



## The only stupid question is the one never asked.

*Hélène Bonsall, Biology teacher*

### *“Miss, aren’t kestrels what popcorn’s made of?”*

Even the wackiest questions provide us with essential information to tailor our teaching to students’ needs (this one highlights a vocabulary issue confusing kernels and kestrels - no point in continuing until that’s sorted!). The benefits of questions far outweigh the possible drawbacks of the inevitable one or two irrelevant contributions. Even the exasperating “Shall I underline the title, Miss?” provides some information; that this student needs help in developing their independence. Despite student questions being a highly effective assessment tool, an abundance of research points to a paucity of student questions in many classrooms.

Interviews with Sixth Formers, conducted as part of my school-funded masters research, revealed myriad reasons for this reticence, ranging from student self-esteem to student engagement. However, two prevailing inhibitors recurred in discussions: a student’s perception of their teacher and a student’s perception of their peers. Frequently, similar comments arose: “I think that’s a lot about the teacher. Like, how you know the teacher’s going to react to questions.”

Even the most approachable teachers might quash questions when racing through the syllabus to get it all covered in time for exams. This well-meaning approach could be perceived as a dislike of student questions. Problematically, even a teacher explicitly encouraging student questions might encounter difficulties. Students could be holding back their questions to preserve their self-worth, as suggested by this individual: “... if the one question you ask in, like, three weeks happens to be stupid, then that sort of gives a bad impression and that’s going to discourage you from asking more questions.” It seems some students think their questions are perceived as a sign of intellectual weakness and would prefer to clam up rather than show themselves up in front of their teacher.

Seemingly of equal importance, my interviewees recurrently spoke of peer influence: “People don’t want to ask a question because they’re embarrassed that the whole class will, like, laugh at them.” Just as we might not raise our hands to admit confusion in the start of term INSET presentation, these students appear to care deeply about how their peers might react to their questions. It can feel vulnerable to admit you don’t get it. Hence, we arrive at the the ‘dominant student’ effect. An individual at ease with their peers and with high self-worth might not hesitate to ask their question: “Another thing that would encourage me to ask a question is if I think the question actually sounds clever. (...) To show off, to put it simply.” Meanwhile, the less confident students, whose questions are arguably more important in helping them develop their understanding, become classroom wallflowers.

Maddeningly, it seems these perceptions of peers and teachers are unfounded. Video interviews, which were played in Lower Sixth and Year 9 assemblies to encourage student questions, indicated that teachers regard students who ask questions as confident, bright and engaged. Furthermore anonymous polls in assemblies found that the large majority of students find peers' questions beneficial to their learning.

So what can be done to commence combat with the entrenched myth that teachers and peers don't appreciate student questions? There seem to be some straightforward steps we can take during our lessons. Circulating around our classrooms and checking in with each student demonstrates an encouraging teacher demeanour and reduces the number of peers able to hear a question being voiced. As put by one student: "I think people are a lot more inclined to actually ask a question when it's one-on-one." Anecdotally, having trialled this in my own lessons, the simple act of passing by a student's desk appears to encourage them to assess their own understanding and search their mind for any questions they want to ask. It seems encouraging student questions goes hand in hand with encouraging student reflection, a form of higher-order thinking. Explicitly praising questions should also go a long way in confirming our appreciation of them. Without being disingenuous, this praise needs to be regular to negate the longstanding perception of questions as a sign of intellectual weakness. It seemed to work for this student: "... when [the teacher] praises you, it feels like there's, it counters the environment around you and your peers, so you don't feel as bad asking the question." Allowing pair or small group discussion, before opening the floor to questions, can bolster confidence in the validity of a student's question too as indicated by another participant: "... the more you get that [small group discussion], the more questions you'll ask because also you feel like you're helping other people and also feeling like people are similar to you, you're not like, the only person who doesn't understand." We feel safety in numbers.

Rest assured, more student questions does not have to mean more work for the teacher. We are not, after all, encyclopedias of our subject knowledge and there are several ways to help a student answer their question. A direct answer may be required but, often, guiding students in the use of a textbook, or looking back in class notes, is equally helpful as it promotes research skills students can use when stuck outside the classroom. In this way, we can help our students become more independent learners. Alternatively, directing a student's question to the rest of the class can foster a more collaborative learning environment, as students work together to develop their understanding, whilst providing



the teacher with even more feedback on student understanding. If few students were confident they could answer their peer's query, perhaps the concept should be reviewed with the whole group.

Ordinarily, a student question signifies an attentive, reflective student who provides their teacher with immediate feedback on their learning progress. Students withholding questions prevent their teachers from fully assessing their understanding and helping them develop further. Quod erat demonstrandum, the only stupid question is the one never asked. Let's make sure our students know it.

