



# DAVID DIDAU



## 7: QUESTIONING

**BEFORE YOU NEXT ASK YOUR STUDENTS SOMETHING, THERE ARE A FEW POSERS YOU SHOULD CONSIDER YOURSELF, ADVISES DAVID DIDAU...**

**I**t's always worth questioning conventional wisdom. Why do we do the things we do? Why, as teachers, have we decided certain practices are more valuable than others? Is it because they're the most effective aspects of teaching or just habit and lazy assumptions?

And what could be more conventionally wise than the assumption that teachers need to commit time and resources to improving their ability to ask questions of their pupils? There's research that suggests teachers, traditionally, aren't that great at asking questions. We often answer our own questions; we give less than a second for pupils to answer questions; we accept incorrect answers, and then paraphrase their responses asking, *'Did you mean...?'* and we allow pupils to avoid participating by accepting the answer *'I don't know'*. All this being the case, surely it's imperative to spend time instructing teachers on how to be better at questioning?

### Could there be a cost to asking questions?

Questioning is inefficient. It takes far longer to ask questions and get a response than it does simply to tell pupils something. In the normal run of events we only tend to ask questions to which we don't already know the answer; we ask for information or clarification. But in the classroom, it's considered both normal and desirable for teachers to ask questions to which they already know an answer, if not the answer. Why is this? Possibly it's because we believe that by asking questions rather than just giving answers we will make pupils think more deeply about the information we want them to learn.

Seeing that questioning is an inefficient way of communicating information, there must be an opportunity cost to all these questions we ask. If we just told pupils what they needed to know, would we be able to get on with something more useful? In order to answer this we need to consider whether asking questions is a better means of communicating concepts than simply explaining them. Because if it's not, we're wasting valuable time. Imagine what else we could be doing with this time. Could it possibly be the case that sometimes it's preferable to just *tell kids stuff*?

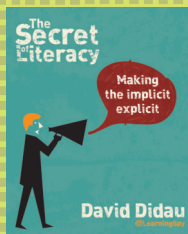
### Does answering questions lead to better understanding?

We assume asking questions is better than 'just telling' because pupils will get a deeper understanding of an idea or concept. This sounds self-evident. How could it not be better for pupils to have a deep understanding? The thinking goes that by interrogating pupils' understanding by inducing cognitive conflict they are more likely to take ownership of what they've learned and therefore it will be more memorable. But is this actually true?

Maybe, but a clear and relevant explanation could be equally memorable. In our rush to get kids to understand, we can, at



DAVID IS AN ASSOCIATE OF INDEPENDENT THINKING AND HAS RUN TWO ENGLISH DEPARTMENTS AND BEEN AN ASSISTANT HEAD WITH RESPONSIBILITY FOR TEACHING & LEARNING. HE IS THE AUTHOR OF THE BEST-SELLING 'THE PERFECT ENGLISH LESSON' AND HIS LATEST BOOK, 'THE SECRET OF LITERACY', WAS PUBLISHED IN JANUARY 2014.



times, be guilty of failing to concentrate on making sure they remember what we've taught them. Clearly there's no point in understanding something which you later forget, so it makes complete sense to make every effort not only that something is understood, but that it is also remembered.

### What are the purposes of the questions we ask?

Understanding why we are asking a question is pretty fundamental. There are two main purposes for asking a questions in the classroom: to teach or to assess. If we want to assess what pupils know or can do, it's probably most sensible to ask closed questions. But if we want to use questioning to teach we suppose that asking open questions that require pupils to think will always be a good thing.

If it's right that we remember what we think about, then maybe questions have a useful part to play in prompting and provoking thought. But thinking depends on knowledge; you can't think about what you don't know. Unless we're sure pupils already know something worth thinking about, we might be better off not asking them what they think.

### Which of these purposes might be worthwhile?

- To ask pupils to articulate their understanding for the benefit of the class
- To prompt pupils to give better answers
- To spot silly mistakes
- To find out what pupils know
- To verbalise thought processes
- To make pupils apply what they know
- To make logical leaps between topics
- To make pupils generalise a concept
- To make pupils guess

If we're determined to commit time to training teachers on the art of questioning, maybe it might be profitable to examine how effective questioning might differ across subjects. Is questioning different in maths, geography, art and PE? We should also think more about the content of questions instead of focusing on the methodology of how they're asked. If pupils remember what they think about then it would make sense to design questions that forced them to think hard about the subject content we wanted them to learn.

Whatever you do, and whatever you decide to believe, please remember that what *you* do is irrelevant. It's what your *pupils* do that matters. I've got absolutely nothing against asking questions, I just think it always pays to look again at we believe is 'obviously right'. Asking questions is a good thing. The more awkward and problematic your questions are, the better. But fetishising questioning as a pillar of pedagogy is more troubling.