

The A-Z of Great Classrooms

Roy Blatchford

May 2023

The following is an extract from *The A-Z of Great Classrooms*, just published by John Catt. The book is a celebration of that magical double act of teaching and learning, organised around the 26 letters of the English alphabet.

Q for Questions

Pushed to identify a singular feature of great classrooms, the posing of great questions might well come top of my list. It is not just the questions themselves, but the style in which they are posed and *how* students' responses are managed and built upon. What accomplished teachers do with the answers they receive is fascinating to observe.

Why do we use questions in our everyday lives: Why? What? Who? When?

In essence, it is to receive answers to give us information we do not already possess. With when, who and what, it can often be a closed question to which there is a definite answer, helping us to do something, go somewhere or identify someone. But listen for a moment to a young child asking the question why? Why does my sister pull those faces? Why do we have to leave? Why is it raining?

Those more open questions are not so much about securing a definitive answer (although young children want clear answers and will repeat the question until they think they have a clear answer!), but are the beginnings of natural human wondering. In classrooms, teachers present factual information and then ask questions to check that new knowledge has been understood and can be recalled. Surface understanding leading to deeper learning is what is going on here. At a more sophisticated level, teachers begin to ask more searching questions to promote higher order thinking.

In early years, skilled teachers are asking: why is the water flowing quickly, why do these words rhyme, why do these numbers go in a sequence? As children move up through primary school, the teacher starts to work at a different level of sophistication: why do we use this mathematical formula here, why did peoples

emigrate, why do we apply this fair test? And moving to older students, the questions become more demanding, with less obvious right and wrong answers: why (do we think) did this war leader act as he did, why did this character murder his wife, why did this painter use this technique, why not combine these two chemicals?

All such questions in classrooms are fundamentally aimed at helping children and students comprehend knowledge and skills that are new to them - or at least were recently new and the teacher is revisiting to ensure full understanding. We remember what we must think deeply about.

None of this questioning is possible without it being rooted in the teacher's own knowledge and skills base. Teachers are quick to recognise where they are working at the limits of their own knowledge, and in an information and digitally wealthy era can readily refer students to a reliable source for some answers.

In great classrooms teachers demonstrate that their expert knowledge and skills rise out of them as easily as sap from a tree.

The A-Z of Great Classrooms

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