



PROMOTING SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING: Responding to Student Questions

When a student asks you a question, consider not answering ... at least not right away. Instead, choose to respond in a manner that will encourage student thinking and discussion.

Repeat the question and paraphrase it.

Paraphrase the question to ensure that everyone hears the question and to verify that you understand what is being asked. This will also give students an opportunity to consider the question. Note, too, that in response to a paraphrase the student asking a question will often provide further elaboration, and in the process of thinking aloud the student may even come up with an answer!

- *"Let me see if I understand your question ..."*

Redirect the question.

Either ask another student to respond, or redirect the question to the class as a whole. This encourages student participation and demonstrates that you are not the only source of knowledge in the classroom.

- *"What does the class think about ..."*
- *"Can anyone find that in the notes?"*
- *"That's a great question! Let's get in small groups and talk about that for a couple minutes."*

Ask probing questions.

Direct class attention to a particular aspect of the question, or to some aspect of the course content that is relevant.

- *"What do we need to know in order to answer that question?"*
- *"Tell me what you do remember about _____ and we'll work from there..."*
- *"Is there anything we've talked about in lecture that might help us answer that?"*
- Referring to an author from a class reading: *"What do you think _____ would have to say about that?"*

When to answer directly:

- If a question asks for information that other students are not likely to have.
- If a student asks for your opinion.
- If an answer is needed quickly, and you don't have time to probe or redirect.

And then you might want to check in ...
"Does that answer your question?"

And if you don't know the answer:

Don't be afraid to say *"I don't know ..."* (followed by *"...but let's see if we can figure it out ..."*). This helps students appreciate that the sign of a master student isn't to know everything, but to be willing and able to seek out answers.

Adapted from IDEA Paper #31: Answering and Asking Questions by William E. Cashin <http://www.theideacenter.org>

