

The art of asking questions

KEEP THEM COMING As a student, do you hesitate to ask questions in the classroom? Is it because of being ridiculed? Or is it because you have learnt to shy away from challenging the status-quo? Whatever the reason, you are missing out on a great learning technique by not questioning, says **V Pradeep Kumar**

LEARNING STRATEGY The ability to ask questions is a critical component of effective learning.



Sir Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin and Albert Einstein, three of our greatest thinkers had one thing in common; questions of purpose, relevance and interpretation, powered their critical thinking and intellect.

Thinking and learning methods are indeed different across societies. For instance, my own experience of teaching Indian and American students is a study in contrast; Americans are keen and active listeners, with a knack of asking the right questions. You teach them a concept or illustrate an idea and before you proceed, there are hands raised and questions

asked. Then a series of interconnected questions arrive one after another, until their final question is answered.

Truly, teaching a group of active and interested students is a rewarding learning process that reinforces the belief that, “To teach is to learn”.

What's your learning style?

As a student, are you hesitant to ask questions in the classroom? Is it because of the fear of being ridiculed? Is your reluctance due to anticipated mockery by fellow students? Is it the result of a culture of not challenging the status-quo, imbibed deep inside an Indian mindset? Ir-

respective of the reason, you may be missing an opportunity of a great learning technique through questioning.

Introspect and examine your unique style of learning. Listening skills, power of concentration, passion and seriousness about the subject, determine your learning style. For example, are you involved and receptive in the class or tentative and watching? Are you often distracted or are

you perceptive, reflective and analytical? Do you take lectures seriously and reinforce your learning by taking notes?

Low interaction between teachers and students make the current learning methods superficial and ineffective. Many students are shy and hesitate to ask questions, probably influenced by our culture, which has thrived on ‘acceptance’ of what we are told to do, instead of questioning or challenging the status-quo.

Several students also feel that teachers don't welcome questions, which is an assumption not always true. Teachers recognise that questioning is not ‘defiance’, but an outcome of a desire to learn. Understanding and practicing the art of questioning, is essential in the quest of knowledge.

Key learning strategy

The ability to ask questions is a critical component in effective learning. Teachers like questions, which generate a discussion, and eliminate the fatigue of a monologue. The classroom environment suddenly changes from being monotonous and dreary, to an exciting endeavour in enlightenment. Such interactions result in the process becoming an active gratifying exercise, with several benefits to students, like:

- Developing critical thinking skills
- Gaining an insight into the subject
- Improving listening and communication skills
- Building self-confidence
- Building a mentor-mentee relationship with the teacher

While questioning is indeed an excellent way to learn, asking appropriate questions is equally important.

What kind of questions?

As a student you learn diverse subjects, concepts and ideas, with different challenges, which determine the type of ques-

tions that need to be asked. Let's assume you are learning an important concept of the four P's (Product, Price, Promotion and Place) in Marketing as part of an MBA course. The range of questions, relevant in this context, can be as below:

■ **Conceptual questions:** What is the principle behind the four P's concept?

■ **Exploratory questions:** How has this concept further developed? Is the concept universally applicable? Such questions will take the discussion forward to a much higher level, like the seven P's, as applicable in service industries, by including the people, process and proof of evidence factors.

■ **Probing questions:** Why is the people factor so important in a service industry? Why is proof of evidence important in the service industry?

■ **Comparative questions:** How different is the marketing process when compared to that in the manufacturing industry? How different are the application of marketing concepts in India and Europe?

■ **Hypothetical questions:** What are the consequences if the people factor is not given due importance in an organisation? Suppose the pricing is reduced by 10 per cent, what will be the impact on demand and volume?

■ **Connecting questions:** What are the challenges of shortening the product life cycle to manufacturing?

Students should take the initiative in asking questions and develop learning through participation. Such interesting questions increase the involvement of teachers to a higher level, and optimise imparting knowledge. The ideal learning questions are ‘open-ended’ questions, which typically begin with what, why and how, which seek an explanation or an elaboration.

How to ask questions?

Begin by asking open-ended questions,

progressively seeking answers until you reach the tip of the questioning funnel. Continuing with earlier examples, if you ask, “So, you imply that product life cycle has direct implications in manufacturing?” could be a final question on the subject. Such close-ended questions, having ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers, completes the learning of the particular topic.

Always maintain dignity, decorum and practice the right etiquette in a classroom. Raising your hand is the most common and accepted method to draw a teacher's attention. When prompted by the teacher, pause, take a deep breath, speak with your whole body, maintaining eye contact and emphasising the key words in the question. The right tone and tenor are important to express your sincerity and seriousness.

Master the art

Psychologists opine that we activate only ten per cent of our potential. Former British prime minister Benjamin Disraeli, once said, “A university should be a place of light, of liberty, and of learning”. Therefore, free yourself from the shackles of fear of ridicule or mockery, and increase your learning potential.

Remember, even if you were to fumble or make a mistake, it only means you are learning the art of questioning faster and becoming wiser. Real knowledge sprouts out of curiosity and the power of questioning.

India has become a knowledge economy, and knowledge is synonymous with human power, growth and advancement. The art and science of questioning is the source of all knowledge; and the responsibility for self-development and learning is on you; so, go ahead, explore a completely new world of opportunities, and unleash your potential.

(The writer is a management and career consultant.)



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