Wait for it …… A Lesson Study into Whole Class Questioning

Alan Lea & Sophie Anderson

Introduction

Questioning is one of the fundamental skills a teacher possesses. Used to stimulate interest, improve factual recall, assess understanding, explore complex ideas, and develop the oracy skills of pupils; being able to ask a good question is a corner stone of teaching and learning. Socrates said *"the disciplined practice of thoughtful questioning enables the scholar/student to examine ideas and be able to determine the validity of those ideas".* It is estimated that teachers can ask up to 400 questions every day. Therefore how do we make sure our questioning is effective? Plenty of research has been done around using Blooms Taxonomy to help differentiated questions, and it has been a focus of the Trust over the last few years to improve the use of Higher Order Thinking (HOT) questions to both challenge and engage pupils.

Whole class questioning is a useful tool to gauge pupils' conceptions at the start of a topic, to assess their learning, or to challenge common misconceptions. It also allows an opportunity for pupils to practise their speaking and listening skills and the ability to express themselves clearly. However this style of questioning has its caveats. It is easy to fall into the pattern of only asking the same few pupils to answer questions (i.e. the ones who always know the answer). The questions can end up being purely recall questions which fail to challenge pupils. Or pupils can feel they are "put on the spot" and can be unwilling to answer. One of the key strategies that teachers can employ is to increase the "wait time" between posing a question and asking for the answer. In addition, use of targeted questioning can make sure a wide range of pupils have opportunity to share their ideas.

To investigate the use of these methods we used a Lesson Study model to plan lessons together, observe the lesson, and provide feedback on the techniques. To keep track of the questioning we made annotations on a seating plan to record who was asked questions, the type of question asked, and notes about the pupils' responses. We also wanted to gauge the pupils experience during whole class questioning. Pupils were given an exit ticket at the end of the lesson asking two main questions:

1. How much time do they feel they have before answering a question?
2. How confident do they feel answering a question in front of the class?

The pupils were asked to give a short reason for their answer.

Observations

Key Notes from Alan's Lesson – Yr 8 Higher Attainment

- Mixture of questioning techniques used:
- Predominantly targeted questioning, mostly no hands up, hands up for long term recall questions after targeting other pupils.
- Use of follow up questions to challenge pupils, "bouncing" questions, pupils were allowed to choose who to help them.
- Waiting time made explicit using think pair share, or specifically saying how long to wait before choosing pupil to answer.

Key Notes from Sophie's Lesson – Yr 7 Mixed Attainment

- Starter questions: used hands up but chose pupils to answer who did not have hands up.
- Made effective use of "wait time" by narrating hands up to recognise pupils as well as repeating the question.
- Good use of follow up questions to clarify and expand on answers.
- A mixture of targeted questions for recall and hands up questions.
- Very effective movement around the classroom to question and guide pupils – spoke to every table.

Responses from Exit Ticket

	How much time do you have to think about a question before answering in front of the class?		How confident do you feel when answering a question in front of the class?
none	3	not at all	5
some	21	a little	28
just right	29	quite	16
too much	3	very	9

These responses show a very even split between pupils feeling they have **"some"** time to answer questions and **"just the right"** amount of time to answer. This is encouraging because it matches with the observations that we made that the wait time was effective. However a large proportion of the pupils were not very confident when answering in front of the class. Not surprisingly the most common reason for this was the fear of getting the answer wrong and looking silly in front of the class. Other reasons included being embarrassed when speaking in front of the class rather than being worried about the answer. Those who were confident gave reasons such as being interested in the subject, and enjoying making contributions to the class. Interestingly one pupil explicitly made the link between feeling confident and the amount of time they had to think about the question:

- *"[I] have enough time to answer and I'll know I'll find out [the correct answer] even if I'm wrong."*

Reflection

Alan

Using the Lesson Study model was a great way to think more deeply about how I delivered whole class questioning. Having a colleague observe your questioning really makes you consciously slow down, and the confidence of the pupils' answers were clear to see. I found the Think Pair Share particularly useful in increasing the wait time, and it also allowed me to target specific pupils to gauge their understanding of the question. I was surprised from the results of the exit ticket to see that pupils were not very confident giving answers in front of the class. Although I always tell my classes at the beginning of the year that I'm not worried about them getting answers wrong, they still seem to have that fear. This is something that I will have to keep reminding them about in order to improve their Growth Mind-set.

Sophie

Participating in a Lesson Study was an effective way to reflect on the range of questioning techniques we employ as practitioners and the impact this has on pupils. It can be challenging to build in whole class questioning with large amounts of content to cover in a short space of time; the danger can be to focus on moving the lesson forward to deliver content leaving pupils little room to digest and engage with the higher order questions. Working with a colleague allowed me to reflect and consider how I use questioning in my classroom and how pupils engage with this process. I felt narrating hands up was a useful way to increase wait time, and encouraged pupils to be more actively engaged in discussion. As Alan, I was surprised at the number of pupils who were not very confident with giving answers in front of the class. It would be interesting to focus on resilience and the importance of making mistakes as part of the learning process in future research.