

What if a Student Asks a Question I Can't Answer?

Presented by:

Dr. Therese Huston



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WHAT IF A STUDENT ASKS A QUESTION I CAN'T ANSWER?

DO, DON'T, AND MAYBE | 20-MINUTE MENTOR | MAGNA SEMINARS |

DO	DON'T	MAYBE
<p>Confirm you've answered the question</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Does that answer your question?” 	<p>Get angry with students for asking</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's easy to feel flustered if you've been asked several questions in a row you can't answer • Take a deep breath • Joke – “I must have left my brain at home” • Reassure yourself – if they are asking hard questions, you're doing your job as the teacher 	<p>Ask a student to research the answer</p> <p>Pros</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaches students where to find answers <p>Cons</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students can be discouraged from asking questions because it leads to homework <p>Alternative</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give extra credit to first three students who send you the answer & the source
<p>Let students know if you made a mistake</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you discover you've made an error, admit it • Explain the correct answer • Point out that it's a place where it's easy to get confused and that you don't want them to make that mistake 	<p>Fake it</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students can quickly find the correct answer, online or in the book • Reduces credibility and students' confidence in you 	

Ask “What are your questions?” instead of “Does anyone have any questions?”

- Frame the question so that the assumption is that they will have questions
- Other phrases include
 - That was a lot of new material. I’m sure something could be clearer.
 - What we just covered was really important. Take a minute to review your notes with a neighbor and put a star next to places where your notes aren’t clear. (This usually leads to questions)
- By asking “Does anyone have any questions?” or “Are there any questions?” it sounds as though you assume there will be none

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QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION | 20-MINUTE MENTOR | *MAGNA SEMINARS*

1. When you're teaching a course in a topic you know well, and a student asks a question you cannot answer, how do you respond?
2. Could these same responses work when you're teaching a topic you don't know as well? Why or why not?
3. When you've been a student and your professor didn't know the answer, what responses were memorably good? Are there any responses that were memorably bad?
4. Why might a student be pleased if you research an answer to their question and come back to the next class with an answer?
5. How do you define your role in the classroom? What role should a good teacher play? Your answers might help you develop a strategy for handling students' difficult questions.
6. Are there ways you could show students how someone in your discipline thinks about and answers a question? In other words, when a chemist / anthropologist / studio artist / etc. encounters a new question, how do they find an answer?

Recommended Resources

Publications:

CASHIN, W. E. (1995). *Answering and asking questions*, IDEA Paper No. 31. Manhattan, KS: Center for Faculty Evaluation and Development, Kansas State University

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HUSTON, T. (2009). *Teaching what you don't know*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

HUSTON, T. (2009). Teaching by the seat of your pants. *NEA Higher Education Advocate*, 27(1), 5-8.

Websites:

Wei_Dai (2010, January 17). Tips and tricks for answering hard questions. Retrieved March 11 from http://lesswrong.com/lw/1q4/tips_and_tricks_for_answering_hard_questions/

Adubato, S. (n.d.) The art of answering difficult questions. Retrieved March 11 from http://www.caucusnj.org/adubato/starledger/difficult_questions.asp