Designing Effective Projects: Curriculum-Framing Questions

Transforming the Classroom with Effective Questioning Practices

Strategies for Engaging All Learners

Incorporating Essential and Unit Questions into the curriculum is an effective way to promote student inquiry and target higher-order thinking, but it takes more than a few good questions to truly transform a classroom and engage all students in learning.

Research and development specialists, Jackie Walsh and Beth Sattes (2005), authors of *Quality Questioning: Research-Based Practice to Engage Every Learner*, claim that knowing how to formulate quality questions is only the first step in the process of transforming classrooms. They argue that if educators wish to engage all students in answering the questions, they must also teach new questioning behaviors to students and adopt classroom norms that support them.

To begin the process of transforming your classroom, establish a risk-free setting where students feel comfortable asking and answering questions. Make sure that everyone understands that no question is a bad question, and always allow plenty of wait time for students to formulate, process and answer the questions.

Next, assign projects that require students to answer the “big questions” and back them up with evidence. Present students with scenarios or problems where they must derive the solutions themselves. In the beginning, students that are unfamiliar with open-ended questioning, most likely will need guidance as well as assurance that there may be many right answers. Provide students with appropriate scaffolds that will ensure success and frequently monitor their work. Remind students to provide rationale for their opinions and to formulate hypotheses, based on facts.

Make time for questions. Use probing techniques to urge students to clarify their ideas and explain their reasoning. Then, challenge them with even more complex questions. Help students to understand that in order to answer the big questions, they may need to address the smaller questions first.

Once students are accustomed to exploring and answering open-ended questions supported by evidence, take a step back and assume the role of facilitator. Teach students how to generate their own questions and encourage them to elaborate and build on each other's ideas.

Finally, as you begin to assess student work, consider the effectiveness of your own questioning practices. If students are unable to adequately answer the Essential and Unit Questions and support their answers with evidence, is it because you need to modify the questions? Do you need to utilize more effective probing techniques to urge students to clarify their ideas and explain their reasoning? Or do you need to provide more scaffolds to ensure objectives are met? If all students are not engaged in the learning, do you need to reinforce classroom practices so that all students feel free to share their ideas or state their opinions? If student work does not demonstrate higher-order thinking and include unique responses or creative approaches, do you need to modify your project requirements or assessment tools to target these skills? Or do you need to provide more practice and guidance in how to address open-ended questions?

Transforming your classroom into a place where all students are engaged and interested in asking and answering the big questions will require time and work, monitoring and adjusting, but the rewards of students engaged in thinking and learning are worth the effort.

Resources

Walsh, J. A. and Sattes, B. D.. (2005). *Quality questioning: Research-based practice to engage every learner*. Thousand Oaks, CA: AEL and Corwin Press.

Classroom Assessment. *Questioning strategies*. Pinellas School District and Florida Center for Instructional Technology.
http://fcit.usf.edu/assessment/classroom/interacta.html*