

Effective Use of Open-Ended Questions in Elementary Classrooms

In this helpful article in *The Reading Teacher*, Barbara Wasik and Annemarie Hindman (Temple University) say teachers sometimes ask questions that students can answer with a single word – for example, “Did you like the book?” elicits a simple “Yes.” Better for teachers to ask open-ended questions that invite elaborated responses. But there are two reasons teachers might hesitate to do this: the pressure to move on with the curriculum, and the uncomfortable silences when some students struggle with more-complex questions. Wasik and Hindman urge teachers to get past these two concerns, arguing that the nature of the prompts and teachers’ responses to students’ responses make a major difference in student learning. They suggest that teachers prepare a series of open-ended questions for each lesson, and then take cues from students’ responses to generate more questions. Here are their suggestions:

- *Focus prompts.* A general question like “What did you do over the weekend?” isn’t the best use of classroom time, say Wasik and Hindman. Teachers should ask questions about the particular words and ideas that are at the core of the lesson – and make sure students use those words and ideas in their responses (students need to use new words multiple times before they’re learned). For example, during a primary-grade unit on spring, the teacher might ask:

- What signs of spring did you see on your way to school?
- What comes out in the spring?
- Describe the animals you saw coming to school.
- How do we know that spring is on the way?
- Describe the parts of a flower.
- What signs of spring do you see on the cover of this book?
- How might the caterpillar on the cover change throughout the story?
- What plants are we eating for lunch?
- What parts of our lunch would a rabbit like to munch on? A caterpillar?

Some target words might be *breeze, flower, grass, leaf, petal, plant, rabbit, squirrel, stem.*

- *Give children time to respond.* There are several reasons teachers sometimes cut off students’ responses to open-ended questions, among them: not wanting one child to monopolize the response; impatience with repetitive answers from several children; and loss of momentum and student focus waiting for a response from a hesitant child. “All these practices, although motivated by the important desire to keep the classroom running smoothly, have the potential to limit the value of open-ended prompts, which depends in large part on how children respond,” say Wasik and Hindman. “Teachers should not simply ask open-ended prompts and move on; instead, they should foster as much child

talk as possible in response to these prompts.” The quantity of student talk about key words and ideas is what matters, even if there’s repetition and a few awkward silences.

- *Provide meaningful feedback.* Immediate praise – “Great idea!” or “That’s right!” – may not be the best strategy. To extend and deepen classroom conversations, more-complex feedback helps students get used to extended, higher-level conversations about substance. For example, after asking, “Why do we see more insects in the spring than in the winter?” the teacher might accept several responses and then follow up on the theme by asking, “Describe some of the things that insects need to survive” and “How could insects hide from predators?” and “Tell me about some things that insects like to eat.”

- *Encourage complete sentences.* “If children use only a few words to respond to a question, they are not able to practice using language as fully as they should,” say Wasik and Hindman. Teachers should model complete, elaborated sentences and prompt students to respond in like manner.

“Realizing the Promise of Open-Ended Questions” by Barbara Wasik and Annemarie Hindman in *The Reading Teacher*, December 2013/January 2014 (Vol. 67, #4, p. 302-311),
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