# Go below the SURFACE

The questions students ask us can sometimes betray some deeper, underlying knowledge gaps that we can't afford to ignore, writes **Colin Foster**...

ften, when a student is stuck and asks a question, I think that the question they're asking is more advanced than the question they *should* be asking.

This isn't their fault. They'll typically be asking about a problem they're experiencing at that moment, which is a perfectly natural thing to do. The teacher's job is a subtle one. It's not necessarily always our role to try and answer the question they're asking us as best as we can.

There may be no such thing as a silly question, but there certainly *is* such a thing as the 'wrong' question. This is because, often, in order to help a student effectively, we have to press 'pause' on the question they've actually asked and go back to something earlier potentially even something much more basic, which they may *think* they already know, but which is actually underpinning the difficulty they're currently experiencing.

### Two steps forward

Responding in this way can seem strange to them. They might think we're misunderstanding the difficulty they're having. They might interrupt us: "No, I already know that – what I'm stuck with is this."

I think it helps to explain how we're not failing to listen to them, but are rather trying to dig a bit beneath the surface and come at their question a bit more indirectly. And that we believe this is more likely to address their problem – particularly in the long-term.

In this way, by taking a step back, we can more effectively enable students to take two steps forward.

You can see parallels to this in other professional disciplines. If a dentist were to spot some decay near the surface of a tooth, and rapidly 'drill and fill' there and then, it will likely lead to present. The deeper problems we must address are likely to be the root causes of many superficial difficulties, meaning that dealing with them has the potential to kill many birds with one stone.

If we can secure those underlying foundations, then we can also ensure that students are less likely to keep coming back to us with more and more little issues.

Amid the busyness of a classroom, it can be hard, if not impossible to find the time needed to deal thoroughly with everything

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far worse outcomes later on if, in fact, there are deeper problems out of sight, a little further down below.

# The danger of quick fixes

As teachers, we need to similarly drill down and find the deeper underlying causes behind the difficulties our students are experiencing. Failing to do so, in favour of staying with just the surface layer, is unhelpful.

If this sounds time consuming to you, then that's probably because it is – but it's a process built around future-proofing students' learning, rather than only obsessing over the we're presented with. The temptation can therefore be to try and offer quick fixes instead. If that's all we focus on – helping with those superficial problems presented to us – we'll often manage to come up with a quick fix of some kind.

Yet while the student is quickly satisfied, they're likely to come unstuck again almost immediately. As soon as they're on their own, tackling similar questions again, they'll run into a similar, but slightly different difficulty. And then need our help all over again.

### Daring to dig

This is not only inefficient, but will also have a negative impact on the student's self-perception, who will likely conclude that: "*I can* do it when the teacher does it with me, but I can't do it on my own" This common complaint is a reliable indicator that we're addressing the student's difficulties at too superficial a level.

Or, perhaps the student concludes that they're simply no good at the relevant subject. For one reason or another, it just doesn't come naturally to them. Or, they might just think that they're

generally 'not smart' because they fail to grasp things, despite receiving repeated help from their teacher. At a certain point, they may even give up on asking us. If their parents can afford it, perhaps they could get a tutor in to help. But

## **DIVE DEEPER**

# Embark on your own journey below the the surface of your students' questions with these 6 practical strategies...

- Avoid feeling that you must immediately answer the question posed. Pause and consider whether there might be a 'question behind the question'.
- Attempt a quick 'root cause analysis' on the student's question. What might cause a student to be asking that question at this moment?
- Look for commonalities across superficially different questions that

common difficulties might be, and then addresses them in small groups, or perhaps with the whole class, then considerably more progress might be made.

### Smarter, not harder

Teachers can often be found rushing round their classrooms, travelling from 'hand up' to hand up', overwhelmed with the sheer number of requests for help; desperately trying to manage behaviour, while also attending to students' innumerable questions.

This can be exhausting and stressful for everyone. The teacher wishes they had another pair of hands to help them, or even that they could speak more quickly, so that they could assist more students in the same time. It can feel like rearranging deck chairs on the *Titanic* while the ship is going down, instead of doing something about that iceberg.

So instead, let's start asking what lies *behind* those questions that are being asked. What do these questions seem to have in common? In what ways are these seemingly different questions in some sense the same? students are asking. What do these questions have in common?

- Consider addressing these common issues in groups or with the whole class, rather than individually.
- Develop a culture whereby students check in books and with peers before asking you.
- Turn common or similar questions into wholeclass activities for all students to think about.

If there were some underlying factor responsible for 90% of these questions being asked, what might it be? Maybe a crucially important, yet missing piece of knowledge? A connection between two things that hasn't been made sufficiently explicit? Or perhaps a fundamental misunderstanding that's caused students to get the wrong end of the stick?

Or, might it have something to do with students' approach to studying – such as failing to 'Ask three (peers) before you ask me'? Whatever it may be, focusing on those deeper issues will be much more efficient than dealing with numerous immediate and salient questions as they present themselves.



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then, there's a good chance that all the tutor ends up doing is diagnosing and 'fixing' the same superficial issues, rather than daring to dig deeper.

### **Common difficulties**

How can a busy teacher with 30 students in their classroom painstakingly address 30 different sets of difficulties? Is this approach not, to state the obvious, completely unfeasible?

Indeed, in a typical classroom the teacher will have extremely limited time for performing any one-to-one teaching. But the benefit of looking for deeper, underlying difficulties is that you'll generally come across far fewer of them.

On the surface, it can seem as if every student has their hand up in relation to a different specific issue. Looked at from a different perspective, however, you may well find that really, there are only two or three different fundamental misunderstandings buried beneath the surface, serving as the root cause of almost all these problems.

If the teacher finds the time to identify what these