Cambridge Assessment
International Education

Effective questioning

Effective questioning involves thinking carefully about the question you are asking, the purpose behind asking the question, and what will be done with the responses. These principles are as relevant online as they are in the classroom.

Benefits of asking questions online

Asking questions online often gives you more flexibility than in the classroom. Questions can be written or spoken and feedback from learners can be immediate or asynchronous (not occurring at the same time) depending on how the learning is taking place.

In the classroom, we are used to posing a question and waiting to allow all learners to process and think hard about it. Online learning gives students more time to think and more time to prepare their responses before publically expressing them. For example, posing a question and asking your students to respond the next day, or in their next scheduled lesson with you, will encourage your learners to think through and refine their answers before submitting. This gives students who do not say much in class more opportunities to express their opinions.

Questioning to encourage reflection

Online learning is new for most of our students, so it is helpful to build in time for them to reflect on this different approach and what impact it is having on their learning. Help your learners to self-reflect by posing open questions such as "What would you do differently if you were to approach this problem again" or "How will you use what you have learnt in the future?". Encourage your learners to write down their thoughts and reflections like this will help them to better develop their ideas.

Sharing their reflections and ideas with each other provides opportunities for developing greater understanding. Depending on your learners, it might be more appropriate for any sharing to be anonymous. Students could share their reflection with you and then you could paraphrase and summarise before sharing with the whole class. Or, to keep things even more anonymous, your students could submit their ideas through an anonymous survey.

Using questions to personalise online activities

There are a lot of ready-made worksheets, activity banks and quizzes online for your students to use. Whilst these can be great resources, think about how you can improve on

what is already there. If they are doing an exercise that requires them to only enter the answers, extend this by asking them to write a short explanation of their answer. E.g. 'What method did you use to find the answer?', 'Why did you choose X not Y?' or a general question such as 'Why did you choose this answer?"

Asking questions in this way will have two benefits. It will encourage your students to reflect on and explore their own reasoning and learning. Furthermore, it will help you, the teacher, to gauge their level of understanding

Who asks the questions?

Remember you do not need to be the only one asking the questions. Encourage your students to ask questions both to you and to each other. For higher level learners, get them to use open questions such as "How…?" or "Why…?" to ensure their questions are probing and promote deeper thinking.

Allow your learners time to plan their questions. Make it clear when they should raise their questions and which medium to use – such as email or a messaging service. You should also set clear expectations of when they should expect to get a response.

If your learners are asking you the questions, you could either reply to them individually, collate their questions into a summary communication or use them to develop future lessons and activities. Whatever you are going to do with them, make sure that you keep the students informed.