

Q&A session during an academic lecture: a new approach

Maurycy Zajęcki

University SWPS, Faculty of Psychology and Law in Poznań, Poland

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

1. INTRODUCTION

It is quite common among lecturers to permit students' questions during lectures. I do it myself, but is it really beneficial for the process of teaching? Allowing *ad hoc* questions is perceived by listeners as an invitation to active learning. But do we, teachers, really want to be interrupted? Two obvious disadvantages are: (1) danger of losing the rhythm of the lecture, (2) difficulties in time-management. Both problems with allowing questions during lectures can be solved when we plan a Q&A session at the end of a lecture. It does not interrupt the flow of thoughts, and allow to plan in advance the amount of consumed time. But here arises another problem: how much time should we plan for such a session? If time is too short, the very idea becomes pointless. On the other hand, with substantial time left for a Q&A session we risk inefficiency in time-management. Without any good question being asked, a lecturer may be forced to ask for questions. During my tuition as a lecturer I prepared and implemented a unique method of conducting Q&A sessions. I will refer to this type of Q&A session as "the Q&A Method".

2. METHODOLOGY

The whole session consumes about 45 minutes. It is quite a lot of time and therefore the session must be planned well in advance. During a course I recommend to use "the Q&A Method" only once. The exact amount of time depends on the number of students in the group and on the accessibility of on-line tools. "The Q&A Method" has distinct features that make it different in quite unexpected way from typical Q&A. In a typical Q&A session: (1) the more active participants (i.e. number of asked questions), the longer the session lasts, (2) using on-line tools makes the session more dynamic and quicker. For some teachers an on-line tool is a must-have in handling large groups of listeners. In "the Q&A Method" time consumed for a session does indeed depend on the number of participants, but this is not a linear relation. With increase of the group, the time used for a Q&A increases slower – and therefore "the Q&A Method" works effectively in larger groups. In "the Q&A Method" the whole procedure can be performed both on-line and on-site, and, paradoxically, an on-site version is more effective in handling larger groups.

3. RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The session can be either an introductory (after the first lecture), or summarizing (during the last lecture). The session can be organized on-line or on-site. Conducting a Q&A session in this manner grants several benefits: (i) checks students' understanding of material, (ii) identifies common misconceptions, (iii) forces students to self-reflection on their learning progress, (iv) encourages simultaneously both excelling and struggling students, (v) equalizes participation chances of both dominant and shy students, (vi) revises material (vii) encourages work in groups (on-site version), (viii) encourages using on-line tools (on-line version), and last but not least (ix) explains to students the rationale behind the proverb: "There are no bad questions, only bad answers".

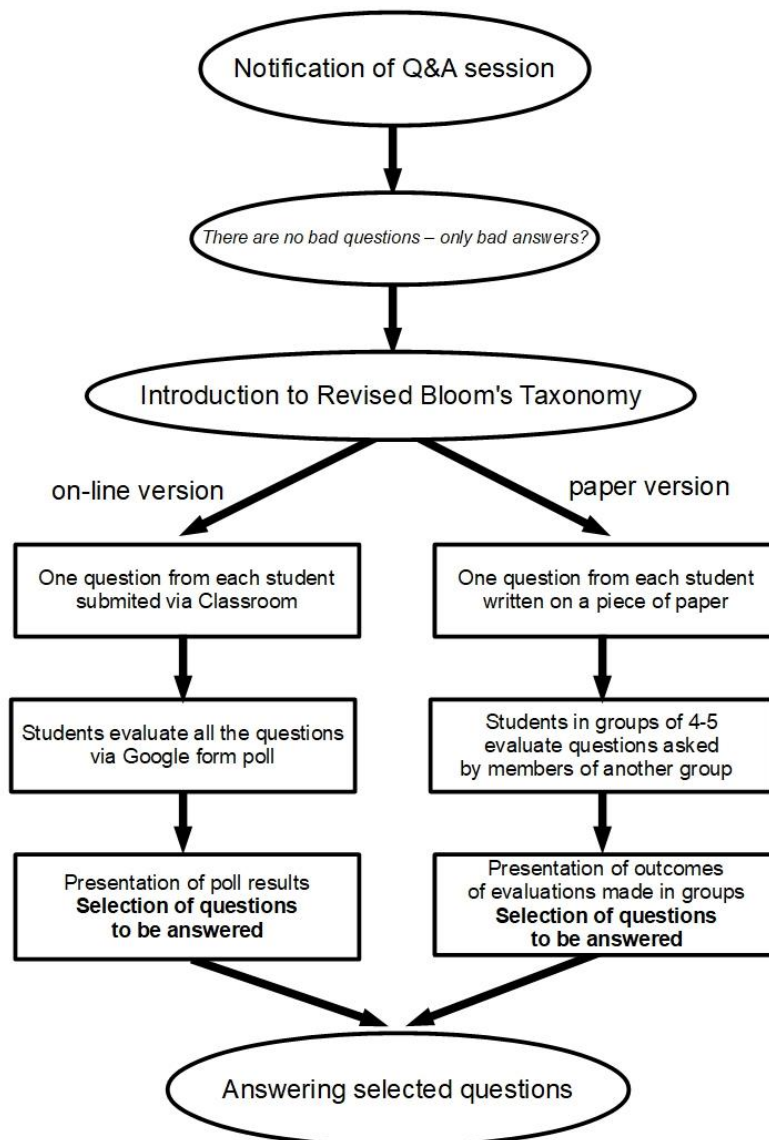


Figure 1. "The Q&A Method" as a process.

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