

**ANY QUESTIONS?  
EXPERIMENTS IN GETTING STUDENTS TO ASK QUESTIONS**

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**ABSTRACT**

Students do not or will not ask questions for a number of reasons from past educational experience to peer pressure. Research on students asking questions focuses on comprehension and critical thinking, but the Business and Economics Department at Lebanon Valley College has added two important dimensions: a feedback loop from communications models and the pragmatic goal of preparing students for interviews, both for internships and their first job. The department has developed several strategies which set expectations; explain the reasons for the expectations; give students feedback, including grades; sustain the expectations through the course; and create a continuum of expectations from the students' first course through their last.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Some professors scratch their heads and wonder why students don't ask questions.

Part of the answer, in my view, is that students have been "conditioned" to keep quiet in the classroom; they don't want to show how much they know or how much they don't know; they also don't want to stand out from the crowd; they don't want to appear different than their peers. Students can also be influenced by embarrassment and fear of ridicule (Schell, 1998).

Another part of the answer is that some professors don't want questions. The class size may be too large or questions might take up too much time. If a professor asks if there are any questions in the last minute or two as the students are packing up to leave, the lack of response is no surprise.

Research shows that one of the primary aims of having students ask questions is comprehension (Schell, 1998). In the Business and Economics Department at Lebanon Valley College, we have several additional purposes, which focus on improving our teaching and the students' learning and on preparing students for internships and jobs.

Relating comprehension to communication models, which include a feedback loop (Locker, 2006), we can discover what students are comprehending, not comprehending, and finding fuzzy. Some professors are surprised that students do not follow instructions. Some students do not do the assignment or do not do it the way the professor asked. The only way to find out how students are

decoding what professors are encoding is to ask, to do a feedback loop.

When students go to job interviews, it is essential that they ask questions. Several years ago, one of our students interviewed with a large accounting firm but did not receive an offer. Afterward, the alum who had recommended the firm interview that student called and said the student had asked no questions. This is not an isolated example.

To prepare our students for interviews, not only for jobs, but also for internships, we have designed strategies to get students to ask questions from their first course through their last.

**BUS 185: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT  
(FORMERLY BUS 130: PRINCIPLES OF  
BUSINESS)**

In this first course, from the second class and for the rest of the semester, business administration and accounting students put a question they have written out on the professor's desk at the beginning of every class. This activity establishes the expectation early and reinforces it through the entire semester (See Appendix A, BUS 130 and BUS 185). Records are kept of questions submitted since asking questions is part of the grade: Participation (BUS 130 – 5%) or Group Performance (BUS 185 – 10%).

The professor scans the questions and reads a few, without identifying the author. The questions may be chosen because several students asked them, they are most central to the material, or they are the most creative or amusing. Not identifying the "questioner" allows the student to remain anonymous and not be embarrassed.

After several classes, the professor asks the class to the answer to that question. The students begin answering their own questions, and class discussion starts with the students' concerns. This technique allows the professor to find out what is on the students' minds and lets the students know that the professor wants to know what is uncertain or unclear to the students. The climate in the classroom becomes one of an exchange or dialogue rather than one of an authority handing down the "truth."

If a guest speaker comes to the class, students are expected to write down and to ask questions. The professor records who asks questions since asking questions is part of the Group Participation (BUS 130) or Group Performance (BUS 185) portion of the grade.

At the end of the semester, as the final step of a group project where students have started a company, each "company" gives an oral presentation. All the students in the audience are expected to ask questions of the presenting group (See Appendix A). The student "questioners" are significantly more invested because they see the presenting group as competitors and they want answers to questions their own group may have faced.

On September 26, 2006, 19 students in BUS 185 toured Seltzer's Smokehouse Meats in Palmyra, PA. After only four class sessions of writing out questions and after the professor had alerted the students that they needed to ask questions which related the textbook concepts and theories to the business, everyone student asked a question of the tour guides. Everyone asked at least two questions and some as many as 11 and 12. The professor was impressed that students, especially freshmen, responded so positively and enthusiastically and told the students they were the best group he had ever seen asking questions.

### **BUS 285: ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS**

In Organizational Communications, students get to ask the professor a question before class begins. Every class morning, the students show their annotated text to the professor in his office, so the professor knows the students are reading the material. This activity constitutes 10% of the grade.

During the meeting, the professor asks each student for the "question of the morning." In this one-on-one, interpersonal feedback loop, the professor learns what is unclear about the syllabus; what

instructions need to be repeated, perhaps over and over; what is on the students' minds. The professor also asks the students questions about the material, about their writing, about the students' understanding of the professor's method.

The students also generate their own feedback loop by asking for more information or clarification about the syllabus or about the text, by asking for advice, and by asking about their own writing. The question and answer about their own writing could be considered a mini-conference.

At first, some students do not have a question, but once they know they need one each morning, they ask one. Sometimes a student says s/he had one but forgot; in most cases the student creates another one on the spot. The questions begin on the operational level (See Appendix A, BUS 285), but progress to ones of substance.

When class begins, the professor asks, "What are your questions?" or "Questions?" This language sets up the expectation that there are questions. The language "Are there any questions?" leaves the door open to a reply that there are none.

In Organizational Communications, students give five, taped oral presentations, with three, four, and five including a question and answer session. Presentation three has questions after the presentation. Presentations four and five have questions during the presentation.

As a side note, all presentations, until recently, had the question and answer after the presentation. But an alumnus returned and told us that was not the "real world." He told us that the president of a company had asked him a question after his first sentence. So we changed our approach to prepare our students for life after college.

During presentations three, four, and five, students write out questions. The professor records which student asks questions and how many. At first, each student must ask a question before anyone may ask a second question. At the end of class, the professor collects the questions and marks them with a plus, a check, or a minus, which become part of the Group Performance grade. The professor also makes comments on the questions which include positive feedback on the number written down and the quality of the question. When students have written down questions but have not asked any, or many, the comment reads, "Ask more questions." Most times, the student responds by asking more questions. The

students get the professor's marks and feedback before the next presentation.

For the fifth presentation, the students are not required to write out questions, but the professor continues to record who asks and how many they ask. Overall, students ask more questions than the third presentation, but a few slip back to old habits when the "requirement" of writing the questions down disappears.

One semester, prompted by another professor who had given a quiz on the syllabus to students on the second day of class, the professor asked students to write out five questions for each of three documents handed out in the first class: the syllabus, the Day Of Observation Guidelines, and the Writing Guidelines (See Appendix A).

This assignment forced the students to read the three documents, to understand the documents, and to provide feedback to the professor, who, in turn, learned what the students needed to be clarified. At the start of the rest of the classes, the professor answered the questions the students had written out.

### **BUS 485: STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT**

In this senior, capstone course, students, formed into groups, do three case studies from a text book, a computer simulation, and a "final competition" at the end of the semester. For the final competition, each of two sections forms a group made up of the entire section. The two sections analyze the same case, select five students to represent their section, and compete against each other on the campus theater stage. The final competition is open to the entire campus and the public.

For the three case studies, each student hands in a written question before class starts and is required to ask a question of the presenting group during the presentation (See Appendix A, BUS 485). Students asking the questions stand, identify themselves, and ask their question. A record is kept as part of the Participation grade, which is worth 35%.

After the first case study, the students begin working on a computer simulation, the Business Strategy Game in different groups. So the group work on textbook cases and the simulation overlaps.

At the end of the simulation, each group presents to the entire class, and the students in the audience ask questions during the presentation.

Again, the "questioners" stand, identify themselves, and ask their question. The groups have been competing with all other groups in both sections of the course on the computer, but not face to face. The presentations to the other groups in their section generate penetrating and very difficult questions.

For the "final competition," each section sits on one side of the theater. Students may only ask questions of the other section, so they can not feed easy questions to their own section. Since the final competition occurs at the end of the semester of their last college course, the students ask substantive and penetrating questions. The element of competition fuels the intensity.

### **DISCUSSION**

In the beginning, freshmen students are somewhat surprised by the expectation, and even the requirement, that asking questions is central to classes in the department. But once they know asking questions, both in writing and orally, is a constant, they respond; some respond more effectively than others.

The faculty can see shy, reserved students grow more comfortable and more assertive in the classroom, in group projects and in the whole class setting.

Student will ask questions if they know that the professor is serious; if they know why the professor is requiring that activity; if they know asking questions is a constant throughout the course; if they know they will receive feedback; if they know the activity is part of the grade; and if they know asking questions is essential to their future success.

As I see it, the feedback loop back to the professor is more than worth the time and energy of these strategies. The constant back and forth between professor and students gives the professor a reality check on what the students understand and what they need more clarity on. And once the students know the professor wants and accepts their feedback, the students become instrumental in improving the dialogue of teaching and learning.

### **CONCLUSION**

With these strategies to get students to ask questions, the Business and Economics Department is attempting to get students to take a more active role in their learning, to get more comfortable and more

confident in a public setting, and to prepare for life after college.

By having our students start to ask questions in their first course, by reinforcing that activity in other courses, and by ending with that activity in their last course, the department presents our students with the opportunity to learn and to develop personally and professionally.

#### REFERENCES

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**APPENDIX A:  
REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE QUESTIONS**

Note: The percentage represents the percent of all questions for each of the three classes listed below: BUS 130/185; BUS 285; BUS 485.

**BUS 130: Principles of Business and BUS 185: Business Management**  
(Bus 185 data for five class meetings only.)

**CURRENT EVENTS – 25% - BUS 130: Principles of Business**

Do you think that low consumer spending now will continue into Christmas or do you think the holiday will boost the economy?

With domestic automotive companies offering a 0% interest rate, will foreign competitors begin to make special offers to gain a share of the market?

Do you think Bush is going to make the right decisions, regarding the Terrorist Attacks? Is this going to lead to another World War?

How much will the incident affect the world market? The US market?

Where do you think the stock market will be when we come out of the recession, how will the interest rates be affected by the change in the market?

**5% - BUS 185: Business Management –**  
Do you think lowering gas prices has to do with the upcoming election?

Why don't the developers of the Chinese building complex just demolish the woman's apartment that is delaying their building plans?

**OPERATIONS OF CLASS – 25% BUS 130: Principles of Business**

When writing our business proposal how much info. Should we put in our location of business? (Do we need to include size of building, maximum capacity and things like that?)

Are we ever going to find out how to use power point or are we going to have to learn it ourselves?

Which days paper should we use for the article that we bring on Mon?

What are the key sections to focus on in the Wall Street Journal?

What types of questions do you put on tests?

When is the actual written part of the group project due? Mon or Wed (the first day of presentations)

Have you ever done group projects, like the ones we are doing now, every year?

Does our business plan need to indicate that financing has already been secured?

**5% - BUS 185: Business Management**

What kind of dress are we supposed to wear for the tour?

Me being a music business major, is there anything in this class that will apply directly to music business?

**CONTENT – 17% BUS 130: Principles of Business**

Where can I find a good example of a code of ethics?

What is a manager's most important duty?

Do you think that this will have a positive or negative effect on the airline industry as a business whole?

Within the Wal-Mart on 422, there is a Cingular (communications co.) booth. Does this type of company interaction classify as B2B? Or, does this have another title?

How long is Alan Greenspan's term?

Say I started a company how would I go about putting it on the stock market?

What is the relationship called that Ford and Firestone have? Is it like a contract?

**87% - BUS 185: Business Management**

Can outsourcing cause confidentiality problems if competitors in a certain industry use the same supplier or manufacturer? Is there contracts that can legally make the supplier keep information such as specific materials confidential?

Can anorexic down sizing affect a company enough to make it bankrupt?

Are there times when a firm decides to transform from decentralized authority to centralized authority?

**LVC – 10% BUS 130: Principles of Business**

What business courses will I need to continue taking next semester?

What gpa does a student have to earn in order to be allowed to do an internship?

Do I have to schedule a meeting w/ my advisor to pick up my midterm grades or do I just go to his office?

When will all the construction around the campus be finished?

How many people are employed by LVC?

Who is the Human Resource person on our campus?

0% - **BUS 185: Business Management**  
No applicable questions

GRADES – 7% **BUS 130: Principles of Business**  
When do we get our grades for the group project?

What percent of our grade is the group project?

What exactly needs to be done on the outline to get an A? (Explain what you want more clearly.)

0% – **BUS 185: Business Management**  
No applicable questions

PERSONAL – 5% **BUS 130: Principles of Business**

Did you have to take computer training courses to learn how to use new technology?

What is your favorite movie and why?

Professor Kline, what made you decide teaching was the road you wanted to take? Why not a business man, etc.?

How was your thanksgiving?

0% - **BUS 185: Business Management**  
No applicable questions

OUTSIDE WORLD – 5% **BUS 130: Principles of Business**

If someone had a choice, would you recommend that they join a union?

How many speeding tickets did the anvil police issue last year?

How many different jobs can you get with a business degree?

How difficult is it to get a loan and start your own business?

3% - **BUS 185: Business Management**

Why are salaries generally higher in the North than in the south?

Why has college been the socially expected thing to do and is it possible to be successful without it?

FINAL EXAM – 5% **BUS 130: Principles of Business**

What is the actual day and time of our final exam? (The syllabus says Thursday, Dec 14 – but the 14 is a Friday.)

Will the final be focused more on the last few chapters or will it be equally distributed through all the chapters?

Will we have a review session for the final exam?

0% - **BUS 185: Business Management**  
No applicable questions

SELF EVALUATING – less than 1% **BUS 130: Principles of Business**

What do you feel is the most important thing we should get out of this course?

What was your overall opinion of the group presentations?

0% - **BUS 185: Business Management**  
No applicable questions

**Questions from Presentations: BUS 130: Principles of Business**

MARKETING – 10%

Besides location, how do you expect to draw business to your distribution center?

Do you plan on making smoothies for large events such as rock concerts to get your name out?

PROFITS/FINANCES – 10%

How much money do you plan on making your first year?

Is your \$9,000 NI after salaries have been taken out?

OPERATIONS – 20%

How many part-time employees do you plan to hire?

How often will your business be open? What are your hours?

Will you be giving straight razor shaves?

How often will you get new inventory in?

Are you offering any other products besides sno-cones?

#### ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE/ BUSINESS STRATEGIES – 60%

Why did you decide to start a landscaping business?

What do you plan to do in the off-season since its not warm all year long in Ocean City?

Do you plan to open up more locations in the future?

What kind of ethics training will you provide?

#### **BUS 285: Organizational Communications**

##### **Questions Asked Before Class**

What does TBA mean in the syllabus?

My potential shadowee has not called back. Should I move on?

Which accounting firm would be better?

The person said to call back early next week. How long should I wait?

Does the ending in Figure 7.6 shift the focus of the letter?

How can I improve my writing?

##### **Written Questions**

#### DAY OF OBSERVATION – 7%

Would it be possible to discuss the order of material hand in with the report?

On the day of the DOO Report is due, will we be doing anything else in class, other than handing in our report

Can we set up an appointment for DOO questions next week?

Is it better to use what the shadowee said on the PowerPoint or to use what we saw on the day of observation?

#### PRESENTATIONS – 10%

How long is presentation 4 going to be?

For our presentation, are we going to stand behind the computer or to the side of the projection screen?

Are visual props permitted for this presentation?

When will we find out the order for presentation five?

#### OPERATIONS – 30%

Can we use news items as our communication events for our daily writings?

I'm having some difficulty figuring out how to include my Wall Street Journal grades onto my excel worksheets. Could you explain this?

What will we be doing next week? Do we need to bring anything special?

Do we meet with you to review grades before or during finals week?

#### PERSONAL – less than 1%

Where did you go to school?

What specific grammatical errors are your pet peeves?

#### ETIQUETTE – 20%

What would be more professional? A follow up e-mail or follow up call after we initiate contact with our shadowee?

The reading talked about how many cultures act differently when it comes to the international business world of communication. Do many cultures do things differently when it comes to content and organization of a report or memo?

More than once in the Professional Image text, it mentions that if you are not sure what to wear to a certain occasion, event, or even work you should ask someone. Who would be the most appropriate person to ask to ensure you will wear the proper attire?

How do you talk to a difficult employee when you are forced to work with everyday? Should you work things out and at what point should you seek help?

#### WRITING/FORMAT – 15%

How long should our recommendations part be?

When listing quoted items, do you still put the punctuation inside of the quotations?

What has been the most efficient and useful use of time when planning, writing, and revising of a paper for you?

#### CONCEPTS – 10%

In Locker, page 481, the author states that, “gestures usually work best when they are big and confident.” Won’t this distract the audience?

When “Getting to the Problem”, is there an easier way than using Active Listening without offending or making the communicator mad?

Of the 6 Questions for Analysis (found on page 24) Which is most important, in your opinion?

#### SELF IMPROVEMENT – less than 1%

How would you evaluate our class as a whole?

If there was one things you would want us to take away from this class what would it be and why?

#### **Written Questions of the Syllabus, the Day Of Observation Guidelines, and the Writing Guidelines.**

Syllabus:

What is “Cooper” in the Responsibility section? I answered my own question!

After a presentation is presented, does everyone have to ask a question?

When will the Review of Grades take place?

What is meant by Improvement in the Grading section?

Does missing a class for our DOO lower our grade in any way?

Day of Observation Guidelines:

Can the shadowee be a friend of the family?

Are we expected to wear full professional clothing for the DOO?

If possible, are we allowed to observe more than one day to see what different days are like for the shadowee?

Did you ever shadow someone while you were in college? Is that how you came up with the idea?

How do we obtain a shadowee, do you have a list or do we find one on our own?

Writing Guidelines:

Do we need a thesis for our Daily Writings?

What is the difference between then and than?

What is the most common error?

What does M=R mean?

Will you tell us if our paper has enough content?

#### **BUS 485: Strategic Management**

#### OPERATIONS – 17%

What steps in the employee recruitment process do you recommend Quorum pay particular attention to, to not only maintain quality, but also the safety of the patients?

Isn’t Harrah’s Entertainment sending contradictory messages by saying they are concerned about problem gamblers; but offering Total Gold Playing cards, which reward people for spending a lot of money at their establishments?

Do you feel that Harrah’s strong effort to recruit minorities and women has been successful in gaining quality employees? Should this effort be continued?

Azalea’s had to recall \$100,00 worth of gumbo in 2000 due to a stamp problem. What can Azalea’s do in the future to prevent such a problem?

Do you think the salaries for the employees of Portman Ritz-Carlton Shanghei should be raised?

Do you feel that the waste given off by the company is too much for the environment?

#### MARKETING – 17%

What do you think is the market niche for Quorum? Do you think its [sic] helps or hurts them?

What kind of target do you see most important for Quorum Health Group to go after?

Are there any plans to change the demographics of the company to try and reach a new and different customer?

The financial statements show Azalea has not spent any money on advertising since 2001. Do you think more advertising would help the company grow?

Company growth is an important issue. Since most of your sales come from repeat customers, do you have a marketing plan in order to attract new customers and increase sales?

Do you think BFW should advertise their biodynamic/environmental uses on their label to further increase their sales and recognition?

#### PROFITS/FINANCES – 11%

How are you planning on making enough profit so that it will justify your operating expenses

Since net income decreased significantly while operating revenues increased, what measures will be implemented to reduce operating expenses

What do you feel about the financial situation of Harrah? Practically, about the Increase in debt over the pass [sic] few years? Almost a 1 million dollar increase a year. (most of which is long term debt)

Would it be possible to estimate the total cost of implementing BFW's Ems and compare it to the total gain? If the company will not make a profit after developing the EMS, should they still follow through with it?

Is the company financially stable for all the changes, monitoring, and other steps needed to help this company?

Cash flow appears to be a problem in recent years (199-2003), as the balance sheet presents negative cash. What are your suggestions to improve cash flow?

#### ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE/ BUSINESS STRATEGY – 55%

Do you feel that HARRAH's Entertainment, Inc.'s management style is effective?

Because gaming on the Internet has not been banned, do you plan to compete on the Internet?

Quorum has had difficulty acquiring in the past, what procedures would they need to change to acquire more effectively?

Do you think EA's powerful vision of obtaining millions of users for playing EA games online is realistic?

Do you feel that the pyramid they created was wrong...meaning guest satisfaction should have been before employee?

Do you think DeCocinis should have spent more money on his employees (i. e. salary increase than spending it on himself (i.e. fancy motorcycle)? If he had, do you think he would still be facing the same problem now in terms of competitors "stealing" his employees?

How has the Asian currency crisis effected[sic] your company over the past several years?

As an aging employee with three children, what is the likelihood that I will lose my job if the company expands since younger employees tend to be more productive and are cheaper to employ?

How can Azelea prevent future bad customer relations, such as what happened in 2000 with the mislabeling of dates on their products?

