

Five Questions That Will Improve Your Teaching

By Larry Ferlazzo

It's not hard to find checklists that are supposed to make it easy to improve schools and classroom instruction. What's difficult is locating checklists that you can remember and that are actually useful, as I've written about before.

My own **list**—while not necessarily easy to implement—is easy to remember. And it has served my students and me well. Maybe that's because my list focuses on questions rather than tips.

"Will what I am about to do or say bring me closer to the person with whom I am communicating—or will it push me further away?"

I've borrowed this question from **Marvin Marshall**, a well-known writer on positive classroom management techniques.

This question has been invaluable when I'm feeling frustrated or displeased with student behavior. It is similar to a rule that good community organizers follow (I was one for 19 years prior to my teaching career): "If you're going to polarize, you also have to de-polarize." When organizing for positive social change, you can't just demonize your opponents—you also have to respect them, no matter how strongly you disagree, or it will come back to haunt you. Students obviously aren't our "opponents," but the principle is similar. I might be angry with a student and speak sharply with him or send her to the office, but I try to remember the question above. I find ways to "de-polarize" with the student either later in the class period, later in the day, or the next time I see him or her. More and more, I'm able to deal with misbehavior without "polarizing" the situation at all. Which brings me to the next question ...

"Is what I am doing (or about to do) going to connect to the student's self-interest?"

Building relationships is key to answering this question positively. If I make an effort to learn about students' goals, hopes, and interests—whether they want to become an Ultimate Fighter, a doctor, a member of the high school football team, or a college student—they are less likely to feel like I view them as replaceable widgets in my classroom. In addition, I'm better equipped to help individual students reflect on whether their behavior will help get them what they want. This kind of intrinsic motivation—based on students' self interest—is far more effective than

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Classroom Q&A With Larry Ferlazzo

This week, Larry Ferlazzo **started a new blog** on *Education Week Teacher* in which he responds to readers' questions on classroom management, instructional strategies, and other teaching issues. Got a question for Larry? Send it to lferlazzo@epe.org.

short-term behavior modification based on teacher control and power.

In addition, it is important to help students learn what researchers have discovered about the importance of self-control, perseverance, accepting personal responsibility, and many other qualities for long-term personal and professional success. (I've shared some brief lessons about this on my [blog](#) and in my most recent [book](#). For example, after we examine Walter Mischel's marshmallow test on [self-control](#), I don't have to command, "Stop throwing the paper wads at John." Instead, I can say, "Remember what we learned about self-control" or "Don't eat the marshmallow."

"Who's doing the work?"

This is another borrowed question, this time from Kelly Young, a consultant on [instructional strategies](#).

It's sometimes said that schools are where young people go to see older people work. Too often, we fall into the trap of seeing our students as vessels that need to be filled up. Instead, we should remember this quote attributed to Confucius: "I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand."

There are many ways to maximize the chances that students are doing the work and doing the "understanding," such as inductive teaching (having students discover the concepts and rules by providing examples from which they can identify a pattern) and [cooperative learning](#).

"Is what I'm doing connected to higher-order thinking?"

Higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) involve applying knowledge and concepts to problem solving and critical thinking. Lower-order thinking skills (LOTS), on the other hand, involve recalling and reproducing existing knowledge. We employ LOTS when we use our keys to start a car. We use HOTS when we have to figure out what to do when the car doesn't start or breaks down when we're driving.

We can connect our teaching to higher-order thinking by preparing our lessons with [Bloom's Taxonomy](#) in mind and by modeling our own thinking processes for students. We can also develop what [Project Zero](#) at Harvard calls a simple "thinking routine" that involves asking the same questions regularly, such as, "What's going on here?" and "What do you see that makes you say so?"

"Am I using 'whole-class processing' strategies?"

Certain instructional techniques can maximize the probability that all students are thinking and learning *all* the time. My school's principal (Ted Appel) and vice-principal (Jim Peterson) coined a term for this: "whole-class processing."

These techniques include "cold calling" on students instead of asking them to raise their hands, having each student respond to questions on individual whiteboards, using think/pair/share activities to have students ask questions of one another—the list is endless.

I work at being transparent with my students about these five questions and sharing the research behind them (though I word the questions a bit differently than I have here). That way, students can help me remember the questions and evaluate how well I'm



implementing them.

Leonardo da Vinci supposedly said that "simplicity is the ultimate sophistication." Of course, it's easy to think about these "simple" questions when we're outside the classroom. It's less easy to be guided by them in the middle of the teaching day. And it can be challenging to implement them when we need them most. But with time, practice, and reflection, I suspect you might find (as I have) that these questions can help take your teaching—and your students' learning—to a more sophisticated level.

*Larry Ferlazzo teaches English and social studies at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento. He has published three **books** and writes a popular resource-sharing **blog** for teachers. His most recent book is titled **Helping Students Motivate Themselves**. Larry is a member of the **Teacher Leaders Network**.*

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