



Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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Dumb Questions: Can't Live With 'Em, Can't Live Without 'Em

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We've all had it happen. With perplexed look, a student asks a question indicating that, although they read the assignment, they didn't understand it at all. Or, with obnoxious gleam in eye, a student launches a query deliberately aimed at disrupting your class. Or, worst of all, a student asks a question about the very issue you just spent ten minutes talking about. What to do when you get a question that strikes you as totally devoid of merit?

Fielding "dumb questions" is one of the most difficult aspects of teaching. Most inquiries are predictable; wise teachers anticipate what their students will have difficulty learning and prepare for the attendant queries. The question that comes out of left field, however, can throw even the most veteran educator for a loop. On the one hand, you don't want to discourage students from asking questions. At the same time, repeatedly engaging in major digressions makes poor use of precious class time.

The strategy recommended here is to take a preventive and diagnostic approach. Take measures to reduce your chances of getting "dumb questions" in the first place. Those that still occur will require a more thorough analysis, but you can usually identify and remedy the source of the trouble. Finally, when "dumb questions" arise in spite of your best efforts, be gentle and think of the big picture.

Dumb Questions that Really Aren't. A lot of dumb-sounding questions can actually be

turned into good teaching opportunities with a modicum of quick thinking. For example, a TA recently related to me his response when one of his students asked, "Where did morality come from?" Rather than viewing such an inquiry as impossibly naive, this TA took advantage of the situation. He instigated a lively discussion by throwing the question out for the consideration of the class. During this exchange, both the TA and students brought up issues central not only to that day's assignment, but the course as a whole. Bravissimo!

Don't be a "Dumb Listener." We have all had the experience of watching a teacher begin answering a question before the questioner finishes asking it. This is disconcerting to the questioner, because oftentimes the teacher guesses incorrectly about what the student is actually asking. Furthermore, it is a fundamental rule of courtesy to allow the first person to finish their thought before the second person speaks. Finally, cutting off the questioner often frustrates other students because if they do not hear the entire question, they may not understand the answer. The simplest way to avoid this pitfall is to make sure you have listened to, and understood, the entire question. Use basic feedback techniques to make sure you got it right. ("Is this what you are asking?" "Could you ask the question in a different way?" "What parts don't you understand?," etc.) Try asking for a volunteer to rephrase it. Students are often able to formulate the essence of another's question in a more coherent manner. (Barnett and Lindner, ch. V.)

My Cup Runneth Over. A large number of

"dumb questions" may indicate that the students as a group are not at the same level, it may help to review more frequently, use more concrete examples, or introduce a more varied approach to accommodate students' learning styles (Barnett and Lindner, 17-19; Cashin; McKeachie et.al.; Mittendorf and Kalish.)

Blessed are the Peacemakers. If you have a student who asks questions that demonstrate antagonism towards you or the subject, consider what you might do to rectify the situation. A private chat with the student often works. Instigating small group discussions concerning what students like and dislike about the class can also be effective. Although sometimes a student will persist in his/her recalcitrance, more often than not you can find a way to grease the squeaky wheel. (McKeachie, et. al., 251-54.)

Help Students Learn How to Learn. Students often need help learning how to listen in class, read for comprehension, organize their notes, and order their thoughts. You can do quite a bit to help them by structuring your lectures and assignments to teach effective listening. On an individual basis, you can achieve much the same result during your office hours with a little investment of time. (For concrete suggestions, see Newton; McKeachie et.al., ch. 10, 32-33.)

Learning Disabilities. Although only about 3% of the population exhibits learning disabilities, you may have such a student in your class. Indicators include repeated problems with a certain type of assignment or difficulty grasping a particular category of concepts, especially if the student has applied sufficient effort. Such students' questions are not "dumb." Contact the TRC or the Learning Needs Evaluation Center for more information. (Loevinger, 51-61.)

Get Help from Other Students. If you have attempted to answer a question twice and the student still doesn't "get it," let somebody else have a try. Be magnanimous. Say something like, "I'm sorry, but I'm not making much sense today. Could somebody help me by explaining it in their own words?" You might be surprised

at how lucid some of your students can be. Take it as a compliment to your outstanding teaching abilities.

R-E-S-P-E-C-T. Most important of all, remember that every student's question should be treated with sympathetic consideration. Remind students throughout the semester that there is no such thing as a "dumb question" in your class. Students should feel free to ask whatever questions are necessary in order to understand the material. Even if you do not actually believe in the "no dumb question rule," it is important, as a practical matter, to uphold the fiction. The quickest way to extinguish all questions in your classroom is to treat a query, even a simplistic one, with disdain. Students, when faced with a choice between understanding the material and avoiding the condescending gaze of their instructor, invariably opt for the latter. It is also important to protect students from the rolling eyes and exasperated looks of their classmates. Respond enthusiastically. Answer as thoroughly as time and other circumstances allow. Take note of any factors discussed above that seem relevant to this particular instance. By so doing you encourage better questions and foster learning. We are all enriched as a result.

Works Cited

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