

Asking the Right Question

PTAS Project (2017) - Findings and Recommendations

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Overview:

The aim of the project was to explore teacher/student dialogues in educational contexts - with a particular focus on what happens when conversations go wrong or are at cross-purposes.

14 interviews were conducted with teachers and students from 3 discipline areas (Education, Veterinary Science, Informatics). The participants included first year undergraduate students, masters students, PhD laboratory demonstrators/teaching assistants, and lecturing staff. We asked participants about their experiences of teacher/student dialogues and to give examples of a 'successful' and a 'less successful' dialogue.

Key Themes

Questions Welcome! Overall both teachers and students reported positive experiences of questions. Students felt teachers were happy to answer questions and the majority of teachers said that questions from students were welcome.

'But from my experience I find the lecturer in University of Edinburgh are happy to receive the questions from the students and happy to help.' (Masters student)

Why don't students ask questions? Many teachers noted that students seem reluctant to ask questions.

Teachers attributed this to students not wanting to 'lose face', cultural differences (see below) and fear of failure/showing weakness.

Students talked about 'being ashamed', fear of negative reactions, worry about wasting others' time (see Timing is Everything), and the size of the group.

'I think there's a hundred people in the lecture hall. It's just like you don't wanna like waste other people's time during the lecture cause it's already really squeezed.' (First year student)

Timing is Everything! Students discussed worries about taking up teachers' time with questions, and about when it was appropriate to ask questions.

'I probably would only approach them at the end of a lecture. I might not catch them around the Vet School. I feel like I might be interrupting something. They might be trying to go somewhere.' (First year student)

Teachers were aware that students may worry about taking up teachers' time and some also mentioned their own time pressures.

'For me I just wish that I had more time, you know, to make, to really draw out the stuff that could be drawn out of even sometimes quite straightforward posts about research.' (Tutor in online masters course)

Asymmetry in
teacher/student
relationship

Students noted that there was an asymmetry in the teacher/student relationship and in some cases attributed this to problems that arose. This was particularly the case for first year students grappling with the transitions from school to higher education, from childhood to adulthood.

'Regarding conversations with teachers the only thing I would change is the manner in which they sometimes address their students. It shouldn't be an assumption of superiority (understandably they are in a position of power, but it is important not to abuse it).' (First year student)

'I truly believe that I am an adult and I'm speaking to an adult. ' (First year student)

What can be asked?
What can be answered?

Both students and teachers noted a limit to what could be asked and what could be answered. Negotiating this was not always easy.

'Cause some of the instructions are like really unclear and like vague, but when we talk to them about it and they always say, "oh we don't wanna tell you what to do. Like you each step you have to figure it out yourself". It's hard to find the right balance between like how, like what do you ask'. (First year student)

Teachers also observed that some situations were beyond their level of expertise

'I kind of, usually I'd consider that's slightly above my pay grade to be like dispensing that kind of advice.' (Demonstrator)

Are they listening?

Students really appreciated the feeling that they were being listened to

'But, yes, things are getting better. In fact, in that conversation, my personal tutor played a listener more than an advisor, and that's what I need at that time.' (First year student)

But were frustrated when they felt that teachers weren't listening

'I think the lecturers should listen to us more rather than just talking on and on and on. Cause what usually happens, I ask the question and they just talk on and on and on and on.' (First year student)

Communication,
communication,
communication

A variety of different communication challenges were mentioned by students, and to a lesser degree by teachers.

Teachers talked about the challenges of understanding students with a strong accent and not wanted to cause them undue embarrassment by asking for something to be repeated.

Students mentioned worries about how to phrase a question, or who to direct their question to. Non-UK students also mentioned difficulties in expressing themselves in English and the impact of cultural differences.

'One of the most obvious culture differences appears on thinking method. Roughly speaking, western people are more explicit and eastern people are more implicit. When I want to ask questions to a western teacher, I need to find a suitable scale between these two.' (Masters student)

Case Study 1

Questions or Answers?

The issue of how to most effectively answer students' questions was something that was raised by both teachers and students.

Miriam, a non-UK masters student offered this advice to teachers:

'maybe when he or she want to explain something, ask the student, "do you know, x, y, z?"...Just maybe give an introduction about to what he is going to say or explain'

in response to an incident in which a lecturer used terminology that she didn't understand after she asked him a question in a workshop.

In fact a number of teachers talked about asking questions as part of their answering strategy:

'If they say to me, "oh well what is this or what is this structure?", then often I say, "well what is this structure and how do you think this works?" Turning the question round into different ones so that they can then answer it themselves.' (Lecturer)

And I think a lot of the responses that I make on discussion forums are in the form of questions. They're questions about the stuff that students have presented as like their kind of position around something. And sometimes it's useful to ask them as questions rather than say, you know, "I don't think you've really thought this through, you know".' (Lecturer – online masters course)

But as John, a demonstrator describes, the type of question, and the way that it is asked can have important consequences:

'And the difficulty came when I went to talk to the person and I said, "so do you know what a static method is?", to which he replied, "yes". And then I said, "well okay the reason this isn't working is cause it's a static method". And he then sort of stared blankly at me for a bit.'

John suspected that the student did not know what a static method was despite answering 'yes' when asked, but continued his answer anyway. John eventually realised that the student hadn't understood his answer, so he changed tack:

'But he still wasn't sure so eventually I asked him what a static method was and he couldn't really explain it to me at all.'

We don't know whether the student was embarrassed to admit that he didn't know, or whether the student really thought that they had understood the concept. Either way John changes his questioning strategy by asking an open question where multiple answers are possible, rather than the closed question, which he used initially. This gives him the opportunity to get a more detailed understanding of which areas the student is struggling with. As a result of this experience John changed how he responded to subsequent students:

'I made sure to ask everyone directly whenever I was solving that particular problem if they knew what the static method was. And then even if they sort of said they did then I'd say, "well this is a static method. How would you use it differently?" So phrase the question so that they clearly had to answer, so that they had to give me a clear answer to what a static method was in order for the conversation to go past that point.'

Case Study 2

Demonstrators: Relationships and Roles

The inclusion of demonstrators and teaching assistants in this research gave another (and often contrasting) perspective on the student/teacher relationship.

Students commented that it was easier to approach a teaching assistant or a demonstrator than a lecturer. Sophie, a first year student, suggested that this was due to the smaller gaps in age and educational achievements:

'They were either PhD students who you felt maybe a bit more comfortable talking to because they were also in education at the time..... Or they were just technicians who we just used to get to know very well, you know, in that kind of more informal sense. Whereas maybe it's more formal with a lecturer is all I can think.'

Teachers also felt that students would find it easier to approach demonstrators than lecturers. Sarah, a teaching assistant reasoned that this was because students don't want to 'lose face' and also suggested that students may feel that a higher level of dialogue would be expected when talking to a lecturer:

'It's easier to say to members of the technical staff, "I can't quite work my head round what's going on here", than to turn round to a lecturer who they think is going to be talking academically.'

Despite this demonstrators noted that some students were still reluctant to ask questions. To overcome this they (and some teachers) recommended various strategies, including being proactive in approaching students. Sarah for example described reading students' body language in laboratory sessions to determine which students were struggling with the task.

'So you look to see them reading and rereading the instructions. They're sitting with a pipette in their hand but they're gazing into space. And you can tell they don't know what to do but they're too scared to ask...So in that class I have to start the conversations'

Sarah also noted that students were either unable, or unwilling to ask the question at the heart of their problem:

'Cause as you start to answer that you discover that there's actually something else they don't really understand. And they've asked you the easier question to get you to (come over)'

One issue noted by demonstrators was that they sometimes felt that they were caught in the middle between students and academics, especially when things went wrong:

'It would be nice if the courses were run in a slightly more open way, you know, where there was a bit more communication going on between the lecturers and the students rather than me having to be sort of between them.' (Demonstrator)

or when the demonstrator was critical of the teaching that students were enthusiastic about

'But if they go to a specific type of class and they're like, 'oh it was great, it was brilliant fun, it was this, that and the other' and you don't think it's a very good class or structured well or teaching them what they need to know, it's kind of ...sometimes you've got to bite your tongue.' (Teaching Assistant)