

## TEACHING

# SKILFUL QUESTIONING AS AN EFFECTIVE TOOL OF HISTORY TEACHING

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As most teachers are aware, skilful questioning is a necessary tool in all effective methods of teaching. This essay intends to show this for history teaching. It also intends to show the importance and necessity of categorising one's questions. But above all, the writer emphasises that teachers of history ought to place more emphasis on certain categories of questions than on others for reasons that we will see.

Assuming that most history teaching is about some aspect of problem-solving, questioning is therefore one of the best ways of presenting historical problems and helping pupils to solve them.

In the writer's experience with teacher training in Zambian and Bophuthatswana schools, too many questions in history lessons are recall or memory questions or questions that ask for guesswork, sometimes on a topic that has not even been taught before. The practice of asking pupils questions they cannot be expected to answer is both irritating and frustrating for them. For example, if one is teaching about the early years of European settlement at the Cape in South Africa for the first time it would be pointless to ask: "Who do you think succeeded Governor Willem Adriaen van der Stel?" or "So what do you think happened after this?" Rather than have the class guessing and thus wasting time, it would be far quicker and much more sensible to simply tell the class the answers to these questions.

In many student-teachers' history lessons observed by the writer, for example, the general tendency has been to ask too many factual or recall questions - which is the easy way out. Questions are sometimes formulated and asked on the spur of the moment. Obviously, such unplanned questions are usually poorly constructed and therefore little understood or not at all.

A useful way of overcoming the related problems of asking too many factual or recall questions and hastily, poorly constructed questions is first of all to **plan** all the questions one intends to ask about a historical document, map or picture well before the lesson and, secondly, to **classify** those questions. This strategy helps pupils to begin to think historically rather than merely memorising historical facts. In the writer's view, it is the failure by many history teachers to do this sort of preparation that has led to the stereotyped attitude in many pupils and the public generally that history teaching/learning is simply memory work.

As already pointed out above, apart from the more common routine questions (e.g. Can you all see the major routes taken by the Voortrekkers on the map?) and recall (e.g. Who was the founder of the Basutho nation?), it is more important to emphasize other categories of questions for reasons we will see shortly. Here are some examples:

**Comprehension questions:** These try to ascertain that pupils do not simply recall information but are also so familiar with it that they are able to use it. For example, "What made it so difficult to establish peace between the Xhosa and the white settlers in the Fish/Kei rivers area in the late 18th and early 19th centuries?" or "Why was Faku able to hold together his Pondo people so effectively throughout the Mfecane?"

**Interpretation questions:** Here pupils are required to explain or paraphrase information. For example, "Why were there rebellions among the white settlers in Graaff-Reinet and Swellendam in 1795?" or "What was the historical significance of Governor Philip Wodehouse's annexation of Basutoland as a Crown Colony in 1868?"

**Extrapolation questions:** These require

pupils to use information to infer or conclude what is not explicitly stated in the light of other knowledge. For example, "How would the desire to control the Delagoa Bay trade have led to state formation among the northern Nguni during the early 19th century?" or "What do you think was the Luba aristocrats' purpose in basing succession to the Luba Kingship upon their concept of 'bulopwe'?"

**Invention questions:** These are directly imagination stimulating questions which require pupils to put themselves in a historical situation and use its evidence to inform their imagination. For example, "If you had been the Zulu leader, Dingane, how would you have dealt with Piet Retief and his party?" or "If you had been Paul Kruger, how would you have dealt with the Uitlanders?"

**Evaluation questions:** Pupils are required to *make a judgement and to substantiate or justify it with facts or examples*. Here, the detection of bias in recommended texts would be good practice for pupils. For example, "Is the author saying this because he is a white colonial official or because that is the only way to interpret the uprising?"

Sometimes there are no right or wrong answers to evaluative questions but only shades of opinion. For example, "Was John Chilembwe a courageous crusader for African freedom and dignity or a desperate visionary who misled his followers?" A question like this one might sound rather difficult for the average junior history class but would be appropriate for the senior class as an interesting and challenging historical

problem.

As suggested earlier in the paper, the sequencing of levels of questioning is very important.

It has been established in educational theory and practice that pupils progress from one simple level of ability to the next higher one since intellectual skills are hierarchical in order. (Pierce and Lorber: 1977 p. 40; Garvey and Krug: 1977 p.51). It should be emphasized, however, that the above levels are not watertight compartments but in fact do frequently overlap. But this does not in any way negate the usefulness of sequencing questions since the vast majority of questions would completely fit into one or other category.

As outlined above, the following hierarchy - from the simple to the more challenging - would therefore be the suggested sequence of questioning: Routine, Recall, Comprehension, Extrapolation, Invention and Evaluation.

The last four categories of questions are much more useful than the first two because they are designed to assist pupils to **think** historically. The writer does not advocate discarding routine or recall questions in history teaching at all, but rather calls for greater emphasis upon questions that stimulate thinking, i.e. questions that are similar to the ones that professional historians ask themselves when they are looking at historical evidence. If we can begin to do this, we will have gone a long way towards making history teaching and learning much more stimulating, enjoyable and worthwhile.

## REFERENCES:

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