ABSTRACT

Teaching is a complex activity that involves careful preparation, delivery, and reflection. As an educator, it is essential to create a sense of community in which students feel significant and are truly engaged as learners. A central focus of the educator is to maximize the capacity of each learner. How does this happen in an online learning environment? This article addresses the needs of learners for a learning community that promotes effective discussion; specifically, the practice of questioning that lies at the heart of classroom practice. Just as in a face-to-face classroom, questioning occurs in a variety of ways for online learners. The article shares ideas for using the I.Q.—I Question strategy in an online environment.

Keywords: distance education; distance learning; online classroom; online teaching; pedagogy; teaching strategies; Web-based instruction

INTRODUCTION

In the book, Technology Literacy Applications in Learning Environments, edited by David Carbonara, Tomei states “Technology plays a significant role in changing the instructional environment by promoting the role of the teacher as a guide in educational discovery, serving as a resource to the student-as-information gatherer.” In an online environment, just as in a traditional classroom, you have a spectrum of learners. As an instructor, how does one begin to address the needs of the spectrum of learners in your classroom and create a learning community that promotes effective discussion? Different instructional practices help students learn in meaningful ways. One particular teaching strategy that is utilized in both traditional and online courses is discussion. Questioning is a significant instructional design element for the promotion of effective discussion (Muilenburg & Berge, 2000). Questioning provides students with an opportunity to challenge their thinking. As teachers, we are constantly asking questions. Asking questions that require higher level thinking is not an easily acquired skill. Good questioning takes thinking time, planning ahead, and experience. An excellent first step in differentiating online is to increase the challenge and variety of your class discussions, activities, and assignments through questioning. By pay-
ing attention to the kinds of questions you ask, you can stimulate learning with a wide range of learners in your online classroom based on their readiness, interests, and learning style. In order to use the discussion method effectively, it is critical to understand how to design and maintain an online discussion so that all learner needs are met. In order to do so, questioning is an integral focus.

Why Question?
Questions are an important part of communication. It is safe to say that questioning is at the heart of classroom practice. Research in classroom behavior indicates that cueing and questioning might account for as much as eighty percent of what occurs in a given classroom on a given day (Marzano, 2001). In Marzano’s book, “Classroom Instruction that Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement,” he indicated three generalizations as it related to questioning (p.113-114):

1. Cues and questions should focus on what is important as opposed to what is unusual.
2. “Higher level” questions produce deeper learning than “lower level” questions.
3. “Waiting” briefly before accepting responses from students has the effect of increasing the depth of students’ answers.
4. Questions are effective learning tools even when asked before a learning experience.

I would propose that these generalizations also hold true for an online learning environment. All students need to be accountable for thinking at higher levels. Some students will be challenged by a more basic question, while others will need more. As in an oral setting, all students can hear and learn through a wide range of responses and questions; so it is also true in an online setting where students may engage in oral and written responses and discussion.

Who Needs to Ask Questions?
When considering who needs to ask questions in an online classroom, I would include both teachers and students in the I.Q. or I Question process. Whether in a traditional face-to-face classroom or in an online environment, teachers must ask questions. Just as important in engaging students to answer questions at various levels of difficulty, students must also engage in opportunities that elicit them to generate and ask questions.

How Do You Question in an Online Environment?
Just as in a face-to-face classroom, questioning can occur in a variety of ways online to engage all kinds of learners. First, teachers ask questions to promote discussions. Second, teachers pose questions on learning activities and assignments as they work individually or in small or large groups. Finally, teachers find ways to engage students in question-asking.

The remainder of this article will share ideas for using the I.Q.—I Question strategy in an online environment.

I.Q.—I Question with Bloom’s At-A-Glance
The Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, by Dr. Benjamin Bloom, brought a structure to higher mental thought processes. It is still utilized today as a way to develop questions that will probe the widest possible range of intellectual activity. In Gridley’s book, “Asking Better Classroom Questions,” he states that “by building classroom questions upon Bloom’s taxonomy, teachers can systematically cover as wide a range of intellectual processes as they wish, from rote memory through sophisticated and creative manipulations of knowledge.” The I.Q.—I Question with Bloom’s At-A-Glance is a strategy that may be utilized for readings, articles, and other activities. It is important that we model the kinds of questions that stimulate higher level thinking. To accomplish this, a list of prompts, adapted from Gregory and Chapman’s book, Differentiated Instructional Strategies: One Size Doesn’t Fit All, are used to springboard discussions in an online class.

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