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Real-time feedback for teachers

Geoff Petty recommends assertive questioning as a teaching method that helps students and teachers track learning. Geoff is the author of *Teaching Today* and *Evidence Based Training*

Studying the research on teaching methods has given me a particular affection for assertive questioning, which can be adapted to any subject. It revolutionised my classroom, forcing my students to make sense of what I was teaching, and to think hard about it.

As I got used to the method, I realised it had a unique strength – it revealed, in real time, what all my students were thinking, what they had understood, what they hadn't, and why. This enabled me to correct any errors or omissions in their learning, so that learning was sound before moving on to the next topic.

Many methods provide students with immediate feedback, but few provide this for the teacher. If teaching were driving a car, this method would give you the view out of the windscreen. It is most useful when students are nearing the end of a topic, or are revising. Students really enjoy it and so will you – when you get used to it.

LET'S SEE HOW THE METHOD WORKS IN DETAIL.

1. You ask a thought-provoking question and ask students to work on it in small groups. You warn them that YOU will be choosing who will answer for their group.
2. You ask: "Anyone stuck? If so, ask me for a hint." If a group does not respond to this offer of help they are 'fair game' for the next stages, and after a few trials they will know it, so will own up. Don't give the answer away when you help a group. Later, you gauge if groups have finished by asking them: "Does anyone need more time?"

Again, if groups don't ask for more time, they are fair game for the next stages.

3. **You choose** (no volunteers) a student to give their group's answer, and another in that group to justify it: "What did your group think, Ahmed?", "Why did you think that, Ellie?" Thank them for their answers, **but crucially, you do not evaluate the answers.**

You could get answers from all or most of the groups one by one in the same way, but the following is often better with a larger class. After the first group gives its answer, ask "Do any other groups agree with that answer?" If so, you choose a member of such a group to say why. Then you choose a member of a group that did not agree with the first group's answer, to give their different answer. Then you ask another from that same group to explain why. You then ask if any groups agree with this new answer. You can, of course, delve for more answers still! In this way, you highlight the differences between groups. You have not yet given the answer away. You now know a lot about which groups think what and why.

4. You summarise the various positions of the different groups, and point out inconsistencies. If all groups agree, perhaps the question could have been more challenging, though in early practice easy questions are helpful.
5. The aim now is to get the whole class to agree their 'class answer(s)'. You encourage the class to discuss and evaluate each other's answers, and to agree, and to justify their 'class answer'. Minority views are allowed, but the aim is consensus.
6. Only when the class have agreed their class answer do you give away the right answer, or evaluate and comment on the answers given by the groups. This method works whether there are right answers or whether different interpretations and answers are likely, for example in a critical appraisal of a painting.