
**Categories:** Pedagogy, Active Learning, Discussion

**Summary**

Cashin’s idea paper stresses the importance of discussion as a facet of pedagogy that encourages active learning and student engagement. He examines the means by which professors can improve upon their use of questions in the classroom. Within this subject he looks at questions and responses posed by instructors and students.

The first section of Cashin’s paper offers advice in regards to responding to students’ questions. Cashin argues that it is important to resist the urge to immediately answer questions, as doing so ignores the potential for discussion created by such queries. Rather, instructors should repeat or paraphrase the question, to ensure that the whole class has heard and understood the question, and redirect it by asking another student or the class in general to offer answers. This turns a student question into a topic for discussion and identifies students as a valid source of knowledge. Instructors can make further use of students’ queries by responding with related probing questions; for example, the instructor might draw attention to information implied by the question to spur further discussion of the class material related to that topic.

None of the above is intended to suggest that instructors should never directly answer student questions. Rather, Cashin argues that professors need to consider when doing so is absolutely necessary as opposed to when student questions should be viewed as an opportunity to engender greater active learning. To a large extent, direct response should be limited to situations in which questions are aimed at information or knowledge that the students are not likely to have. In such cases, instructors should answer the question succinctly and directly. Moreover, instructors need to tactfully deflect questions when they are likely to take up too much time, divert attention from the central topic of the class session, or are inappropriate. Finally, instructors need to be honest when they don’t know the answer to a question, and offer to find the pertinent information as soon as possible.

Cashin also proffers advice as to how instructors can improve upon their own skills in asking questions. Perhaps most importantly, argues Cashin, professors must avoid answering their own questions when students hesitate to answer. Instructors need to understand that pauses or silence in the classroom, after a question has been asked, may not be a sign that students are unwilling or incapable of answering. Rather, it may indicate that students need time to consider the question and formulate responses. Equally important, when instructors do not give students time to answer questions they imply that they do not really expect an answer, thus decreasing the willingness of students to participate. In order to facilitate more effective discussion, Cashin also suggests that professors make sure to focus on asking open-ended questions and a combination of convergent (questions with a single accepted answer) and divergent (those with many possible answers) questions. By focusing on open-ended, divergent questions, instructors utilize questions in a way that more effectively facilitates discussion and stimulates critical thinking.
Finally, Cashin highlights the importance of creating an accepting atmosphere in the classroom. If students are going to participate in discussion, they need to feel comfortable when asking or answering questions. There are several straightforward ways to accomplish this: ask for questions; solicit questions and/or answers from those who participate less frequently; listen attentively to students’ questions and responses; and most importantly, avoid putting students down in any way.

Applications

In some ways, the points that Cashin raises in his paper seem obvious. Yet, for those professors who tend to rely on lecture this discourse offers a useful primer in employing Q&A as a means of encouraging active learning in the classroom. Beyond this introductory application, however, Cashin makes several points that are useful or serve as important reminders to even the most experienced discussion leaders. In particular, Cashin counsels the need for patience in allowing discussion to emerge in the classroom. Far too often, students’ failure to immediately offer thoughts in response to a line of inquiry by the instructor lead to a willingness to move on or engage in lecture. Finally, in a broader sense, the mechanism by which Cashin presents this information, the idea paper, would seem an easily duplicable and useful innovation at U.D.C. Such a series of papers offers considerable potential for U.D.C.’s ongoing efforts to further advanced teaching and learning throughout the university system. Indeed, the production of such papers would seem to be a perfect fit for the proposed academy for advanced teaching and learning.

Citations of Interest
