

# The ToolBox

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## Blank Stares and Sealed Lips

**Y**ou are standing in front of your 2:15 class. The students sitting before you seem to be listening ... but you just can't be sure. And then it happens. You ask a question with the hope of eliciting some intense discussion on the topic of today's class. The response: Blank stares and sealed lips. For a moment, you wonder if your students heard the question, whether you had inadvertently spoken in a foreign language, or if the question you posed even merits a response. Have you ever been there? We all have!

This month's edition of *The ToolBox* focuses on those awkward moments in teaching where we sense that a connection with our students is not occurring. Is it me? Is it the topic? Is it the time of day? We may never know. What we can know, however, are some alternative strategies to reinvent the situation and invite our students to be active participants in the learning experience.

When considering this dilemma, the first place to begin our discussion is to examine the very nature of the questions we ask in the classroom. One effective way of looking at our own questioning technique is to assess questions based upon the six levels of Bloom's Taxonomy. Consider, for example, the following examples that illustrate the varied levels of questions that can be posed in the classroom:

### Remembering

Sample questions beginning with words such as "What is...?", "Who is ...?", "Where did ...?" and "When did ...?".

### Understanding

Sample questions beginning with words such as "What is the main idea of...?", "How would you compare ...?", "What can you say about ...?" and "State in your own words ...?".

### Applying

Sample questions beginning with words such as "How would you organize \_\_\_\_\_ to show ...?", "What examples can you find to show that...?", and "What other ways would you plan to ...?".

### Analyzing

Sample questions beginning with words such as "How is \_\_\_\_\_ related to \_\_\_\_\_...?", "How would you classify ...?" and "What is the relationship between ...?"

### Evaluating

Sample questions beginning with words such as "What is your opinion of ...?", "How would you prioritize that...?", and "How would you justify ...?".

As an additional ingredient to good questioning is the ability to provide a follow up that encourages students to dig deeper and further clarify their thinking on the topic of discussion. In the text *Philosophy in the Classroom* (Lipman, Sharp, & Oscayan, 1980), a series of follow up are offered for that purpose:

- What reasons do you have for saying that?
- Why do you agree (or disagree) on that point?
- How are you defining the term that you just used?
- What do you mean by that expression?
- Is what you are saying consistent with what you said before?
- Can you clarify that remark?
- When you said that, just what is implied by your remarks?
- What follows from what you just said?
- Is it possible you and he are contradicting each other?
- Are you sure you're not contradicting yourself?
- What alternatives are there to such a formulation?

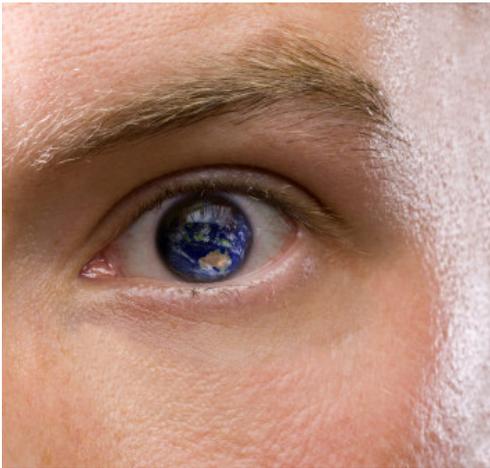
### Creating

Sample questions beginning with words such as "Can you formulate a theory for...?", "Can you invent ...?", " and "Can you think of an original way to ...?".

# Blank Stares and Sealed Lips: Strategies to Prompt a Response

## Wait Time

If a question is important enough to ask, then it merits the time necessary to wait for a response. Granted, the silence of waiting is sometimes uncomfortable. But think of it this way: The waiting is probably more uncomfortable for students than for the teacher. In time, students will learn that if you are going to ask a question, then you are also going to wait until someone provides a response.



## 60/60/30/30

If students have a difficult time responding to the questions of the teacher, then "60/60/30/30" is a great way to provide a means for review, discussion, and recall of important concepts. This strategy starts with putting each student with a dialogue team-mate:

- When the clock starts, Team Member #1 starts talking about the topic at hand. He or she continues this monologue for 60 seconds.
- At the end of the first minute of talking, Team Member #2 begins to talk, not repeating any of the information shared by his or her partner. Team Member #2 continues for one minute.
- Then it is Team Member #1's turn again; this time for 30 seconds of uninterrupted talking.
- And finally, Team Member #2 gets a final chance to talk for the allocated 30 seconds. This activity is surprisingly energizing, and the students are usually amazed at how much they have learned and can remember. (From Garmston & Wellman, *The Adaptive School*, 1999)

## Give Me Five

There are times that we ask questions and get a quick and superficial response. One way to encourage students to dig deeper into the question is to challenge them to provide a specific number of additional responses to the question. At these times you would say, "That is a great answer! Let's think of five other reasons why ..." As the students give their responses, verbally count down to zero.

## Designated Hitter

In this activity, students are placed into groups and given a list of discussion questions. As they discuss each question or topic, they are also asked to identify the individual in their group who will synthesize and share their team's responses with the larger group.

## Reflect and Respond

On occasion, there is a tendency to interpret silence as an indication that the students simply aren't thinking and don't want to answer. Quite often, however, they need a few minutes to reflect on the question so they can formulate an answer they are willing to share with the rest of the group. For this reason, it is often wise to provide designated reflection time before asking anyone to go public with their response. So, for example, the teacher might say, "Take 60 seconds and think about this question ... Write down a few thoughts that come to mind." Then, at the end of 60 seconds, the question can be posed for a large group response. Most often, the reflection time leads to several responses from the group.



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