

Curiosity about the world around us often provides us with a strong motivation to learn about the world. Encouraging students to ask questions and to help them find answers to their questions can sustain their inherent curiosity and motivate their learning in school. In this article, I share some of my experiences of trying to encourage students to ask questions and my learnings from these practices.

I faced this challenge early in my teaching life. When I started as a starry-eyed, enthusiastic, but naive science teacher in a small alternate school. I was bombarded with questions by an equally enthusiastic group of students. For a new teacher, it was an amazing experience to see that students' daily experiences were triggering these questions. On a rainy day, a class III student came running to me, grappling to keep a slippery frog within their gentle grasp, and asked, 'Why does the frog pee not feel warm to touch as my pee?' Before I could wonder about the possible origin of this question, he obliged and told me the details of how he knew his pee was warm! It was clear to me then that this question, and questions like these, especially of children from early stages, are linked to their observations and experiences. What was not clear to me was how I should respond to students in such a situation.

### Counter-questioning as a strategy

In the beginning, I thought that if I gave away the answers to the students, they would be deprived of the learning opportunity. Moreover, I thought, they would develop dependency on me to give all the answers. This was contrary to what I had in mind for them at that time – to help them become independent inquirers. I decided to deal with each question that came to me with a counter-questioning strategy. So, in response to their questions, I would ask them questions, such that the answers to my questions would provide them with hints to the answer to their question. I would frame the counter questions such that they were age- and level-appropriate. This also meant I had to understand their question, formulate the answer,

and then frame the counter-question. It took some time to get used to this strategy.

But instead of becoming curious inquirers, I noticed that the number of questions that the students were asking me began to drop. This, along with their complaint that I never answered their question, clearly pointed to the fact that my strategy of counter-questioning had failed.

The strategy was not a complete failure as such, because it worked well for students of classes V and VI. At this stage, students were transitioning from their home language Marathi to English. They were encountering a lot of new English words whose meaning they did not know. During class, they often asked me the meanings of unfamiliar words, and I modified the counter-questioning strategy into a riddle-making strategy. So, instead of directly giving the meaning of a new word, I would frame sentences using the new word such that the rest of the words in the sentence were familiar to students, and it was easy for them, then, to figure out the meaning of the new word. The students enjoyed solving these riddles and learning in a fun way.

### Question box

While reflecting on the previous experience, I realised that I was treating all questions equally. For a small alternate school, this was not such an issue, and we could spend a lot of time perusing the elusive answer. But such an approach, I realised, would require a lot of time and effort if the number of students increased. Not just the number of students, but also other curricular demands of the school, would prove difficult to navigate.

So, when I shifted from the small, alternate school to a larger and more formal school setting, I decided to follow a different strategy. By this time, I had gained some more experience in teaching, and had started reading and discussing classroom experiences with fellow teachers. The idea of a 'question box' was suggested by a colleague.

As we saw in the case of the frog pee question, the wellspring of students' questions could be

varied and could potentially disrupt classroom proceedings. At the same time, I did not want to discourage students from asking questions. The idea of a question box was one of the solutions. At the beginning of the academic year, I asked some students in each section to bring an old shoebox, we decorated it and placed it in the class. I also kept pieces of one-side-used paper slips attached to the box for students to write their questions. Every time anyone had a question, and if that was not directly relevant to the class proceedings, they would write their question and their name on the slip of paper and drop it into the question box. They were also encouraged to drop their questions throughout the day if they wanted. Once in a while, when I finished my planned lesson and had some time to spare, I would open the box to take up a few questions. As a class, we would discuss possible answers and plan further explorations to get answers. At times, we had to seek clarification from the student asking a particular question before proceeding to find answers.

The use of a question box had clear advantages in generating questions, sustaining student interest in questions, and more importantly, in the process of finding answers. Additionally, opening the question box became a much-awaited activity, incentivising the class to finish assigned work on time to be able to have time for the question box. Adding their names along with the questions inculcated a sense of ownership and responsibility among them, allowing sustained interest in the quest.

### My learnings

Through these experiences, I want to highlight a few of my key learnings as a teacher:

- The more varied experiences I could provide to students through my pedagogical choices led to more opportunities for them to observe and ask varied questions.
- My choice of approaches to handling student questions depended on the age, existing knowledge of the students, curricular constraints/ and needs, and the nature of the knowledge students sought.
- I preferred balancing between creating ownership towards their questions and providing a safe space to seek genuine information, depending on the context.

Apart from these, there are a few additional points, that, I think, have helped me in my quest to find ways to nurture the curiosity of my students. The most prominent among them is to openly acknowledge limitations to my knowledge. I prefer saying, 'I don't know, but let us/me find out...' allowing me to not only get myself some space to find reliable answers or frame an appropriate response for the situation but also demonstrate to the students that they too can find answers if they do not know something. Secondly, I think providing students with a safe space to ask questions plays an equally important role in encouraging them to ask more questions. This safe space also includes how we look at their mistakes and ours. In the end, we should keep in mind that having a class full of questions is a joint adventure for all involved!



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