The skill of Framing Questions

Developing Instructional Leadership in the History Classroom:

The Skill of Framing questions

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In March 2009, a two day conference was held at the Mount Wolseley Hotel in Co. Carlow under the auspices of the Irish Vocational Education Association. The theme of the conference related to the development of the concept of instructional leadership in the second level classroom in Ireland. This involves examining ways in which instructional intelligence may be merged with real systemic change in how our students are taught and learn. The facilitator for the gathering was Dr. Barrie Bennett of the University of Toronto, whose research interest relates to teacher thinking / learning / action focused on instructional practices - how teachers acquire an instructional repertoire, how they extend it, integrate it, and what effects this practice has on student learning (kindergarten to adult).
He is also interested in educational change and is the author of several books related to instruction and the integration of instructional methodology. My participation as a teacher/ delegate at this conference reminded me of my own experience in the provision in-service.

Between 2003 and 2008, I was privileged to work with the History In-Service Team in devising, facilitating and evaluating a programme of professional development related to the introduction of the revised Leaving Certificate history syllabus.
As well as informing teachers throughout the state about the syllabus, the team also consciously endeavoured to explore teaching strategies and methodologies that we believed were most consistent with the principles underpinning the syllabus. I was gratified to witness the positive and enthusiastic response to our ideas and to learn so much from interacting with fellow teachers and benefiting from their expertise. The experience convinced me of the quality and expertise of the history teaching community and of the real appetite among that community for professional development geared towards the advancement of teaching and learning in the history classroom. It is in that spirit that I would like to discuss in this article some aspects of Dr. Bennett's presentation at the recent conference that I consider immediately applicable to my own classroom practice as a history teacher.
I hope that these ideas might resonate with other history teachers as well.

The amount of material covered was quite extensive so it would be impossible to convey its full breadth and richness in a short article. Therefore I propose to discuss an instructional skill that is central to effective teaching but has a particularly crucial role to play in the teaching of history; namely, the skill of framing questions to encourage specific types of student responses. This article will also look at The importance of acknowledging the importance of what Bennett calls academic engaged time and wait time if appropriately framed questions are to achieve success in student learning.
The article draws extensively on Dr. Bennett's comments at the conference and a publication entitled Beyond Monet: The Artful Science of Instructional Integration by Barrie Bennett and Carol Rolheiser, published in 2001.

Framing questions In articulating what is meant by the instructional concept of "active participation", Bennet and Rolheiser argue that it is incumbent on teachers to consider the variety of ways in which students can be encouraged to become involved and motivated in the learning environment. Recognising the practical realities of classroom life, the authors acknowledge that teachers can exercise little control over such factors as students' learning styles, intellectual abilities or home environments, not to mention the attendant pressures of covering courses and meeting assessment expectations. However, they do suggest some ways

of invoking student participation; for instance, through the structuring of content and strategies such as role playing and co-operative learning. The method that is focused on here is that of framing questions.

Questioning is a methodology that most teachers employ in most lessons, often as a means of recapitulating on previous lessons or as a means of gauging student understanding. However, I wonder how many of us reflect on how well or effectively we frame the questions that we ask? Or, in other words, how useful are the questions that we put to our students as a means of enhancing the learning –and indeed, the teaching-that takes place in our classrooms? History teachers who engaged with the HIST in-service programme will be familiar with the formation of enquiry-focused questions as a means of engaging students with syllabus content. It will be recalled that the enquiry focused approach was advocated as a teaching methodology consistent with the aims and objectives of the syllabus. For instance, when engaging with the case study, "The Montgomery bus boycott, 1959" in the topic LME6, The United States and the world, 1945-1989, the HIST team offered a model of question that was considered appropriate in stimulating students' curiosity while also offering a pathway through the events and issues relevant to the case study. The question was: "Why did Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat on a bus trigger a national controversy?"
The engagement with this and other examples of such questions at in-service sessions was often lively and stimulating. But my participation in Dr. Bennett's conference led me to think about how I structure questions in my role as the leader of a class so as to engage my students fully in the learning process, as distinct from specifically addressing aspects of historical thinking in my students. Modelling questions in the history classroom The following page consists of a selection of questions that might commonly be asked in history classrooms. (This selection is a close adaptation of a series of model questions devised by Bennet and Rolheiser in Beyond Monet, Ch. 4, p. 58.) It is worth exploring the structure of these questions in terms of the effect each one might have on student participation in the lesson.

Compare the odd-numbered examples and contrast them with the even numbered. In each case, think about how the structure of each question might affect student participation in the lesson.
1. "Share with your partner please. Who were the Kulaks? What was the connection between the Kulaks and Stalin's policy of collectivisation?"
2. "Who can tell me why Sinn Fein was so successful in the 1918 General Election?"
3. "No hands please, I'll pick several of you to answer. What are two causes of the First World War?" (After waiting ten seconds, the teacher picks a student at random to respond).
4. "Who in this class can explain why de Valera and his followers opposed the Anglo-Irish Treaty?"
5. "Thumbs up if you agree, and down if you disagree, and be prepared to defend your answer. The 1936 Eucharistic Congress played an important role in shaping the culture of the Irish state."
6. "We talked yesterday in class about the importance of propaganda in the rise of Nazism in Germany. John, please tell the class about three examples of how propaganda was used and how these examples influenced public opinion."
7. "Take five seconds to think of the difference between democracy and fascism. Be prepared to share your answer with the class."
8. "Could someone please tell me what they predict will happen in Vietnam now that Richard Nixon has become President of the United States?"

9. "Think to yourself and I'll ask you to share. What was the significance in terms of US-Soviet relations of the Moon landing, 1969?"
10 "What do you predict might now happen in Derry as a result of the Lockwood Committee's recommendation that the second university in Northern Ireland be located in Coleraine?"

Perhaps you have identified a common characteristic in each of the odd-numbered questions? Bennet and Rolheiser argue that the critical feature of these questions is that they are framed in such a way that each student is held accountable to think.
Furthermore, students are afforded the opportunity to rehearse an appropriate response within the safety of his or her own mind before sharing the answer publicly, before the whole class and teacher. Each of the questions also allows for the movement from covert (think to yourself) to overt (write it down or share it publicly) in terms of student responses, although this movement is not considered essential in terms of the effectiveness of the question.
Let us now look at the even-numbered questions. In each case, only one student is held accountable. In addition, Bennet and Rolheiser maintain that very often, the suddenness or abruptness of being selected can erase the information from the student's head as a result of the increased level of concern due to no opportunity being provided by the teacher to practise or reflect prior to being asked to respond.
It might be argued that regular exposure to such a model of questioning with the resultant potential for embarrassment or exposure could lead to the student becoming disillusioned with the subject as a whole.

In summary, then, it is suggested that the odd-numbered questions in this discussion are framed so as to:
- Increase the accountability of all the students in the class;
- Involve all students in the class in the lesson;
- Maximise the learning that takes place in the classroom.

Academic engaged time Bennet and Rolheiser also point to the evidence from research that indicates the positive impact on student achievement of "academic-engaged time".

This concept relates to the extent to which students are engaged with the business of the lesson. In terms of framing questions with the objective of maximising student learning, it is important that teachers reflect on whether they wish all students to be encouraged to be involved in thinking or instead require students to respond if or when they feel like it.

Let us consider the two examples that follow:
A: Does anyone in the class know why the Jarrow march took place in October 1936?
B: In our last class, we discussed the Jarrow march of October 1936. Discuss the reasons why it took place with your partner for 30 seconds and then I will select several of you to respond.

It seems evident that example B above is likely to allow for more participation and less opportunity for misbehaviour that example A. Yet, research indicates that teachers commonly employ a model of framing questions in class similar to example A, not B.

This is common in classrooms throughout the world. It is worth reflecting also on the fact that example A, above, tends to lead to the same three or four students most frequently responding to teacher questions. In fact, research suggests that when students are invited to respond in a way that encourages them to volunteer, three or four students in a class willingly answer 80% of the questions.

Interestingly, this figure is replicated for adults: three or four adults in a group of twenty five will respond to 80% of the questions asked that seek voluntary participation. We need to ask

ourselves if this is an acceptable level of student response in our classrooms. Wait time If we accept the importance of maximising students' academic engaged time in our classrooms, it is important for us to be sensitive as to how we structure time.
As teachers, we might not think too much about this issue, particularly when we are concerned with covering syllabus material in a 40 minute lesson. If we are not immediately presented with the response we expect from a student, we often move quickly to a different student or give the answer ourselves. Yet, one means of increasing our students' academic engaged time is through monitoring the time we give students to think during questioning. Literature in this area refers to this as "wait time". Bennet and Rolheiser define wait time as "the time the student has to think after a question has been asked and the time to think after a student has been asked to respond." It might also be extended to include the time given to a student to reflect further upon or develop more fully a given response.

Research in this area points to two specific effects of wait time a san instructional skill in the teacher's practice. Firstly, wait time increases the chances that the quality and length of a student's response will improve. Secondly, wait time enables the fostering of a safe learning environment. (Bennet and Rolheiser cite the work of Tobin, 1982 and Rowe, 1974 in this regard.)

Research also suggests that when students have time to think and share with a partner before sharing publicly, they are more likely to feel secure and experience success. Yet, Bennet and Rolheiser report that from their research, most teachers' wait time is measured in hundredths of seconds even though increasing thinking time to three or more seconds meaningfully improves student responses.

Teachers need to exercise discretion in relation to the amount of wait time allocated. Such factors as the current performance level of the student, the complexity of the question asked and the student's past experience with the material being explored are all relevant here. Also, research indicates that wait time has little effect on questions that simply invite students to recall facts, yet such basic recall questions amount to approximately 60 to 70 per cent of questions asked in the classroom. Group/ pair work It is noted that the idea of assigning students to work in pairs or smaller groups is a valued one in the rationale for framing questions discussed here. The History In-Service Team consistently advocated such practice in the classroom in modelling methodologies for teaching the Leaving Certificate syllabus. The History inspectorate also lauded examples of such practice that they observed, as can be seen in the report Looking at History. Aside from any other arguments in favour of group/ pair work form a pedagogical viewpoint, it is important to mention here the ethical argument, in terms of framing questions, of engaging in such a strategy. As Bennet and Rolheiser caution, when we randomly select students to respond to questions, we are asking them to possibly fail in front of their peers.

While we as teachers might not consider inability to respond to classroom questions to be "failure", the fact is that students usually do consider it so, unless a safe environment has been created for them to respond. We are all aware of teachers who may be perfectly relaxed and competent within their own classrooms but may be extremely reluctant to talk in front of their peers at meetings or in-service sessions.

That is why it is incumbent on us as educators to develop the skills to understand and respond to students' efforts. As has been suggested previously, affording students the opportunity to rehearse answers with a partner or within a small group will increase the chance that students will experience success. Structuring lessons in a small group format increases the chances that students afraid of failure will involve themselves more actively in the lesson.

Many teachers are reluctant to deviate from a whole class approach to other forms of class engagement, such as pair or group work, often citing the disruption caused or the impact on

discipline as negative features of such practice. Yet, the evidence is that adapting such practice in our own lessons, even on a gradual level, does have a positive impact on student learning. Conclusion. In the course of welcoming teachers to the seminar with Dr. Bennett, Ms. Joan Russell, Education Officer with Co. Cork VEC and conference organiser, expressed her confident belief that the conference would be the catalyst for profound change in the nature of instructional leadership in the classrooms of those participating, with positive attendant consequences for teaching and learning. Certainly, the feedback from those who attended was positive.

I think that we as professionals need to be aware of compelling educational research evidence that has implications for the manner in which we teach. I was struck by a comment by Dr. Bennett in which he described as a "tragic flaw" the notion that our deep knowledge and passion for our subject is all that we need to foster effective learning. He characterised such a view as naïve and urged teachers to rethink their instructional repertoire in terms of how they engage students, arguing that there is an ethical imperative on teachers to do so.

He added that he would prefer to see teachers "consciously competent rather than accidentally adequate". This serves as a reminder to us as professionals of the need to examine our pedagogical practice so as to ensure that our students' needs are met – a challenge to which history teachers have always responded positively in the past.