

**“Questions are great, but only if you know the answers. If you ask questions and the answers surprise you, you look silly.” Laurell K. Hamilton, *Burnt Offerings***

Is it ever a good thing to be surprised by a student’s answer? I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve looked silly in front of a class. I’ve inadvertently dunked my new tie in my coffee, nearly choked on water and fallen over an interactive white board (remember when they had wheels and feet?). But recently, I don’t feel quite as silly. Because I am better at asking questions than I used to be.

Early in my career, I used to hide behind my Power Point and hope that it contained all of my subject ‘knowledge.’ I didn’t use to ask the right questions, apart from seeking out ‘yes’ or ‘no’ responses’ which confirmed to me that the students *looked* like they were learning. It’s good if they know all the answers. It’s progress if they get nothing wrong. They understand if all questions can be answered. Better still, they have no questions. I must have been doing a good job. But I wasn’t. I was doing ok. Excellent observation feedback, but I wasn’t challenging pupils.

Apart from my ability to drink, my tie and my relationship with the interactive white board, things *looked* fine. This became apparent to me after working with a really great teacher. One who asked questions: the right type of questions. This teacher knew their students, they didn’t wait awkwardly for answers but gave 30 seconds to discuss in pairs and feedback, they didn’t call on the same pupil every time, they got out their questioning spade and they dug deep! Asking the right questions is difficult. But allowing for great discussion and opening up opportunities to talk is an invaluable skill.

So, if this post does anything, at worst I hope it refreshes some of our thinking and at best, I hope it offers some new ideas.

- Don’t have a ‘go to’ student. In fact, don’t ask [insert name] until at least 3 others have responded.
- Do ask those who never put their hand up- prompt them, encourage them. Say, “when we feedback I am going to ask you to share that”.
- If a student gets it wrong, tackle the misconception and ask others. Come back to the student so that they get a chance to tell you the correct answer having heard it from others.
- Know what to ask- plan your questions around your subject’s curriculum content. Work as a team to produce hinge questions or something similar for units of work or at stages in topics.
- Know how to react- if an answer is wrong, have your way of exploring the error, without making it feel like a huge deal. Be kind but honest.
- Get round the class in discussion time and engineer the response so that you are able to shape what the class are going to hear, seamlessly.

This is what I’ve learnt about effective questioning and opening up opportunities for our students to articulate themselves more competently. After all, we don’t want them looking silly.