



Artisan teacher NOTES

Are there any questions?

I can't imagine how times I've uttered that phrase- surely thousands. I've asked it of my students during my time as a high school Chemistry teacher. I've asked it during countless meetings as a school principal. I've asked it of my children, my friends, and precariously, of my wife on a few occasions. It's a mostly harmless phrase, I think. As a teacher, I asked it almost without thinking, toward the end of a lesson usually, as an obligatory check-in to see if I was being understood. As I think back on it, there were usually few, if any, takers on my offer. "No questions? Well," I thought to myself, "I must have explained that even better than I imagined."

I was in a 6th grade classroom recently and I heard another version of "Are there any questions." As the end of the lesson drew near, the teacher paused, took a breath, let it out slowly, and said "Now... what are your questions?" Hear the difference? This simple change in phrasing led to a wholly new set of student responses. "**Now, what are your questions?**" comes loaded with a completely different set of implications than does "Are there any questions?"

I'll exaggerate a bit for effect, but baked into "Are there any questions?" is the message... If you've been listening carefully, thinking clearly, taking good notes, and have avoided distractions, you probably won't have any questions. Just in case, though, here is an opportunity to make up for your lapses in learning.

“Now, what are your questions?” implies a different message... If you’ve been listening carefully, taking good notes, thinking curiously, and giving yourself fully to your learning, then at this moment, there is no way you won’t have a bunch of great questions. Let’s hear them! The teacher may continue. “Some of your questions may be simple, factual questions and that’s OK. I’m sure I didn’t explain everything just right. Some of your questions, however, will be deeper, such as, why is this important? How or when might this not work? What else is similar to this? How does this make you feel?”

Going a little deeper, I think that “Are there any questions?” implies that a transaction is in progress. I’m the teacher. I’m teaching this lesson. You’re the students. You’re paying attention. I’ll do my part. You’ll do your part. We’ll take a few questions at the end in case the transaction was flawed in some way. It also implies the too simplistic principle that questions all have answers, and correct ones at that.

“Now, what are your questions?” is generative, rather than transactional. It implies that the lesson is just getting started. Now comes the good part... the connecting, the curiosity, the deeper layers, the schema building. It’s OK, desirable even, to pose questions to which there are no right or wrong answers, or questions whose answers will need to be searched out as a part of one’s ongoing curiosity and interest.

So... sometimes a simple rephrasing of the teacher’s words can make a big difference in students’ thinking and learning. I’m grateful and appreciative that I was present when this skillful 6th grade teacher demonstrated this so powerfully. Of course, there is so much more to know and discover about the simple practice of asking and answering classroom questions. This topic has been well researched and the literature available to seekers is deep and broad.

Now... what are your questions?