

teacherhead

ZEST FOR LEARNING... INTO THE RAINFOREST OF TEACHING

UNCATEGORIZED

# Top Three! High-impact, inclusive questioning strategies.

POSTED BY TOM SHERRINGTON · SEPTEMBER 14, 2020 · 4 COMMENTS

When I'm invited to support schools and colleges with CPD around teaching and learning – or I'm simply asked to nominate my favourite high-impact strategies – these three strategies are what usually come to mind as key areas to focus on. Cold Calling; Think Pair Share and Check for Understanding.

They work incredibly well in themselves and even better in combination – in my experience.

Where teachers have all three working really well, there are numerous benefits:

- every student is involved in all questioning exchanges; everyone feels warmly invited to take part – it's inclusive and challenging at the same time.
- every student can rehearse their thinking, engaging in generative recall and self-explanation, working out what they know and don't know; there's plenty of space for uncertainty and tentative first steps.
- there's a depth to classroom exchanges, beyond the surface of short responses; we can get into the details.
- the teacher gets good information about student learning for them to base dynamic decisions on during the lesson: it makes instructional teaching highly interactive and as responsive as it should be.

Before you cry 'common sense', 'obvious' or do your '*teachers do this already*' eye-roll, I'd just invite you to take a mental walk with me on my travels around schools. The truth is, it just isn't absolutely solid common practice for these things to be done really well – separately or in combination. It's actually very patchy – despite all the benefits that follow. Sometimes teachers don't do any of these things routinely... and it shows. So, I advocate these strategies because I see so much mileage in improving teachers' default practices in relatively straightforward ways.

## Cold Calling

Essentially this means 'no hands up and no calling out'; the teacher chooses students to respond and establishes the routine that this could be anyone for any question. You ask everyone the question, pause, giving thinking time and then warmly invite someone to give their answer or share their thoughts.

*(To the whole class): What are the main factors that made this a significant change?*

Pause

*Jonah... what were you thinking?*

Then you engage with Jonah's response and, after a brief exchange, invite someone else to contribute. It keeps everyone involved, thinking; it stops some people dominating and it prevents the habit of opting out – that students develop in a hands-up classroom. In the right spirit, this a highly inclusive strategy – but it also embeds high expectations about engagement with the material in hand.

(If you don't like the name, you really just need to get over that – or call it something else. Don't let it be a barrier to actually doing it!)

## Think Pair Share

On its own, Cold Calling isn't enough. Why? Mainly, it is because it is a sampling process – although everyone can be thinking about the questions, you only get to hear a few responses from a whole class; this means that not everyone gets the opportunity to rehearse their thinking out loud. It is just so powerful to enable everyone to have a chance to think their ideas through by sharing them with a talk partner. The process of verbalising your ideas tells you a lot about gaps in your own understanding – try it! Do you have the conceptual framework, the vocabulary, a way to put ideas into a sequence? Pair share provides everyone with this opportunity – in a little safe bubble of two where you may admit to uncertainty and doubt much more readily than you would alone. (I've written about this [more extensively here](#).)

Where pair-share is rare, it's just so much harder for all students to express uncertainty; it's also more difficult to make sure everyone can rehearse using ideas, words, explanations. Some don't.. they never really fully explore ideas in detail and they mask their struggles. There needs to be some simple routines around it:

- Everyone has a talk partner pre-established (especially important in a socially distanced space but important any time.)
- The talk should have a goal; a focus -eg to list five advantages or to decide which of two options is better or to formulate a clear explanation of a concept as if for a younger student.
- The talk should have a time limit; knowing how long you have helps to gauge the depth and intensity of the discussion.
- Pairs should know they will be cold-called after their discussions – so that everyone knows they could be asked to share their ideas, no opting out.

Ideally you would circulate during pair talk. That will need to wait until classrooms return to normal but think-pair-share can still be a big part of a socially distanced classroom.

## Check for Understanding

The final piece in the trio of ideas is Check for Understanding. This is important for numerous reasons – feeding in and out of Cold Calling and Think Pair Share. If teachers routinely sample students' understanding after any exchange, comparing answers and exploring differences, more students are rehearsing their thinking and the teacher gets a much better idea of how the learning is going. It takes numerous forms:

- Michael, what did you understand from what Safiya was saying about the poem?
- Samira.. I've explained the main points in the narrative.. let me check, what did you understand the main points to be?
- John.. run through the instructions for the task for us.. what are we all going to do? (practical, activity, homework....)
- Daisy – tell us what you understood was happening in the last chapter of the story?
- Steph – let's have your version; how do can we work out this angle from the information in the diagram? And Melissa – what was Steph's method again? What could you do instead?

Check, check, check. Then compare and contrast. Can we learn from each other's responses?

These three strategies weave in and out of each other continually. Everyone is included. Everyone is connected . Everyone is thinking. Everyone is exploring their own schema looking for gaps, making links. Everyone is thinking. (Oops I said it twice.) And the teacher is getting a rich wash-back of feedback from the class: levels of fluency, knowledge gaps, insights into students' thought processes... It's dynamic, responsive, inclusive. This is great teaching.

In my experience each of these elements can require some work – a conscious choice on a teacher's part to change their habits: to cold call instead of taking hand up; to make pair-share a frequent, punchy, productive, disciplined thinking activity; to check for understanding instead of using the ineffective alternatives like *'is everyone ok yeah?'*. It takes effort and real sustained intent to make these switches. Don't diminish the challenge this can present for some people; it's easier said than done. The pay-off is significant but it all starts with the determination to make the changes.

How's it going for you?

## Discussion

### 4 thoughts on “Top Three! High-impact, inclusive questioning strategies.”

1. Hello, I am about to try this with my class. Paired shared is an integral part of my lessons but I really like the questions you suggest to ensure understanding and also to promote students listening to one another. Will keep you posted, T x

POSTED BY TRACEY | [SEPTEMBER 16, 2020, 2:15 PM](#)

**REPLY TO THIS COMMENT**

## Trackbacks/Pingbacks

1. PINGBACK: [TEACHING FROM BEHIND THE SAFETY LINE.. | TEACHERHEAD](#) - SEPTEMBER 17, 2020
2. PINGBACK: [TEACHING FOR UNDERSTANDING: SCHEMA-BUILDING AND GENERATIVE LEARNING. | TEACHERHEAD](#) - OCTOBER 4, 2020
3. PINGBACK: [HOW CAN WE GET STUDENTS TO WRITE MORE? PART 2 – TOMNEEDHAM](#) - NOVEMBER 9, 2020

[teacherhead](#)

[Blog at WordPress.com.](#)