Using counseling techniques as classroom questioning strategies

Donna Robbins

Recommended Citation

The field of counseling psychology can provide assistance in searching for a way to develop students' reading/thinking strategies.

Using counseling techniques as classroom questioning strategies

by Donna Robbins

Traditional questioning techniques employed by classroom teachers seldom enhance our understanding of and ability to develop the reading/thinking strategies of our students. The most sophisticated taxonomies have done little to discourage our asking questions that elicit literal level thinking. Questions such as: "What color was Arnold's hat?" or "Who was the main character?" cannot possibly provide insight into students' thinking and reading. Instead, they tend to mask the very information needed to assist our students' comprehension of written material.

In searching for more appropriate or, at least additional, means of developing students' reading/thinking strategies, the field of counseling psychology can provide assistance. At a conference at Harvard University in 1952, Carl Rogers gave a presentation entitled "Classroom Approaches to Influencing Human Behavior." Rogers spoke for only a few moments, simply presenting a number of very personal thoughts concerning his own experiences as a teacher and a learner. The result was incendiary: some teachers in the group expressing outrage, and others voicing a sense of relief. Perhaps it was not so much the content of Rogers' presentation that gave rise to such turmoil, but rather that he had dared to give voice to those subconscious fears experienced by most teachers at some point in their careers. Rogers told the group that, in his experience, teaching probably did not result in learning. Instead, that learning occurs as a process of self-discovery by the learner.

Anyone who can accept this notion is immediately faced with the problem of just how to manage the classroom so as to provide maximum opportunities for such self-discovery. Toward this end, the counseing technique of "reflective listening" may be of enormous value to the classroom teacher. It should be mentioned that reflective listening is not suggested as a replacement for traditional questioning. As long as our education system demands the ability to respond to traditional questions, it seems essential that appropriate training occur. Instead, reflective listening may be added to the questioning repertoire of teachers without conflicting with the traditional methods.

Reflective listening was developed by Rogers as a therapeutic model. However, Rogers' notion of therapy was " . . . a relationship in which at least one of the parties has the intent of promoting the growth, development, maturity, improved functioning, improved coping in life of the other." (Rogers, 1961). The similarity between Rogers' goals of therapy and the goals of education are not merely coincidental; Rogers believed that therapy takes place constantly in the classroom (1957).

Whether reflection is used in therapy or in the classroom, the basic purposes and techniques are similar. It is assumed that learning occurs as an individual interprets and integrates life experiences. The individual may be assisted in this effort by a helping person (teacher or therapist) but ultimately, it is the individual and not the helper who is responsible for the learning. It is the extent to which the teacher or therapist can facilitate this learning process that growth can occur. In a sense, reflection is the mirror by which an individual is made aware of his/her processes.

In a classroom it is possible to allow students to observe not only their own processes, but the processes of others as well; to become aware of self-defeating processes and develop more self-satisfying ones. In this case, the teacher's role as a helping person—one who holds the mirror—is most important. What follows is an example of reflective listening as it might occur in a counseling session with a student. It is significant to note the efficiency with which the student is able to identify his major source of discomfort.

H = helping person

S = student

H: I'd like to hear why you have come to talk with me.

S: I'm not sure really. I just feel very mixed up these days.

H: You're feeling a lot of confusion.

S: Yes, I feel like I don't know what I really want out of school anymore. My ideas keep changing.

H: You think that what you once wanted is not what you now want.

S: Yes, last year all I cared about was being on the football team. That was my whole life. Now, I don't know if it's enough for me any more.

In each case, the helping person did not question, but instead, reflected the thoughts and feelings of the student. Now consider a second means of responding to the same client.

H: I'd like to hear why you have come to talk with me.

S: I'm not sure really. I just feel very mixed up these days.

H: What are you confused about?

S: I don't know exactly. One day I like school and the next day I hate it.

H: When you hate it, what things do you hate?

S: Oh everything! The homework, the practice for the team. Stuff like that.

H: Have you considered eliminating those things that you dislike?

It becomes apparent that, in the second dialogue, the student is not being given the opportunity to become aware of his needs. Instead, he is being diverted by the well-intended but not very helpful questions. Carrying the above examples into the classroom, it is possible that our well-intended questions are diverting our students from making the highly personal interpretations and connections between their reading and their lives. Again, as teachers, we may hold the mirror and help them to see their needs and processes, but we cannot interpret their experiences for them.

The following teacher statements are consistent with principles of reflective listening and, therefore, suggested as alternatives to traditional questioning techniques in the classroom.

Teacher statements

Structure Setting (STR): A statement (given prior to reading) designed to: a) direct students' reading/thinking and b) initiate discussion.

·Read to find out how you might use this machine in your daily life.

Reflection (REF): A statement designed to: a) check teacher's understanding of students' statements and/or b) provide students with opportunities to evaluate their own reading/thinking.

-Are you saying that . . .

·You seem to feel that . . .

·It sounds like you agree with John . . .

-I wonder why you are saying . . .

Acknowledge (ACK): A statement of acceptance designed simply to recognize the students' contribution.

-okay

-I see

This response is appropriate when reflection appears unnecessary.

Focus Change (FC): This response, while not normally a part of reflective listening, is necessary for classroom use. Often, the teacher is cast as the "right answer machine" when, in fact, the students should be responsible for their own learning. Changing the focus involves encouraging additional participation by directing the discussion away from the teacher and back on to the students.

Other (O): A response not otherwise categorized. A response which, while appropriate for other types of questioning techniques, are inconsistent and therefore, inappropriate for reflective listening.

The following is an example of reflective listening used in the classroom. The teacher's statements have been coded and illustrate all types of responses mentioned—previously.

T = teacher

S = students

Read the story and decide whether you think Cara acted wisely in leaving her home and starting a new career. (STR)

After Reading·

T: Well, what do you think—did she do the right thing? (STR)

S_1: I think she did the right thing.

T: Why do you think she did the right thing? (O)

S_1: Because it worked out for the best.

S_2: I disagree, I think she hurt a lot of people. She hurt everyone in her life.

S_1: Well, she probably would have hurt more people if she had stayed.

S_3: Why?

S_1: Well, when you yourself hurt, you make others around you hurt also.

T: Are you saying that Cara would have made others miserable just because she was unhappy? (REF)

S_2: No—not purposely anyway, but her unhappiness would have affected those around her.

T: Oh, I see. (ACK)

S_3: I agree that if she stayed, she would have been terrible to live with. But she should have thought of that when she married. (to teacher) Don't you agree?

T: Well how do the rest of you feel? (FC)

Fluency in using reflective listening is not automatic. A teacher who has been involved in traditional questioning strategies must practice reflection in order that it be used effectively. Toward this end, it is suggested that the teacher tape record class sessions in which reflective listening is being used. Later, the teacher's statements may be coded in order to evaluate the appropriateness of the responses. As the teacher gains experience and becomes more comfortable and skillful with the technique, it is expected that the number of responses coded "O" (other) will decrease.

Bibliography

Rogers, Carl R. **Client-Centered Therapy:** It's current Practice, Implications and Theory. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1951.

Rogers, Carl R. "The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions of Therapeutic Personality Change." **Journal of Consulting Psychology**, 1957, pp. 21, 95-103.

Rogers, Carl R. **On Becoming A Person.** Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961.

Rogers, Carl R. and Stevens, Barry. **Person to Person:** the Problem of Being Human. Lafayette, California: Real People Press, 1967.

Smith, E.B., Goodman, K.S. and Meredith, R. **Language and Thinking In School**, 2nd ed. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976.

2