meant to draw attention to things that teachers need to refer to before any questioning practice. Researchers ((Lon et al., 2015) have found that teachers’ questions can cause students to disengage if these questions fail to stimulate deeper thinking. Similarly, questions that are mismatched to learner level can be equally problematic; asking novice learners unrealistically challenging questions can lead them to lose self-confidence and interest and asking advanced fact-based questions can demotivate them. Also, questions posed in a seemingly confrontational manner can cause anxiety and affect the learning climate.

Based on the above mentioned worries about the effects of poor classroom questions practices, we provide a framework for matching questions to a learner’s ability and provide suggestions for formulating questions that are beneficial to learners and the learning environment.

Teachers need to create a friendly climate in the classroom in which students are respected. Hannel (2009) affirms that there are three key criteria prerequisite to effective questioning. The first key point is that teachers must create a classroom environment that is conducive to questioning, one that is robust enough to challenge what Hannel calls the culture of disengagement found in some classroom. It is this environment that can provide students with opportunities to express and test their ideas and views. This enables students to become more confident about what they know and understand (Fosnot, 2005). For this, teachers need
to negotiate, establish, and respect some classroom talk. These rules, as suggested by Gast, include:

1. Respect each other’s ideas, views and opinions: say what you think and why you think it
2. Listen and reflect on what others say
3. Build on what others say
4. Support and include each other
5. Confidentially share partial ideas
6. Ask when you don’t understand
7. Try to reach an agreement
8. Seek clarity from each other
9. Speak calmly

Teachers need to consider students’ level and vary their questions accordingly. Teachers can prepare both less and more challenging questions as each category of these questions can serve different purposes as proposed below:

**Basic range of challenge**

✓ Maintain the flow of the learning within the lesson
✓ engage all, groups or specific students with the learning
✓ assess what has been learned in a previous lesson and check existing knowledge
✓ check and test that what has been learnt is understood and can be used
✓ improve student participation in the lesson
✓ test student memory and comprehension

**Medium range of challenge**

✓ Seek the views and opinions of pupils asking students to articulate their reasoning and get more
✓ Provide an opportunity for students to share their opinions and views - seeking responses from their peers students involved by sharing their partially formed ideas
✓ Create a sense of shared learning and avoid the feel of a ‘lecture
✓ Differentiating by directing specific questions to certain students
✓ Challenge the level of thinking and possibly mark a change to a higher order of thinking by directing specific questions to certain students

**Highest range of challenge**

✓ Encourage collaborative thinking, negotiating and challenge, making learning active
✓ Promoting focused individual and shared thinking and problem-solving dispositions
✓ Model higher order thinking using examples and building on the responses of students
✓ Foster speculation, hypothesis and idea/opinion forming
✓ Encourage creative thought, generating ideas & imaginative/innovative thinking

There are other studies which have worked on what is referred to as Wait – time. Almeida (2010) suggests that the Wait-time is essential for students thinking. Wait-time can be defined as the amount of time a teacher allot for student reflection after asking a question and before a student responds (wait-time I) and to the pause after a respondent offers a response (wait-time II) (Rowe, 1986).
Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to raise awareness towards classroom questioning through highlighting some benefits of developing effective questioning culture. The article also includes a section of some characteristics of questioning culture, which teachers can refer to to know whether their own classes incorporate such culture. The article concludes by discussing some obstacles to questioning culture and providing a general framework to overcome or at least to reduce the effect of these challenges. The article is an invitation to teachers to critically reflect on their questioning practices for better and more effective classroom questioning. Reflection and action research are fundamental tools to understand, analyse, and properly use questions in class.

Bibliography


