Questioning

Thomas P. Kasulis

It is the night before the new instructor's first discussion class. She has looked through the reading assignment one last time, has outlined the central points to be covered in class, and has checked some (if only there were more time!) of the relevant secondary materials. She is better prepared than she ever was for any class as a student. She is tired, but as she prepares to turn in for the night, she mulls over the last detail. "What questions should I ask so that we will cover the material in the most interesting and educational manner?" Suddenly she realizes she is stumped. What if the students don't respond to her questions? What if there is just silence? She feels an anticipatory twinge of nausea. Her head feels dull and hollow; her mouth dry. For twenty years of formal education, she has been the one who answered the teacher's questions in the classroom. Suddenly tomorrow morning at nine o'clock she will be the one who asks the questions. And if the questions fail, the class fails; if the class fails, she fails.

Most college teachers were once good students, even stars, in their discussion classes. It is natural, then, that a new teacher would tend to stay with the pattern of class preparation that had always proven so successful as a student: the meticulous reading of the assignment, the determination of key points likely to come up in class and a listing of possible questions to raise should the opportunity present itself. As our anecdote implies, however, teaching a discussion class is different from being a student in one. The crux of the difference will be explained in terms of questioning.

I. Three Dimensions of Discussion

When a student asks a question, it is almost always directed to the content of the class, that is, to what the course is about. This is only one dimension of a classroom discussion, however, albeit the most obvious to the student. A teacher's question is often more complex in its intention—the teacher may wish not only to raise a certain issue, but also to change the tempo of the discussion or to involve a quiet student in the dialogue. In other words, the teacher must be aware of, and responsible for, all three interrelated dimensions: the content (what the class is about), the process (how the class is functioning) and the persons (who is involved in the class). Let us briefly consider each.

Content is the most obvious facet of the seminar or discussion section and only a most irresponsible teacher would fail to give it due consideration. In fact, if anything, the new instructor is often too well prepared in terms of content. What new teacher has not zealously written up reams of notes, checked supplementary readings, worked out a lesson plan of things to be discussed—only to find that the actual class could cover but a tenth of the material? This enthusiasm for content is not accidental: one's entrance into graduate school depended on it and graduate training itself concentrates almost exclusively on content. So graduate-students-turned-instructors naturally fall into the trap of overemphasizing content, with its risk of neglecting students' legitimate learning needs.

A class is also a *process*, an independent organism with its own goal and dynamics. It is always something more than what even the most imaginative lesson plan can predict. The metaphors are revealing. How often have we heard someone say that the discussion "ran away from us" and the teacher had to step in to "kill" it? The teacher is responsible for not only what is discussed, but also how it is discussed. Are the students involved or just going through the paces? Do some students dominate others? Is the class too sedate or too argumentative? Is there a tendency for the discussion to wander off into empty abstractions or to muddle around in the anecdotal? Such concerns reflect the process of student-student and student-instructor interactions.

Since instructors are responsible for the interactions of the seminar or discussion section, they should be as conscientious in preparing for the class's process as for its content. How does one prepare for process? One technique is to have a process plan to accompany the lesson plan. As one considers which issues should be covered first and which later, one should give forethought to how each issue should be discussed. For the first point in today's class, would one prefer dialectical controversy or group consensus building? For the next topic, would one like to encourage a free exchange of ideas or an analytic, systematic approach? Often teachers know quite well that their classes tend to be lively but

superficial, or critical but ponderous. By developing a process plan, the instructor can try strategies for creating a more satisfactory balance. Later we will discuss specific techniques by which one can direct the process plan through questioning, but our point here is that one must first have a plan. Like the lesson plan, a process plan should be flexible and should foresee alternative routes to the same general goal. One should even be willing to abandon the plan entirely if something unexpected but valuable has spontaneously taken form. But it is better to have a plan that can be adjusted or ignored than to have no plan at all.

A discussion is not only the process of collectively examining a set of issues; it is also the persons involved in that task. Any instructor who has taught multiple sections of the same course will attest to the fact that no two classes are ever the same. To prepare for a class discussion without taking into consideration the personalities, strengths, and needs of the people in the course is to depersonalize teaching. It is to teach the course and not the students. Although the content of a course may be the same from year to year, each class has its own character and deserves recognition of that fact.

The problem again is how to prepare for this dimension of the discussion. The instructor should know how each student operates in the classroom. Which students are fast thinkers and which are more deliberate? Who is the most comfortable with abstractions and who can best connect the abstract with the concrete? Which student commands the most attention from the class? Whose comments are most often ignored? Who is the best listener? What are the class alliances: talkers vs. nontalkers? theoreticians vs. empiricists? males vs. females? majors vs. non-majors? The more fully these questions can be answered, the more skillful the teacher can be in directing a fruitful discussion. If the class has become dry and theoretical, for instance, the teacher may interject, "How would this theory apply to today's political scene?" Three students may raise their hands: one may intend to bring the discussion back to the theoretical; another to take it to the level of practical politics; another may want to introduce a Marxist slant. Without permanently stereotyping students, the teacher can try to anticipate students' responses. The more this can be done, the more the discussion can be controlled merely by calling on the right person at the right time.

A good way to sensitize oneself to the personal dimension is to keep a brief record or diary at the end of each class session detailing such points as who spoke when, what was said, and who responded to whose point. At first it is difficult to remember the details, but this is often a sign that one has not been adequately aware of human dimensions during the class. After a few sessions, however, one will be able to anticipate which students will give which kind of response. Seeing the students as individuals, the teacher can call on a student at the interesting moment when that individual's perspective would be most relevent to the progress of the discussion. As the individuality of each student becomes recognized, the students will learn to listen to, and respect, one another's comments.

Should the instructor call on nonvolunteers? Whatever one decides, it is important to be consistent. The advantage of calling on nonvolunteers is naturally that it involves all students in the discussion. Its disadvantage is that it may provoke anxiety in the more reticent or shy student. One strategy is to distribute before each class a few study questions for which the students will be responsible. Then with respect to those questions at least, the teacher is entitled to call on any student. Using such a format, the teacher may opt to start a class by calling on a student who did not speak during the last session, for example.

If the teacher does decide to call on only those who have raised their hands, the teacher must learn to *wait*. One does not have to call on the first person who volunteers, nor the second, nor the third. In fact, one may have to wait a few moments until the more deliberate thinkers have the chance to formulate their answers. By his or her actions, the instructor must show that replies do not have to be quickly formulated in order to be welcomed and discussed. Similarly, the teacher should not be embarrassed to wait if there are no immediate volunteers to answer a question. Often it takes time to think through a response. Both the teacher and students should appreciate that. Furthermore, the teacher can be cognizant of subtle signs of a student's desire to participate—a look in the eye or a shifting in the seat, perhaps. Sometimes in such cases the teacher's glance in the student's direction is enough encouragement so that the hand will go up.

II. Three-Dimensional Questioning

The discussion leader's primary tool is the question. For a question to be effective, it must ask about the right issue, at the right time, of the right person. Suppose, for instance, that Mary has just made a comment about Kant and one would like her to expand on it. If the class dynamics have been satisfactory and Mary's participation in the class unproblematic, then one might simply ask, "Mary, could you elaborate on that point a little further?" Suppose, however, the class process has been such that the teacher would like to increase the student-student interaction. One might say in that case, "Mary, could you relate that to what John was saying earlier about Kant?" Now it may well be that Mary did not really listen to what John had said, and the teacher might have to help a bit at first. But if one starts asking questions that require students to respond to each other, they will become more attentive. Similarly, if the class has fallen into a sedate relativism in which no one cares to examine anyone

else's view critically, the teacher might try to force a confrontation by asking, "Then you don't accept the interpretation John just gave?" (Incidentally, to increase confrontation, ask questions of people sitting across the room from each other; to decrease it, ask questions of people along the same side. It is easier to argue with someone whom you face at a distance.) Suppose, however, that the class process has been going as planned, but the teacher is concerned that Mary, one of the best writers in the class, has been hesitant to express her views in the seminar. Say, for example, she wrote a strong paper on empiricism and she knows the teacher thought highly of it. Then one might personalize the question in the following form, "Mary, you're sounding like an empiricist again. What do you think an empiricist might say to Kant's argument?"

Thus, questions can function in all three dimensions of discussion and the skillful teacher can pose questions that develop all three areas. Without devising any complex typology, let us briefly examine some of the ways in which this can be done.

In terms of content, questions may elicit a factual or an interpretive response: that is, a question may ask for a straightforward answer ("How many of Thomas's proofs for the existence of God begin with an empirical generalization?") or for an arguable one ("Which of Thomas's proofs is the strongest?"). The proportion between these two types of questions will vary with the discipline: there are likely to be more factual questions in a chemistry class than in a literature class, for example. In any case, however, factual questions can have an important function. First, they clarify for the student what the starting point of any interpretation must be—facts. Second, they may work well as warm-ups for more complex and abstract questions. Third, they are relatively unthreatening and so may be a way of involving a well-prepared, but shy, student in the discussion.

An interpretive question, on the other hand, requires the respondent to go beyond the letter of the text in order to relate, criticize, clarify, justify, extrapolate, or apply the ideas under discussion. In short, factual questions require mainly the classification of information and its retrieval; interpretive questions require evaluation and synthesis. The requested interpretation may be either specific or general. Specific interpretive questions ("Why does Thomas appeal to empirical experience in his proofs?") are more directive. Hence, they reveal some of the standpoint and lesson plan of the teacher. General interpretive questions ("Why does Thomas use the kind of arguments he does?") are more open-ended and elicit the varied concerns and perspectives of the entire group. Any effective discussion will move back and forth between the two levels. If all the questions are on the general plane, the discussion will lose its continuity. If all the questions are specific, the students may feel the discussion is manipulative; that is, the teacher is making her or his own statement by asking a long series of leading questions. This often results in the famous student preface, "I don't know if this is what you are looking for, but. . . ."

One strategy for avoiding the overuse of leading questions is simply to distribute a set of such questions to the students ahead of time. Then they will be able to study the material with that line of thought in mind and will come to class ready to *start* from there. The "manipulative questions" have thereby been transformed into useful "study cues." For the teacher, this means the students will cover material at home that formerly had to be handled in class. This allows more time for open-ended discussion.

There are at least five ways in which questions can be specifically designed to accomplish a change in the discussion process. First, a question may be intended to create a break, to start over, or to mark the transition from one point of the discussion to the next. From my own college days, I recall a professor whizzing us through a proof in mathematical analysis, then stopping, turning to his gaping, awestruck undergraduates and saying, "That was proof one. James, what shall we call the next?" "Proof two?" "Excellent, James. You show promise for doing advanced work in number theory." Obviously, the question was purely rhetorical. It was not intended to teach us anything at all. But it did return us to square one, giving us a chance to catch our breath before a new assault. Similarly, simple factual questions can be used as a quick review of where the discussion has gone, as an ice-breaker at the beginning of a class, or as a tempo quickener when the class has drifted off into the doldrums. A series of short, quickly answered questions that are not too simple tends to make the class more alert and ready to tackle more difficult issues. Such questions are, in fact, almost purely within the dimension of process. Their purpose is not really to elicit information, but rather to accomplish something in the classroom dynamics.

A second way a question can facilitate the process of discussion is by including a specific qualifying instruction with it, such as, "In a few words . . . " or "If you had to pick just one theme. . . ." Such questions are obviously designed to elicit something other than a definitive analysis. They set a lively tempo for the discussion and establish a cornerstone on which the class can build. Sometimes they may mitigate the fear of criticism, since everyone recognizes that any brief answer is likely to be flawed in some respects. Questions with built-in limits are very effective in bridling the loquacious and in getting several students involved in the discussion within a few minutes.

A third way questions serve process is in giving an instruction as to level of abstraction, as in, "If you were to generalize . . . " or "Can you give some specific examples?" Such a question may radically alter the energy level of a discussion. If the class has become cerebral and abstract, for instance, one may want to bring it back to the concrete. If it is heated and explosive, one may want to talk in terms of general principles, something less volatile than the too real particulars. There is no universal rule about whether it is better to start with the specific and move to the general or vice versa. The sudden transition from one level to the other does have an important impact on the classroom dynamics, how-

ever, and skillful teachers use sudden transitions to recreate a shift in the mood or learning process of the class.

A fourth way questions may serve process is by making reference to other students' comments, such as, "Harry, would you tend to agree with Rick on this point?" (As noted above, this type of question increases student-student interaction.) Furthermore, it can be used to emphasize an earlier point that was not fully appreciated by the class at the time. If the teacher refers back to Rick's earlier comment, for example, students infer that it was somehow important. This is a less obvious technique than having the teacher say, "Rick made a good point earlier. Let us go back to it now."

Finally, a question may be used to elicit a summary or give closure, as in, "Jennifer, if you had to pick two or three themes that recurred most often in our discussion today, what would they be?" This is obviously a very difficult kind of question to ask a student and one must be cautious with it. Some students, however, can summarize very well. If the teacher can discover who those students are, their special skills can be utilized. This again would avoid the entrance of the teacher as a deus ex machina who appears at the end of the class to resolve all problems and tell us what is important.

In terms of the third dimension of the classroom discussion, questions can also be directed in such a way that they make the educational experience more personal or individualized. One of the great lessons to be learned from a discussion class is that there is more than one valid way to approach a question. One strategy for accomplishing this goal is to help the individual students understand their own approaches vis-à-vis others'. When a student has been working toward a personal articulation of a given standpoint, the teacher may refer to that standpoint in the class discussion. For example, John may be most interested in the aesthetic aspects of Japanese thought, whereas Betty may be intrigued by the political. By referring to these interests in the questions raised in class, the teacher alerts the students to their own similarities and differences. Eventually, the students may direct some of their classroom questions to a fellow student when the issues relate to that person's particular interest—they may even argue and carry the discussion for a while on their own.

What distinguishes a personalized question from a personal question? What information about a student may the teacher share with the class? Obviously, it is all right to ask Henry about his major, but it would be inappropriate to ask him about his feelings for his father unless Henry himself brought up the subject in class for some relevant reason. The point is to create a classroom environment in which students will recognize each other as individuals, but will also feel no pressure to reveal their private lives. By designing questions which relate what Kathy said last week to what she is saying now, or relate what Jerry and Mark both said today, the teacher can personalize and enrich the class without invading the students' privacy.

III. Actually Teaching

Let us return to the story which opened this chapter. Suppose now that our protagonist has managed to work through her despair by coming to the same conclusions we have reached. She has prepared a process plan, has learned what she can about the students, and will compile a record of the class after it is over.

She has asked her opening questions and the responses are good. The class is only a few minutes old, but already she is into the thick of it. Hands are going up, questions are being raised. She is making mental notes about content, process and personnel: "Marv tends to be long-winded so I'd better use limitation questions with him. The student-student interaction is nil; I'll use more personalized questioning. Bill (or is it Jack?) looks bored and sleepy. Beth likes to talk in abstract terms. Meg (Martha?) . . . Wait, what did Jim just say? The main theme of the Myth of Sisyphus is what? Whose turn is it now? This is going too fast!" She is hesitating now. A quiver in the voice, moisture on the palms. Her pulse is getting faster and faster.

We cannot leave our topic without making the transition from the rarefied ideal to the flesh-and-blood reality. Our theory requires the teacher to be simultaneously aware of three dimensions. In practice this is impossible. Teaching is not simply an intellectual exercise. In fact, it is closer to playing a sport than solving a geometry problem. This should be obvious, but it is often overlooked. The actual teacher in the classroom is looking one student in the eye and listening to what she or he is saying, but is also peripherally aware of a hand being raised on the other side of the room. People are gesturing; diagrams are written on the blackboard; the teacher's voice is an instrument to speed up or slow down the tempo. By noting a small hand movement or a facial expression, one tries to anticipate what the student is going to say or do. The discussion itself flips back and forth between competition and teamplay. In short, teaching involves all of one's psychological and physical being. Like a tennis player about to return a serve, the teacher must be relaxed but alert, ready to respond to whatever happens. The theory must be embodied, it must become second nature, if one is going to be able to use it unself-consciously.

How does one come to embody a theory? We may compare the process with the way we learn to speak a foreign language. First, we isolate the skills or facts we need and break them down into small units. (In language learning, we study, say, verb conjugations.) Then we practice each skill until it becomes unconscious and spontaneous. (We go to the language lab to practice our drills.) Third, we use the skill in actual situations. (We try to speak spontaneously.) Fourth, we may review our performance and work on any difficulties

we might have had. (We correct bad habits by again drilling those points.)

The art of questioning involves a similar cultivation of skills. For a few classes, one may work on personalizing questions. One can develop one's technique, for instance, by imagining classroom situations and working out appropriate responses. Then one can try the new skill in a real classroom discussion. Finally, one should review the particular session (videotapes can be invaluable) in order to see how one can improve that technique. When the skills become second nature, they become part of the grammar and vocabulary of one's teaching. They become potential forms of expression, communication tools to be used as the situation dictates.

One final point about questioning. The more sensitively the teacher can use three-dimensional questioning, the more efficient he or she will become. If the discussion is too abstract, say, the teacher does not have to intervene by explaining, "We're getting too theoretical. Let us try to bring the discussion back to specifics." Instead, knowing from previous classroom performances that Joe is an especially pragmatic thinker, the teacher might simply ask, "Joe, can you see any practical applications for these theories?" In other words, the more successfully the teacher directs the discussion, the more it seems the discussion directs itself. The Chinese Taoist believes that the ideal ruler is invisible. The sage governs in such a way that the people think they do all the work for themselves.

Skillful discussion leaders use questioning in such a way that they seldom have to lecture; they become part of the medium of the discussion. The ideal is, perhaps, seldom realized, but it still serves as a goal for anyone involved in the art of questioning. The Taoist master, Lao Tzu, recognized the principle and the problem over two millennia ago:

> To teach without speaking, to benefit
> without doing—rarely is this achieved in
> our world.
>
> —*Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 43

Thomas P. Kasulis, *1979-80 Harvard Mellon Faculty Fellow, received his B.A., M.Phil, and Ph.D. in Philosophy from Yale, and an M.A. in Asian Philosophy from the University of Hawaii. He taught at the University of Hawaii for five years and is currently the Chairman of the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Northland College. His areas of specialization are Asian thought, modern Continental philosophy, and comparative philosophy of religions. His book,* Zen Action/Zen Person, *was published by the University Press of Hawaii in 1981.*

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Campus Box 360
Boulder, Colorado 80309

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