

Any questions?

What if teachers stopped shouting “Silence in the classroom!” and started letting students ask questions?

Jane Smith tried it with her class – and was thrilled with the results.

After spending a fascinating half hour talking to a friend’s four-year-old daughter, I was reminded how innately curious children are. She was a really bubbly character who wanted to know *everything*! Why are you not living here? Do you have little girls? How old are you? It was a real barrage of curiosity – totally refreshing and very funny at times.



What's the tallest self-supporting structure you can build with newspaper, sellotape and scissors?

It got me wondering - how do we go from being curious, confident, outspoken four year olds to eleven-year-olds who are happy to sit passively and be told what to do? The probing questions from the four year old lacked any form of guise - she wanted to know so she asked! No worries for her about getting the question wrong. She was unconcerned about looking silly or asking an inappropriate question. She was confident that I was with as interested in her as she was in me.

This made me question my classroom practice. As an AST, I'm fortunate enough to attend many training courses. A few years ago I attended a course where I learned that 95% of the questions in the classroom come from the teacher. I wanted to test the theory. I decided to use a year 11 class that I had been teaching for about a year.

I asked one of the pupils to observe the lesson and record only the questions that were posed by pupils. After an hour of torture, being acutely aware of what he was doing and knowing that the results were going to show a real issue, I looked in horror at the questions. Pupils were compliant and pleasant - there were no issues of discipline. All the pupils undertook the task I set and no one said anything other than: "Can I go to Matron's and get a hot water bottle?" On the surface it seemed like a productive lesson. But it was clear that the pupils

thought their role was to receive information and were happy to be passive.

I had made this deliberately difficult for myself - I could have set up a discussion lesson where I would have had more questions from pupils. But it was still a shock to realise that the culture in my classroom was one where pupils just did as they were asked. How could I get pupils to think for themselves and not just accept what they were told at face value? There was no way to measure the students' true level of understanding.

I began with my Cultural Studies class for 2008 - 2009, where we discussed what makes a philosophical question. We played question games - and I stressed that, in our class, we would never laugh at anyone's questions.

In the first term, we developed 'ground rules'. These weren't written down, but evolved from our class discussions. We have a poster on the wall that says: "The only dumb question is the one you don't ask". When I pointed this out to the class, I was overjoyed when a student, Ashleigh, said: "I don't get it, what does it mean?"

As a class, we had we had already discussed Philosophy for Children (P4C) questions. We examined 'Erika's Story' while reading, 'The Boy In The Striped Pyjamas'.

In the story, Erika's mother throws her from a cattle truck



It's easy to ask questions with anonymous post-it notes.



destined for a concentration camp and she, miraculously, survives. Pupils asked: Was Erika's mother right to abandon her? Was the woman who looked after her a German? Did it make a difference if the woman was German? How did it feel to be on the train? Do you need to know where you are from? Once the pupils understand that there is no right or wrong answer and that their emotional reactions are valued, voicing an opinion is less pressured.

When they are still in the early stages of year seven, Pupils are very keen to join in lessons. Often their questions are spontaneous - spoken without any deliberation. They are keen to know "why?". Once the stigma of admitting they don't know something has been removed, lessons become a much louder.

When I gave this introductory lesson (below), all 70 pupils in 7O spoke about it in their end of year 'Assessment

Remembrance Day and share it with the class? I don't know what *Heil Hitler* means, can I go and find out? Can we really plan this trip ourselves?

I introduced a 'Mantle of the Expert' project to further challenge the class. The students were commissioned to produce resources on Judaism for year seven classes.

I listened to the pupils' discussions to gauge how much they knew already. I realised they needed to speak to a Jewish person. I came in to the class (using the technique 'teacher in role') as 'Sarah'. The class they asked me what it means to be Jewish. The pupils wrote their questions on post it notes. As a class, they categorised them (Bloom's - analysis & synthesis) and decided which were the most important questions to ask.

I was surprised by the range of questions. Some were really basic - pupils showed no fear in asking simple

for Living' presentation. Yet it needs virtually no preparation!

Introductory lesson

Resources: Two large pieces of newspaper, one pair of scissors and one role of sellotape per group.

Task: To build the tallest self-supporting structure, using only the materials given.

This activity helped pupils to overcome their natural shyness and soon they were all joining in. Soon they were standing up, kneeling on tables and firing questions like: Did you say we could stick it to the table? How long have we got? Can we tear the paper? This was a fun lesson where the children had to ask questions to progress.

Later in the term, two outside speakers came in to lead a session on e-safety. They were alarmed at all the questions thrown at them! By Christmas, I was pleased to note how diverse the class's questions were. Various students asked: Can we take the next lesson if we prepare it? Shall we research

Exploring Judaism with Kosher cooking.



questions. Living in Barnsley, none of them had ever met a Jewish person – so they asked questions like “What is your favourite food?” and “What do you wear?”

Other questions showed some understanding of Jewish history alongside real confusion. One child asked: “How do you find it living in a concentration camp?” When I answered that I was a teacher in Barnsley, and had never been to a concentration camp, I showed the class our historical setting.

The next set of questions showed depth: Are you proud of being Jewish? How do you feel about the way your ancestors were treated? Are you worried it might happen again? Do you pray in different ways? The students were curious to know who ‘made up’ the Jewish rules, and what would happen if you stopped following them. According to Bloom’s taxonomy, the pupils had progressed beyond basic understanding questions towards evaluative ones.

On deciding to accept the Commission to produce resources another volley of questions quickly ensued: Can we have a company name and logo? Could we do a website? What about a Jewish cooking show? Who’ll do each job? Can we hold job interviews this afternoon?

There is a huge range of techniques that can encourage

questioning - Mantle of the Expert, De Bono’s six hats, Philosophy for Children, Co-operative learning.... They’re all good methods. But fundamentally, it has to be “Cool to question”.

Allowing lots of questions can be very demanding for teachers. It’s like when your toddler is at the ‘why’ stage - there are days when you want to scream: “Because I said so!” But if you can weather these days, the classroom is once again energised.

As a result of our work, my class was given the chance to work with Dorothy Heathcote in July this year. They made a documentary about her by researching her life and deciding what questions to ask. It was so fulfilling to watch an eleven year old ask this amazing practitioner what effect she thinks she has had on teaching.

When I look at my class now, I see the maturity and understanding of young adults, but the curiosity, confidence and playfulness of children. I am confident that their Year 11 selves will give me a much more demanding and challenging experience when I teach them GCSEs. I had better start swotting!

Jane Smith is an Advanced Skills teacher (AST) at Kingstone secondary school in Barnsley.