

Teaching Tip

August 27, 2004

Asking the Right Questions

There is a plethora of research on cognition, motivation and human development that guides our understanding about how people learn best. *How People Learn* (Bransford, et al), *Knowing What People Know*, William Perry's work on intellectual development come to mind. Yet we don't have to read or re-read this research to know what makes a good learning environment. We only need to look at our own learning experiences for good examples.

One thing that we can learn from our own experiences is that an eagerness to learn about something is almost always a result of pursuing an answer to an interesting question. Deep learning (learning that stays with us and can be used to critically think about an issue, topic, etc.) is always about finding an answer to something that we are interested in. Keep this in mind when thinking about your goals for your class. For example, are the learning outcomes of a particular course linked to a series of intellectual questions that you and your students want to know the answers to?

Although your first week of classes at BGSU has begun, it is not too late to re-examine this issue of guiding questions as you move forward in the semester. Here are some questions to consider (summarized from *What the Best College Teachers Do*) when constructing your own questions:

- What big questions will my course help students answer, or what skills, abilities, or qualities will it help them develop, and how will I encourage my students' interest in these questions and abilities?
- What reasoning abilities must students have or develop to answer the questions that the course raises?
- What mental models are students likely to bring with them that I will want them to challenge? How can I help them construct that intellectual challenge?
- What information will my students need to understand in order to answer the important questions of the course and challenge their assumptions? How will they best obtain that information?
- How will I help students who have difficulty understanding the questions and using evidence and reason to answer them?
- How will I confront my students with conflicting problems (maybe even conflicting claims about the truth) and encourage them to grapple (perhaps collaboratively) with the issues?

I will continue this teaching tip about Asking the Right Questions next week. Enjoy your weekend everyone.

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September 3, 2004

Asking the Right Questions (cont.)

Remember, this tip is not just about how to ask the right question for a particular lecture, class or presentation. Keep in mind that the bigger questions that you ask in relation to the course learning outcomes should serve as a foundation and guide that impacts the design of the whole course...select learning activities...student projects... ways to assess, etc. If the right questions are asked up front, then you increase the odds of creating an intellectually stimulating learning environment for your students. Here are a few more questions (*See Ken Bain) that you might find helpful.

- How will I find out what they know already and what they expect from the course, and how will I reconcile any differences between my expectations and theirs? *
- How will I help students learn to learn, to examine and assess their own learning and thinking, and to read more effectively, analytically, and actively?
- How will I find out how students are learning before assessing them, and how will I provide feedback before—and separate from—any assessment of them?
- How will I communicate with students in a way that will keep them thinking?
- How will I spell out the intellectual and professional standards I will be using in assessing students' work, and why do I use those standards? How will I help students learn to assess their own work using those standards?
- How will the students and I best understand the nature, progress, and quality of their learning?
- How will I create a natural critical learning environment in which I embed the skills and information I wish to teach in assignments (questions and tasks) that students will find fascinating—authentic tasks that will arouse curiosity, challenge students to rethink their assumptions and examine their mental models of reality? How will I create a safe environment in which students can try, fail, receive feedback, and try again?

* I have summarized these questions from Ken Bain's book, *What the Best College Teachers Do*. CTLT has a copy of this book in their library.

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