

Exploring the potential of classroom questioning in the National Accelerated Literacy Program

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Abstract

A student's legitimacy as a successful participant in a classroom is often measured by the ability to successfully answer questions. However, teacher questions are seldom simply requests for information and the educational purpose underlying teacher questions often remains implicit. Consequently some students are marginalised in classes by their inability to participate successfully in questioning interactions with teachers and other students.

In Accelerated Literacy classrooms teachers actively seek to engage students in lessons by making explicit the educational purpose of questions and their answers. As a result, many marginalised students find that they can engage successfully in literacy lessons even where they have experienced many years of failure previously. This paper uses examples from lesson transcripts to investigate the role of questioning in an Accelerated Literacy lesson. The examples will demonstrate how questioning techniques can be used to include rather than exclude marginalised students in literacy lessons while at the same time making literacy lessons rewarding and stimulating for all students.

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In no enterprise other than education is it held that questions stimulate and enhance thought. Interviewers, therapists, barristers and others whose job it is to ask questions are typically advised that asking string of direct questions is the surest means of shutting the interviewee up! Silences, declarative statements and other less direct prompts are apparently more effective in getting people to talk. (Edwards and Mercer, 1987, p. 46)

Teachers, it appears, engage in a unique approach to asking questions when they teach, for there is no doubt that teacher-generated questions are an integral part of most lessons. As Edwards and Mercer (1987) point out, as much as two-thirds of teachers' talk typically consists of asking questions and since two-thirds of any lesson may consist of teacher talk then questions and their answers are a significant element of any lesson.

The role of questioning

The part played by questioning in teaching, however, is quite different from the role it plays in everyday life where it is predominantly used to elicit information. As Edwards and Mercer explain (1987), teachers ask questions for the purpose of "controlling topics of discussion, directing pupils' thought and action, and establishing the extent of shared attention, joint activity and common knowledge" (p. 46). They seldom ask questions simply to seek information. In fact, they usually know the answer they want before even formulating the question and this feature of teacher questioning can be quite puzzling to students whose cultural background has not prepared them for school. The orchestration of a lesson and a teacher's ability to respond to students and involve them productively in learning at a high level can be a product of skilful questioning and one characteristic of excellent teaching (Louden et al, 2005).

Alternatively, questioning may simply test recall of information from previous lessons, as in, "What was the name of this book?" At an even more basic level questions may be asked rhetorically for the purpose of classroom control as in, "What did I just say, Kenny?" or "Who's ready to start work?" Asking questions then, is part of every teacher's repertoire of skills; a tool for assessment and maintaining control on one

hand but with the potential to be so much more powerful as a means of engaging students at a challenging cognitive level. As Tharpe and Gallimore (1987) suggest, questioning provides a unique and valuable means of assisting student performance. It “calls for an active linguistic and cognitive response; it provokes creations by the pupil” (p. 59) and it allows teachers “images of the pupils’ minds, projected on the screen of their language” (p. 59). At the same time, in a classroom context, these images of the mind can become part of the common knowledge of every member of the group and available to enrich every member of the class.

This paper will take the topic of questioning to assist student performance as a highly successful element of teaching in the National Accelerated Literacy Program (NALP) and use examples from a lesson transcript to demonstrate how even previously low achieving students can enter a highly literate discussion and contribute to the common knowledge shared by the class at a high cognitive level. Although one lesson has been selected as an example because of the limitations of time, many other such examples have been recorded.

Overview of the NALP

The NALP is a literacy program that is being progressively introduced into 100 Northern Territory (NT) schools by the end of 2008. One reason for the choice of this program in the NT and other jurisdictions in Australia is its documented success with students who have previously found it difficult to learn to read (Gray, Cowey & Axford, 2003). These students, marginalised in their classes by their literacy failure, can be taught quite rapidly to operate on age appropriate texts in class situations, hence “accelerated” literacy. A key technique employed by teachers in the program is a style of questioning that encourages and facilitates inclusion of students in classroom discussions and makes the teaching purpose of questions clear for all participants.

Understanding the “ground rules” that operate in a school context

The problem for many failing and marginalised students is related to their lack of understanding of the “educational ground rules” of classroom discourse (Edwards and Mercer, 1987). These rules are largely implicit, sometimes being quite invisible to even the teacher and operate on rules of interpretation not equally available for all. In particular, one

mystifying aspect of teacher questioning for marginalised students is that they seldom realise that there is an educational purpose underpinning teachers' questions and thus miss any opportunity to learn from them. Edwards and Mercer (1987) emphasise that:

Part of the problem for pupils is that much of the process remains mysterious to them. In however friendly and informal a manner, they are frequently asked to do things, learn things, and understand things, for no apparent reason other than that it is what the teacher wants them to do. The goals and purposes of the lesson are not revealed. (p. 158)

An example of the confusion that can result from questioning for both students and teacher is related in Cowey (2005). Here the teacher asks a group of secondary students with very low literacy about the significance of the moon in an illustration that accompanied a study text. The teacher expected the students to look at the illustration, notice that there was a moon in the sky (no stars, just a moon in a dark sky seen through a window), and infer that the moon in a dark sky meant that it was night-time. The hippopotamus mentioned in the transcript that follows was the main character, sitting at a table in a restaurant, waiting in vain to be served. The moon, seen through the window, indicated how long the hippopotamus had been sitting at the table. The students though, simply answered the question literally as though the teacher was simply asking for information about night-time.

Teacher: How do we know it's night-time, Trixie?

Student: Stars

Teacher: How do we know it's night-time...?

Students: Stars (various others unintelligible)

Teacher: How do we know it's night-time in this picture...? Girls, how do we know that it's night-time...? (pointing at moon)

Student: There's a moon.

Teacher: OK. Where is the hippopotamus sitting?

Student: At the table. (p.9)

The problem for the students in this interaction was that their answers were correct at a common-sense level but not at an educational level. When the students were unable to answer the question to the satisfaction of the teacher, she either had to say no, the answer was wrong (even though stars do show it's night-time) or do what she chose to do and resort to repeating the question and pointing at the moon until finally a student answered correctly. Following the interaction there was no indication about why a

seemingly correct answer was wrong and another answer was right. Instead, another question was asked without any comment other than the feedback “OK” to signify that the student had finally guessed what was in the teacher’s head.

The nature of this interaction, as described above, is typical of the initiation (I), response (R), feedback (F), pattern identified by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) in their work on classroom discourse. In the example above, the teacher initiated the exchange, the students responded until the correct response was elicited and the feedback ended the exchange. The feedback was of such a nature that no reason was given for the “OK”. Such questioning is baffling to students who do not know the educational ground-rules for this type of discussion but participation in these discussions is more important to the students involved than it might seem on the surface. Why not accept that some groups of students do not answer questions as part of their culture? While this view might seem reasonable it is inequitable because the ability to participate in conversations where questions are asked to assess as well as to teach are a key to a student’s access to literate discourse and academic or school success. To be excluded from participation in such discussions severely disadvantages students.

Teachers involved in implementing the Accelerated Literacy teaching strategies used in the NALP use specific questioning techniques to make explicit the ground-rules of literacy lessons and thus make possible participation in the lesson by all students.

Fundamental to the approach is a whole class study of a narrative text at age appropriate level for a class. While this task may seem daunting in a class where some students may be four to six years behind the average reading level for their class it can be achieved through careful teaching based on “scaffolding”. Briefly, scaffolding as used in the NALP refers to “specific help that enables the learner to achieve a task which would not be possible without support” (Sharpe, 2001, p. 31). The following excerpts from a transcript of one of the lessons aims to demonstrate the scaffolding potential of teacher questioning with students working on a text well above their individual reading level. The excerpts illustrate the way in which it is possible to include and involve these students in a literate or critical reading of a text through

asking questions that not only elicit thoughtful answers but make available the educational purpose behind the questions. The students' answers, in fact, offer windows to their thoughts and understanding of the story.

Examples of the role of questioning in scaffolding classroom interaction

The study text that is central to the discussion is "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" by C. S. Lewis. The students are in a Year 5/6 boys class at a remote Northern Territory school. The students in this boys' class were there because they were perceived to be disturbing the more competent girls at the same year level and so they were separated for literacy lessons to avoid disturbing the girls' learning. At the time this lesson was recorded the class had worked on passages from the text for several weeks and were just starting work on the passage near the end of the book: the passage that describes Aslan's death at the hand of the evil Witch. In this transcript from the lesson the teacher draws on common knowledge or intersubjectivity between all participants about the characters and their motivations. The character under discussion is Edmund, a central character who had betrayed his sisters and other brother to the Witch but had then repented, been forgiven and accepted back into his family.

Teacher: I wonder whether we would just come back to what we were doing yesterday. Do you remember something about Edmund? What was Edmund's part in this story, before the part we were studying yesterday? Edmund has an unusual part to play because we know who the heroes are, but what about Edmund, who can tell me something about his character? Yeah? (Teacher indicates to a student to answer).

Student 1: He betrays.

Teacher: OK. Betraying his brothers and sisters is the worst thing a person can do, isn't it? The absolute worst thing you could do to your family is give them over to someone who might kill them.

Student 2: Confused because he thinks the Witch is good.

Teacher: Well done. Absolutely right. So we also see him as confused. Yeah? (Teacher indicates to a student to answer)

Student 3: When she gives him the Turkish Delight it has some kind of power to be on the Witch's side.

Teacher: Well done. Oh, this is so good, you are doing so well. So, what actually happens is that it's not all Edmund's fault. He's a bit silly and he takes the Turkish Delight from the Queen without realising that it will make him in her power. And so we forgive Edmund a little bit because it's not entirely his fault, is it?

On analysis, this interaction has a different structure from the IRF interaction identified earlier. The initiation phase has been replaced by what Gray (2000) described as preformulation where the teacher identifies the common knowledge that is significant and from where the answer to the question may be found. This technique has been identified by others as “cued elicitation” (Mercer, 2001), or simply as cueing students in to the field of possible answers (Sharpe, 2001). In the NALP program preformulation has an additional dimension in that it makes explicit the teacher's thinking and purpose in asking the question. Here, the teacher wanted the students to focus on Edmund's character. To further refine the possibilities, she reminded the class of previous conversations about the characters and reminded them about “heroes” as a possibility not available for Edmund.

Other strategies the teacher used to invite and encourage participation through the preformulation of the question, are illustrated by “I wonder whether we” which is speculating rather than demanding. It allows flexibility in that if no student can answer, the teacher can go on wondering aloud, so sharing her literate thinking with the students without recrimination or resorting to having students guess the answer the teacher wants. Mercer (2001) explains that “we statements” are used as a strategy by teachers when they “are trying to represent past experience as relevant to present activity” (p. 248). This lesson is thus identified as part of a continued activity that builds on foundations previously established.

The first response provided by student 1, “he betrays” was accepted with “OK” but instead of leaving the topic of Edmund's character and asking another question the teacher replied with what Gray (2000) describes as “reconceptualisation”. She took the student's answer and explained the significance of it to the whole class, thus making clear exactly what was “OK” about the answer and added additional information that expanded upon the significance of the betrayal.

Mercer's (2001) work allows more significance to be added to the work the teacher was doing in the above response. He calls this process "reformulation", a technique that allows a teacher to "offer the class a revised, tidied-up version of what was said which fits in better with the point that the teacher wishes to make or the form of response being sought" (p. 247). By taking "he betrays" and reformulating it as "betraying his brothers and sisters is about the worst thing a person can do, isn't it?" the teacher "tidied-up" the response, emphasised its meaning and significance and made it available to all participants.

Sharpe (2001) also calls this type of response reformulating and adds that it develops "a line of reasoning which leads to a 'section summary' or 'metastatement'. This metastatement creates a kind of conceptual hook for the students which may then be used to build new understanding" (p. 41).

The teacher also offered students an additional interpretation of betrayal in, "The absolute worst thing you could do to your family is give them over to someone who might kill them". As well as reconceptualisation this additional restatement of the direness of Edmund's behaviour has been called "elaboration" (Sharpe, 2001) and has the effect of "upping the ante" or "guiding the students in the co-construction of knowledge" (p. 41).

The next significant point to make about the interaction described above is that because the teacher started by "wondering", she left space for participation by other students who were keen to add to the common knowledge shared by the class about Edmund's character. The next student answered, "Confused because he thinks the Witch is good". This response demanded the student make a higher-level interpretation of the story from an earlier part of the book. He was not simply recalling something he had read. To this the teacher responded, "Well done. Absolutely right. So we also see him as confused." This response affirmed the student's answer and repeated it. Mercer (2001) explains the significance of repeating a whole class "an answer or other remark which is judged by the teacher to have educational significance" (p. 247).

Student 2's response hinted at a certain sympathy for Edmund who was deceived by the Witch, a woman of considerable power and guile. This sympathy was then expanded upon by student 3 who added, "When she gives him the Turkish Delight it has some kind of power to be on the Witch's side." To make this response, student 3 had to recall an incident that occurred much earlier in the story and bring it forward to add to this excusing of Edmund and apply it to the question about Edmund's character. He was enchanted by the Turkish Delight and therefore not fully responsible for his actions. The teacher then responded with effusive praise "Well done. Oh, this is so good, you are doing so well" and pulls the two answers together by reformulating with "So, what actually happens is that it's not all Edmund's fault." She also elaborates on the significance of his behaviour, "He's a bit silly and he takes the Turkish Delight from the Queen without realising that it will make him in her power." Finally, she "amplified" (Mercer, 2001) the significance of the response with slightly different wording, "And so we forgive Edmund a little bit because it's not entirely his fault," finishing with, "is it?" Even this invitation to agree offered participation to all the students and made them part of the discussion.

The questioning techniques used by this teacher encouraged and facilitated participation in classroom discussion even by students perceived as having low literacy levels. The discussion that emerged from the question about Edmund's character encompassed incidents and knowledge from many previous lessons. The ability to participate at this level was facilitated by preformulating the question and establishing common mindsets with all students in the class. The reason for the question and the information that would provide the answer was made explicit and available to all. The answers were therefore all relevant to the question. There was no need to reject any of them. As the teacher responded to the students' answers she drew upon a variety of techniques. While they are all summarised in the term used in the NALP as reconceptualisation, other sources add to an understanding of the processes that take place in reconceptualisation. Through reformulations, elaborations, repetitions, amplifications, "we" statements, and positive confirmations, students were able to engage in a literate and perceptive conversation that belied their low literacy levels without the support that these questioning techniques offered. They had support or scaffolding to speak as competent literate students.

While it might appear that the responses detailed in the transcript came from a limited number of students, the nature of the interaction included the whole class. Because students could

understand the educational point of the questions and the significance of the answers, they all learned and at different times in the longer lessons the majority of students joined the conversation at some point.

While the time available in a short presentation makes it difficult to offer more examples of these questioning techniques, one last example serves to show a student making a leap in understanding about the work of expansions in a text: one that had not been introduced or alluded to by the teacher but came from one student's insight.

Later in this lesson based on *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the teacher displayed part of the wording of the text on an overhead projector. Some of the wording had been covered to reveal only the actions taken by the Witch as she prepared to kill Aslan. Without the expansions in the text, the words made sense and described what had happened but there was no description of participants' appearance, thoughts, feelings and reactions. The teacher explained, "So, what I would like you to think now, is that if this tells the story, is if this tells what actions happened, why are any of the words necessary? Why would CS Lewis not just write this – then this happened, then this happened, then this happened? Why has he put all these other words?" The question was preformulated to make the reason for it clear. The section of the wording that was under discussion had been introduced the day before. Now the teacher was taking the students further. She was upping the ante and asking them to explain the function of the hidden words. Initially the students' responses were stereotyped as they tried to explain.

Student 3: Makes it boring.

Teacher: OK. In what way does it make it boring? How is it boring? It's pretty exciting action.

Student 4: Makes it interesting.

Teacher: Good work. How does it make it more interesting? Could you explain it a bit more?

Student 4: Like the action.

Teacher: Yeah.

Student 5: It describes it more.

These students were correct in their answers but lacked the experience to describe what it was about descriptive words that excites interest in a text. The teacher drew out of them as far as possible the meaning of what they wanted to say with, “could you explain it a bit more?” The teacher then reformulated their answers and elaborated on them by providing extra information about what was missing with parts of the text covered.

Teacher: Yes. The other words describe it, don't they? This (indicating to the overhead) just tells what has happened, but it doesn't tell how anybody is feeling or what they are going through, or how it's affecting the people around about. So when an author writes, and if I am thinking about you being authors, when you write, you sometimes, you just write down what happened. But you make your writing much more powerful if you explain the emotions of the people all around you.

So look (points to the transparency), “once Aslan had been tied”, what does CS Lewis tell us next?

Student 1: When you mean describing, it's like, to make it more powerful. It's like bodybuilding.

Teacher: Well done. Bodybuilding. How is it like bodybuilding?

Student 2: Makes it stronger.

In this short interchange, student 1 introduces a novel way of describing the work of the words that had been hidden. He compared it with bodybuilding with the implication that the hidden words made the writing stronger.

Teacher:... That's just wonderful. What we had before was a little skinny body. And what the words do is bodybuilding, it makes the writing stronger. So good. I'll use that next time I'm teaching a class if you don't mind. So now let's see how this bit, “once Aslan had been tied”, is stronger.

For a teacher involved in teaching in the NALP, such moments of insight are exciting. The students participating in the lesson above were also excited and their conversation through the rest of the lesson was animated. The insight this student made into the descriptive power of words was shared by all participants in the lesson with the teacher as well as the students having the opportunity to learn something new.

Conclusion

The questioning sequence comprised of preformulation, question, response, reconceptualisation has been an integral part of the scaffolding strategies employed in

teaching in the NALP since it started. It is a key strategy for involving students previously marginalised from classroom discussions by their failure to perceive the educational purpose of questioning interactions. Examples of how to frame preformulation and reconceptualisation make up part of all teaching notes provided for teachers of the NALP.

Although learning to frame questions in this manner is sometimes challenging for teachers learning to teach the program, the interactions that come as a result of making the ground-rules of classroom discourse explicit are rewarding. For example, at the end of 2006, students in the remote school where this teaching occurred, had each made an average 2.09 years progress in oral reading competence in one school year (2006). This rate of progress illustrates the potential for classroom teaching to make dramatic improvements in the literacy development of students previously perceived as difficult to teach.

While the excerpts of lesson transcripts used as examples in this paper provide just a brief glimpse of some moments that occurred in a sequence of lessons, they serve as typical examples of a dynamic process in action. Understanding of the roles not only of reconceptualisation but the potential of reformulation, repetition, elaboration, amplification, and “we” statements has added to the repertoire of resources available to teachers seeking to include all students in successful literacy learning through skilful questioning.

(This paper has not attempted to describe the strategies employed in teaching in the NALP. Detailed information about the teaching sequence strategies is available on www.nalp.edu.au)

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