

The art of questioning in the classroom

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What is it then, that the teacher (of philosophy) actually does? He sets the interplay of question and answer going between the students, perhaps by the introductory remark: "Has anyone a question?"

Leonard Nelson, philosopher, professor, and writer (1882–1927)

Ord och begrepp som används i texten

Archery – bågskytte.

Assertion – starkt påstående, hävdande.

Assumption – antagande.

Concepts – begrepp, begreppsområde.

Dogmatic – dogmatisk, här undervisning som fokuserar eller hävdar rätta fakta.

Empirically – observerad eller erfaren kunskap snarare än sprungen ur teori eller logik.

Enhance – förstärka, utveckla.

Full/empty way of listening – med "full" menas att lyssnaren baserar tolkning av det som sags på sina egna erfarenheter för att göra en värdering eller bedömning. Med "empty" menas snarare att lyssnaren förhåller sig tillgänglig och närvarande inför det som den andre säger, på ett sätt som också väger in att den andre är och tolkar olika.

Interlocution – samtal mellan två eller flera.

Logos, ethos, pathos – logos handlar om att bygga på förnuft genom logiska argument, det vill säga vad samtalet rör. Ethos handlar om talarens trovärdighet, vem som talar och relationen mellan dem som talar. Pathos handlar om känslor inför det som sägs, hur det sagda förstås och tas emot känslomässigt.

Open questions – öppna frågor, frågan som leder till tolkning och med flera svarsmöjligheter.

Questions down/up – ”questions down” handlar om det verkligt upplevda och ”questions up” om tänkandet. Frågor kan befinna sig på en skala mellan down, det vill säga erfarenhetsbaserat, och up, det vill säga principer och värderingar.

Participant – deltagare (i samtalet).

Rhetorical question – fråga som ställs med annat syfte än att få information, exempelvis för att påstå något, korrigera någon och så vidare.

Unravel – reda ut.

In his 1922 speech for teachers of philosophy, later published as “The Socratic Method”, the German philosopher Leonard Nelson distinguished two kinds of teachers: the “Socratic” teacher and the “Dogmatic”. The latter refers to any teacher who thinks they have some content to offer while the first is the teacher who is convinced that the knowledge to be acquired is already present in the mind of the student. It takes merely the correct maieutic practice to get it out properly. This distinction is of course too strong (and in introducing it Nelson also reveals himself as too “dogmatic”), but it points at one of the central difficulties of being a teacher: you have to lead the students to independence, including independence of your own knowledge. The main instruments you possess to accomplish this noble task are listening and questioning. In this chapter you will learn how to do this properly.

In the first part of this chapter, I will focus on a few basic questioning skills. The second part is about how to encourage your students, but also the parents you work with and your colleagues, to reflect more effectively. Some students or colleagues might not like this, or are not ready for it. In the last part, you get to know how you can reach them.

Some basic questioning skills

Suppose you sit in a classroom and Malin, your teacher, asks: “Have you prepared your reading task? It wasn’t easy, was it? Did you like it? Shall we look at it?” The only thing you can do as a student is think: “Calm down, dear teacher!” It is impossible to answer four questions in a row. Questioning might seem simple but it is not. It requires a full focus on the person you are talking to. You can compare it with archery – your question is like an arrow. It should be delivered smoothly and simply, straight and in the direction you want. You do not get a second chance. Archery starts with accepting what is there, it starts with an empty target. Just like all crafts, questioning requires a lifelong practice. To start, here are ten basic tips to become a better questioner:

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1. Formulate one question at a time.
2. Formulate your question as simply as possible.
3. Formulate your question as briefly as possible.
4. Do not introduce new concepts.
5. Ask open questions.
6. Listen more than you talk.
7. Provide emotional comfort.
8. Respect your own question.
9. Think carefully about introductions to questions.
10. Teach your students to question one another.

Let us go through the list, one tip at a time.

1. Formulate one question at a time

This was Malin's problem in the example above. She was expressing her worries, she was busy with her own thinking, not the thinking of the student. One question at a time allows you to pay more attention to the student's reaction.

2. Formulate your question as simply as possible

When you ask a question, your intention is that the student thinks about the answer, and not about the question. If your question is too difficult or too vaguely formulated, the student will not understand you. So, instead of for example saying "Would it be possible to test this out empirically?", just ask "Can you give an example of this?"

3. Formulate your question as briefly as possible

A characteristic of a well formulated question is that the student remembers the question. A question like "What is your responsibility as a parent, given the fact that you are in charge of two adolescents, who are struggling to find their own way in life?" is difficult to grasp by anyone, let alone answer. Hence, it is better to ask, "What is your responsibility as a parent of two adolescents?" A good maximum is about ten words.

4. Do not introduce new concepts

Just as a chameleon sitting on a tree takes on the colors of the tree and becomes invisible to enemies, a good questioner uses the other one's words as much as

possible. In this way, the student can recognize themselves in the question, and will be more motivated to answer. If you reiterate the words, it is a sign that you have listened well. Besides this psychological advantage, there is also a cognitive advantage; your interlocutor can concentrate better. They will not be distracted by new concepts, continues to listen alertly and is not waylaid by their own thinking. An example:

THE STUDENT: "I am afraid to stand up for myself."

NON-CHAMELEON TEACHER: "What is the cause of this fear?"

CHAMELEON TEACHER: "Why are you afraid?"

5. Ask open questions

Often *open questions* are understood as questions to which you can answer anything, whereas with *closed questions*, you are restricted to a limited number of possibilities such as "yes", "no", "maybe", "I don't know". Closed questions are often used in questionnaires.

I see an open question as a question, with which the other person feels free to answer anything. A closed question is a question where the other person feels pushed in a certain direction. An open question is for example: "What do you think of this exercise?" The closed variant is: "The exercise is difficult, isn't it?" A question like: "Is there life after death?" would grammatically be considered as a closed one, because there are a limited number of possible answers like "yes", "no" or "maybe". However, I see it as an open one because you are free to answer whatever you want. The conversation will then go on, based on the arguments.

A closed question can also be called a *suggestive or rhetorical* question. "Don't you agree that we all go to heaven after death?" is a closed question. These questions do have advantages. They enable you to win people over to your side. After such a rhetorical question "Right?" you are no longer alone, you feel supported. An open question is much "lonelier", the chance is about fifty percent that people will answer something you like. But they will answer what they think, and not what you want them to think.

6. Listen more than you talk

The art of asking questions is the result of the art of listening. A well formulated question is the result of careful listening to the interlocutor. There are two main ways of listening: a *full way* and an *empty way*.

The full way of listening is called "full" because your own thinking is the most important. In listening to your colleague, to parents or your students, you

think: "I recognize that", or you concentrate on how you can apply this to your own situation. This includes anticipating what the other person will say, making assumptions, summarizing, remembering key words, and so on.

This way of listening is not wrong. It is fast and it distinguishes good specialists from bad ones. This listening is done by experts and is inspired by the need for solutions. It is common in situations where action needs to be taken quickly: at the doctors, as a researcher, as a plumber, when collecting data. It is listening in order to make a judgement. You check whether what the speaker says fits your standards, your judgement. You make a diagnosis. Because you make a selection of what you hear, you run the risk of losing touch with the other person. You are concerned with your own goals, not automatically with those of the other person.

The empty way of listening is different. This way of listening starts from an attitude of availability or presence. This attitude implies a complete openness to everything that is happening, not only in the conversation but also in the environment: the energy, the aesthetics of the environment, the emotions, the details in the interlocutor's body language and tone. It starts from silence in which the other can reveal themselves as 'other': someone who thinks differently than you at every second. This way of listening implies an awareness of yourself and what is happening within you, and of the other person as always, every second, being different from yourself.

Students recognize those teachers who can listen well. They are, however, in a minority. It is only in the presence of such a teacher that the student, as a person and not just a "student", can emerge. For some students, meeting such a teacher can be a lifesaver.

7. Provide emotional comfort

Whatever you want to achieve with your questions (reflection, support, clarification and so on), it is important that the other person is central to the process, and not you. There must be freedom in the answering. The student will not feel this freedom if they are under stress or under pressure, if you dominate the student or make them afraid.

You make your interlocutor feel at ease by having an open, inviting attitude. They need to feel that they are persons who are accepted. The more you can enable this emotional support, the further you can take your questioning. You can compare it to being a doctor. The more emotional resistance the patient offers, the more difficult it is to achieve the desired medical outcome. If your student feels emotional acceptance, you will be able to make more far-reaching interventions in respect of what they say and think.

8. Respect your own question

Often a student reacts to a question instead of answering it. They associate words in the question with their own ideas, or interpret them in a different way than intended.

For example:

THE TEACHER: "Did you enjoy your trip?"

STUDENT: "It is not easy to undertake a city trip with a group of forty students."

This is a reaction to the question, not an answer. In daily conversations, this happens a lot, without being a problem. If you find it necessary that the student answers your question, the easiest way is to interrupt them and repeat your question: "I just wanted to know, did you enjoy your trip?"

9. Think carefully about introductions to questions

A well-formulated question, addressed to the right person, on the right subject, at the right time, can work wonders. To accomplish this, the question has to be bare, stripped of unnecessary words. Try to avoid introductions like "What I would like to ask you is ..." or "I have always wondered ..." These are not questions, they are announcements, personal messages, and so on, and the other person does not have to answer. They will probably answer something like "Good for you". Sometimes teachers repeat something about the other person before asking the question, for example: "I heard you say that you don't need a lot of money to be happy, are you saying that ...?" Such an introduction usually serves to reassure the teacher that they have heard the other correctly. It is not always necessary. An introduction to a question is hence superfluous.

Is an introduction never okay then? If you know that you are going to ask a controversial question, an introduction may serve as a "lubricant" to your question. An introduction such as, "You may feel a little shocked by what I am about to ask you, but ..." provides emotional support for a question about which a student may be a little tense. But even then, it is up to the student to accept the question or not. An introduction is also functional if you want to make the student aware of what they have already said, or if you want to introduce a hypothetical situation.

10. Teach your students to question each other

Asking questions is an act of freedom; even of superiority. It enables you to steer the conversation for a few minutes. It is therefore interesting to encourage that your students also ask questions to one another. They will develop a questioning, critical thinking, researching attitude. After a task, instead of asking: "What solution did you find, Sarah?" ask: "What question do you have about this task and for whom, Sarah?"

Encourage your students to reflect as a result of your question

In teacher training, questioning skills are often focused on checking knowledge. Here are some questions that you might recognize:

- Who knows something about the author?
- Can you repeat in your own words what is written in the text?
- Who has a better answer (when the answer, according to the teacher, not is sufficient)?

These are questions that suit the dogmatic teacher that Nelson was talking about; they do not necessarily improve independent critical thinking. If you want to establish independent critical thinking, you need to work with what the student literally says, the spontaneous speech which opens the gate to the thinking of the student. If the student says: "Karin is a wallflower. She only deals with people she already knows" you can ask questions like:

- Who are the people she has contact with?
- Are they all people she already knows?
- Why is this the reason you call her a "wallflower"?
- Is it enough to deal with people you already know to be a wallflower?

The first two questions are called *questions down*: they refer to what happened, to the reality. The student can answer the questions down by pointing to the reality. The other two are *questions up*: they point at the thinking of the student.

To be able to make your student reflect, you need to concentrate on the form of speech of the student. What we have in the example is an assertion or a statement: "Karin is a wallflower" and an argument: "Because she only deals with people she already knows". "Karin is a wallflower" is an assertion because it is either wrong or right. The sentence "Because she deals with people she already knows" is called an "observational argument". It refers to a reality that is either

the case or not. However, if it is the case, the question remains: what is the link between the two? The *question up* deals with the hidden general argument: "When you are only dealing with people you already know, you are a wallflower." This may be true or tenable, or not. It is in any case worth questioning.

When you have a student like this, you're lucky. They speak in a clear way and you can easily distinguish the elements. But suppose your student only sighs, rolls his eyes or shouts, "Leave me alone!" Then you have a subjective expression that is not yet a clear assertion, and as such difficult to question. You might ask something like "What's wrong?" to come to the nub of the problem (and to clearer thinking). Overall, in the speech of the student, we can distinguish the elements visualized in Figure 17.1.

How to establish nuance and openness in your classroom

When you ask down, about the facts, you will get the student to nuance the statement. Reality is often presented more dramatically than it is, and moreover, you can question the student's interpretations. When a student says: "It's boring", you can ask: "When did it start being boring? Is that from the beginning

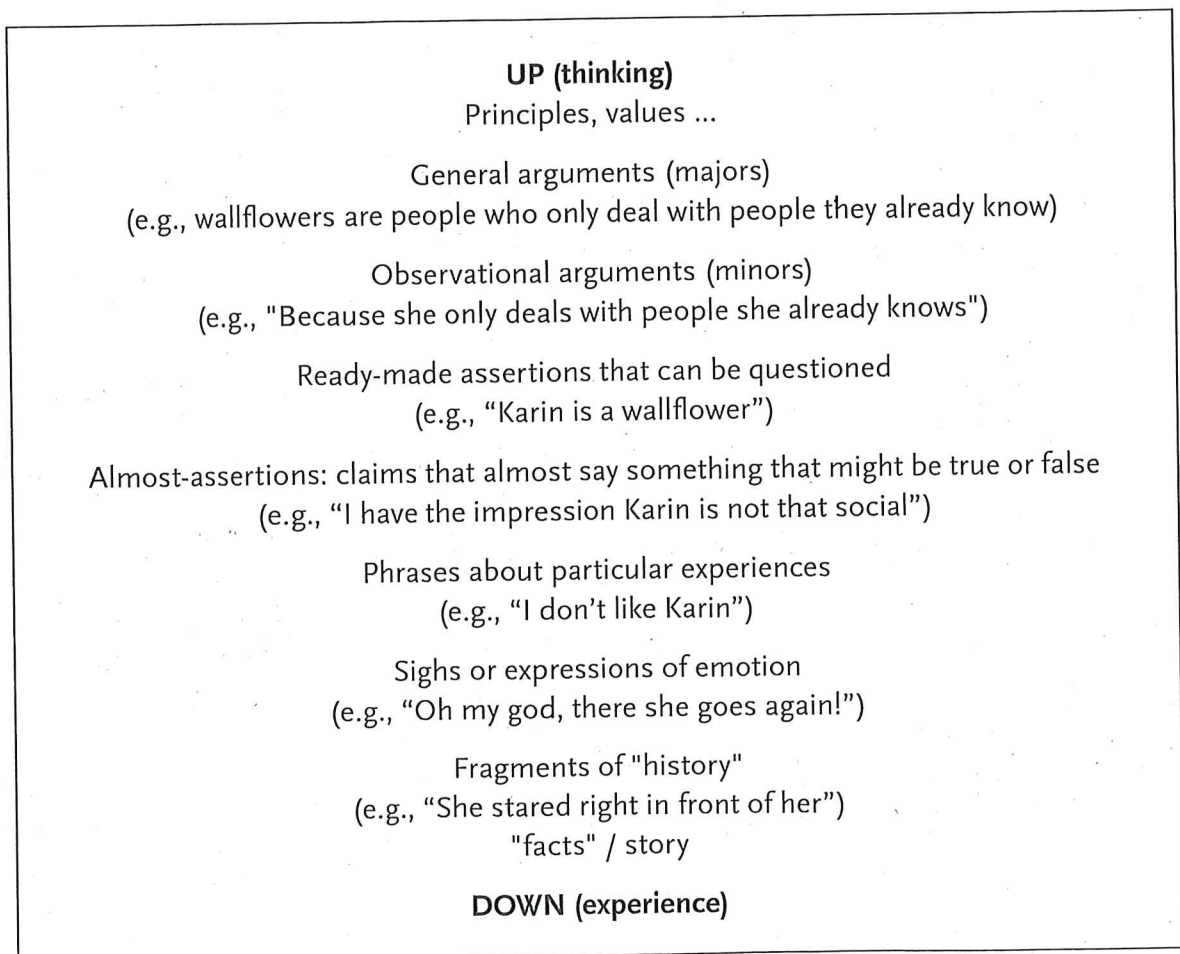


Figure 17.1 Questions up and questions down refer to either thinking or experience.

of this class or just a few minutes ago?” And the student will have to make this clear, and by doing so, it can also be discussed with the other students.

The importance of asking up, towards, the thinking, is that you can unravel general arguments, as stereotypes and assumptions. Three types can be distinguished:

- a. *Stereotypes* like “Girls are cleverer than boys”. These are easy to contradict. It is sufficient to get to know more of the other sex to discover that this idea is wrong.
- b. *Unproblematic assumptions* like “Our class starts at 8.30 a.m. tomorrow”. The start of the class has always been the same time, and therefore does not need to be questioned. We take it for granted, we need things like this to organize our practical life.
- c. *Problematic assumptions* like “We can’t organize a workshop about diversity in our class because we’re all white and Swedish”. This harbors the assumption that there is not diversity among the students present. Another assumption is that you need people of color and non-Swedish background present to be able to organize such a workshop. If you question such assumptions, you open up dialogue about things that the student takes for granted, something that has got stuck in the mind. It is a very useful tool in discussions, because you can avoid polarization, and make students understand themselves and others better. It will prepare students to become better citizens in our complex society.

And what if reason does not work?

In human communication, there is more than just what someone is saying. Students do more than just think: there is also silence, there is sighing, they fall asleep, are agitated. Or you might suddenly hit a sensitive chord and you see tears appear in the eyes of the student. Asking questions for reflection will not work in these cases. In communication there are always 3 elements, (see Figure 17.2).

What you say or ask is here called “logos”, *what* we talk about, the logical questioning that I have dealt with so far in the chapter. But the effect of a

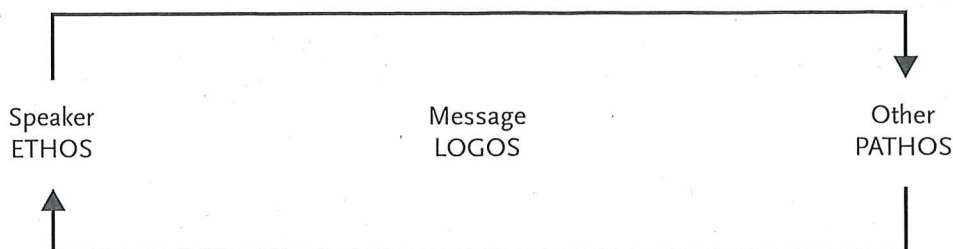


Figure 17.2 The three elements in communication in a simple scheme.

message is depending on how the other person understands it, on the cultural context – *who* is speaking or asking the questions and to *whom*. This is the level of “ethos”, the relationship between the two speaking partners. The third level is the “pathos” level, *how* a message is understood, how your question comes across to the other person and how they feel about this. This distinction and these terms have a long history and go back to what is written in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* (c.335 BC). Let’s explore the two new levels of ethos and pathos, a little closer.

Ethos: asking for the meaning of what the other person is doing

Ethos stands for *who* the interlocutor is. What students want to know is whether you are virtuous (a good person), sensible (not talking rubbish), and benevolent (what you do is for their benefit). It goes the other way around as well; you might expect the same of your students. If there is something missing, a communication breakdown will occur. The other person then will no longer want to talk to you.

Ethos expresses itself in what both partners want and what they do. If you see from the look on the student’s face that they don’t accept what you are doing (teaching, talking,) you can see resistance, the student will come late, be distracted, lie down, and so on. These disturbances take precedence over the message. The trick is to ask about it, at the right time with the right words. Here are some questions with which you can address the ethos level:

- Is there something you don’t like about what we are doing?
- What do you suggest doing together?
- Why don’t you like what we are doing?
- Why is that important for you?
- What is something you like to do that you value more?

When you pose question of the ethos level, you will deepen the level of involvement in the conversation. The identity of the interlocutors is expressed in what they do, rather than in the content of what they say, and behind those actions are values. If a student is distracted, there can be a whole world waiting to be discovered, filled with values that are not always present at school (e.g., humor, joy, discovery). It is worth questioning. You will get to know your student better and vice versa. An example of such a conversation is the following:

A: I don’t like to sit here listening to you.

B: Why not? What is it that disturbs you?

A: I get nervous just by sitting down like this.

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B: Would you like to move, to walk instead and then talk to me?

A: Yes, definitely.

B: Why is moving so important for you?

A: I don't like standing still. It's boring.

B: Why is it important for you not to be bored?

A: I like to move and make progress.

B: Why is it important to make progress?

A: That's why we are here in this life, isn't it?

Within about six questions, you can help your student to verbalize values like justice, equality, happiness, humor, growth.

At the ethos level, it is important that you accept the answers of your student. Do not question critically, as you would do in the logos level. Just deepen the answers. "Why is that important or relevant for you?" If you continue with questions like "Why is being pure so important?", you can even get to a level of spirituality, where your student explains to you why, in their way of looking at life, this is important.

Pathos: asking about the lived experience

The pathos level is about *how* the student tells the story. Where in ethos the relational level of the conversation is discussed, in pathos it is the feelings, and the lived experience. Here we focus on how the student feels, how they experience something. The task of the teacher is to listen to and pose questions about this experience, so that the student feels supported and understood. Some examples of pathos questions are:

- What bothers you?
- What irritates you?
- How do you feel about this?
- What's wrong?
- What feels good?

You might think this has to do with empathy, and that is correct. But to address the pathos level well, you need cognitive empathy, rather than emotional empathy. Emotional empathy is about "feeling what the other feels". When you see a person who has fallen to the ground, you identify with their pain and shock, you feel worried, and you sympathize with that person. But feeling exactly what the other person feels is simply not possible. A person can never experience something the same way as you do, their experience is not comparable to yours. It is fundamentally different. If you use cognitive empathy, you

show that you are aware of this. You respect the difference between you and the other person, and you show that, despite that difference, you can imagine what the other one feels. You can express the persons experiences, and come close to understanding the person.

In the pathos level, the teacher suggests and describes what the student might have experienced. This can not only lead to emotional support of the student, but also to a better understanding of the lived experience. An example of a conversation is this:

TEACHER: What's wrong?

STUDENT (looking sad): I'm sad because my cat ran away yesterday.

TEACHER: Oh, tell me what happened.

[STUDENT tells the story. The teacher does not interrupt and listens carefully and with patience]

TEACHER: He was important to you, wasn't he?

STUDENT (in tears): Yes, he was my best friend.

TEACHER: Is what you experienced the realization that he was your best friend because you lost him?

STUDENT: Yes, that's what I mean.

Conclusion

Just like playing piano, practicing archery or playing football, the art of questioning is a craft. You are not trained in this sufficiently during teacher training. But it is worth investing in it. It enables you to enhance real (self-)reflection in your students, your colleagues, and your students' parents. You also get to meet them as human beings. Moreover, you show them how to have good dialogues in their daily lives, once they leave school. They might even see that human communication is more complex than online communication, and in many ways more rewarding. Good luck!

Control questions – repeat the content

- Can you give an example of an assertion you hear in your daily life (a statement that is either the case or not the case)? Write it down. What question down can you ask??
- Can you give an example of an observational argument you hear in your daily life? What is the assertion that it serves? What question down can you ask?

Questions for reflection

- Do you agree with Nelsons distinction between the “dogmatic” and the “Socratic” teacher? If not, what distinction would you make and why?
- Do you accept the application of the Aristotelian distinction between logos – ethos – pathos as I used it here? If not, what would you suggest to question less-rational students?

Suggestions for further investigation

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