Question-Handling in the American Classroom

Presenters: Dr. Lisa Liseno, Assistant Dean of the Graduate School, and Director of the Program for Instructional Excellence and Fellows Society Mia Gormandy, PIE Graduate Student Teaching Associate, Musicology
Overview/Objectives

- Handling questions when you don’t understand the question
- Manage & navigate too-broad, irrelevant, and offensive questions
- What to do when you don’t know the answer
- The question-handling environment
Animal Classifications

Introduction to Biology
Mammals

- Have hair or fur
- Give birth to live young
- Mammals that live on land have 4 legs
- Have lungs and need air to breathe
- Warm-blooded animals
Handling Questions in the Classroom

When you don’t understand the question...
Do you understand the question?

- **Potential issues:**
- You don’t understand their speech.
  -- Accent or speed
- You miss a key word or two.
- You don’t understand the essence of their question / what exactly they are trying to ask.
Strategies for understanding the question

- Option 1:
  - Ask the student to rephrase the question.

How would you ask students to rephrase questions?
When you still cannot understand the question

- Option 2: Ask another student to rephrase the question for you.
When you aren’t completely sure if you understood the question

• Option 3:
  – Attempt to restate your understanding of the question and ask the student if you are correct.
Is the question off-topic?

Learning to manage and navigate, too broad, irrelevant, and/or offensive questions
Video Example
Off-topic Questions

- Questions that are good, but beyond the scope of the class or the day’s lecture (too broad)
- Questions that are irrelevant
- Questions or comments that are even offensive
- Questions that interfere with other students’ learning

How do we navigate and then deflect these questions?
Navigating the Question

Chart 1

The question is too broad

Explain that the question is good, then...

- Ask student to come to office hours
- Ask student to stay after class to discuss the question
- Ask student to email question
Navigating the Question

Chart 2

Is the question irrelevant?

I would be happy to talk about that further, then…

Ask student to come to office hours

Ask student to stay after class to discuss the question

Ask student to email question
Navigating the Question

Chart 3

The question is offensive

Explain that the question is off topic and will not be discussed
Topic: Animals in Tallahassee
Is the question relevant?

- Do they have flamingos in Wisconsin?
- Are animals in Tallahassee similar to animals in North Georgia?
- You know what manatees remind me of? The girls on Friday night at Bullwinkle's!
- Why does Tallahassee have so many small parks?
- Caring about animals is stupid, we should just get rid of them. Why does the city care about them? We should hunt them down.
- What laws are in place to protect the local animals?
What if you understand a student’s question but don’t know the answer?

Strategies & Cultural differences
Not every question requires an immediate answer

Don’t be panicked!
You just need to know how to handle your class and students.

There are many good ways of answering questions!
Option 1:
That’s a very good question! But, honestly, I don’t know the answer right now. Could you email that question to me? I need some time to think about it. I will get back to you soon.

• In your culture, do you feel comfortable to say “I don’t know”?
• Make sure you do get back to your students with an answer.

What to say when you don’t know the answer...
Option 2:
Does anyone know the answer? I want to hear what others think.

Option 3:
I like your question, but I’ve never thought about that before. I will let you know.

What to say when you don’t know the answer...
• It is OK to be honest with your students if you don’t have the answer right away.
• It is OK to ask for help.
• It is important to always get back to your students with an answer.
The Question Handling Environment
The Question Handling Environment

• Let’s start with a brief skit
  • The TA who responds poorly to students
  • The TA who handles everything properly
Fostering a Negative Environment

- Body Language
- Equal Opportunity
- Teacher Attitude
- Time during Discussion
Fostering a Positive Environment

- Body Language
- Equal Opportunity
- Teacher Attitude
- Time during Discussion
Takeaways

BODY LANGUAGE
Make eye contact
Face your students
Be approachable

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY
Answer a variety
Call on a different student
Reiterate office hours

TEACHER ATTITUDE
Reputation
Attention to students
Positive attitude

DISCUSSION TIME
Beginning of class
During class
End of class
Question-Handling

- When you don’t understand the question
- When the question is irrelevant (too broad, irrelevant, or offensive)
- When you understand the question but don’t know the answer
- Creating a question-friendly environment

Review
Birds

1. Have feathers and wings
2. Lay eggs
3. Have 2 legs
4. Ear holes instead of ears
5. Warm-blooded animals