Domain 3: Instruction

b. Using Questioning and Discussion Techniques

The Framework for Teaching by Charlotte Danielson
Questioning and discussion are the only instructional strategies specifically referred to in the Framework for Teaching; this reflects their central importance to teachers’ practice. In the framework, questioning and discussion are used as techniques to deepen student understanding, rather than serving merely as recitation or a verbal "quiz." Good teachers use divergent as well as convergent questions, framed in such a way that they invite students to formulate hypotheses, make connections, or challenge previously held views. Students’ responses to questions are valued; effective teachers are especially adept at responding to and building on student responses and making use of their ideas. High-quality questions encourage students to make connections among concepts or events previously believed to be unrelated and arrive at new understandings of complex material. Effective teachers also pose questions to which they do not know the answers. Asking non-formulaic questions, even when the question has a limited number of correct responses, is likely to promote student thinking. Effective questioning and discussion techniques lead to animated class discussions that engage all students in considering important issues and in using their own language to deepen and extend their understanding. Discussions may be based around questions formulated by the students themselves.
Not all questions must be at a high cognitive level in order for a teacher’s performance to be rated at a high level; however, when exploring a topic, a teacher might begin with a series of questions of low cognitive challenge to provide a review or to ensure that everyone in the class is on board. Furthermore, if questions are at a high level, but only a few students participate in the discussion, the teacher’s performance on the component cannot be judged to be at a high level. In lessons involving small-group work, the quality of the students’ questions and discussion in their small groups may be considered as part of this component.

In order for students to formulate high-level questions, they must have learned how to do so. Therefore, high-level questions from students, either in the full class or in small-group discussions, provide evidence that these skills have been taught.
The Elements

- This component may be broken down into three distinct and important elements. As you review these elements, think about what they might look like in practice in the classroom.

- **Quality of questions/prompts**
  Questions of high quality cause students to think and reflect, to deepen their understanding, and to test their ideas against those of their classmates. When teachers ask questions of high quality, they ask only a few of them, and they provide students with sufficient time to think about their responses, to reflect on the comments of their classmates, and to deepen their understanding. Occasionally, for the purposes of review, teachers ask students a series of (usually low-level) questions in a type of verbal review. This may be helpful for the purpose of establishing the facts of an historical event, for example, but they should not be confused with the use of questioning to deepen student understanding.

- **Discussion techniques**
  Some teachers report that "we discussed x" when what they mean is "I said x." That is, some teachers confuse discussion with explanation of content; as important as explanation is, it’s not discussion. Rather, in a true discussion, a teacher poses a question and invites all students’ views to be heard, and also enables students to engage in discussion directly with one another, not always mediated by the teacher.

- **Student participation**
  In some classes a few students tend to dominate the discussion; other students, recognizing this pattern, hold back their contributions. Experienced teachers use a range of techniques to ensure that all students contribute to the discussion, and they enlist the assistance of students to ensure this outcome.
Determining a level of performance for a component must be grounded in evidence found during an observation of a lesson. The indicators below may be used as a guide for looking for evidence of this component in a classroom.

- Questions of high cognitive challenge, formulated by both students and teacher
- Questions with multiple correct answers, or multiple approaches even when there is a single correct response
- Effective use of student responses and ideas
- Discussion in which the teacher steps out of the central, mediating role
- High levels of student participation in discussion
The teacher only calls on students who have their hands up.

This observation is evidence of student participation—one of the elements of this component. If a few students dominate the conversation, then this is an indication of a lower level of performance.

In a lesson on plot structure in a Dickens novel, the teacher asks, “Where was Shakespeare born?”

This observation is a demonstration of the quality of questions/prompts—one of the elements of this component. The question posed to students is unrelated to the lesson outcomes, and does not deepen their thinking; however, it might be appropriate in a higher level of performance if the question is followed by one or more questions that do require higher-order thinking.
Students attend fully to what the teacher is saying.

*NOT RELEVANT:* This observation does not provide evidence for the quality of questions posed by the teacher nor the quality of discussion among students. Rather, this observation is evidence for how respectful students are in teacher-student interactions—an element of *Creating an Environment of Respect and Rapport.*

A student says to a classmate, “I don’t think I agree with you on this because…”

*This observation is evidence of students engaging directly in discussion with each other (rather than a completely teacher-mediated discussion) in a manner that extends their learning—an indication of a higher level of performance.*
Relevant because...

- The teacher asks, “Student M, can you comment on Student T’s idea?” and Student M responds directly to Student T. *This observation demonstrates that the teacher employs techniques that encourage students to engage in discussion with each other—an indicator for this component. An important piece of evidence to note would be whether or not Student M responds directly to Student T. If he does, then this would indicate that students have been taught how to engage in respectful discussion with one another—a higher level of performance.*

- The teacher asks a student to explain the task to other students. *NOT RELEVANT: This is evidence for directions and procedures—an element of Communicating with Students. In order for an observation like this to be relevant for Using Questioning/Prompts and Discussion Techniques, the teacher would have to ask students to discuss an issue related to the topic that deepens student understanding rather than clarifying task procedures.*
Activity: Level of Performance

You will read four classroom observation descriptions. They are numbered so that we can reference them and in no way reflect their performance level.

After each of the four description, jot down what performance level you would assign it and why.
1. While the teacher may use some low-level questions, he or she poses questions to students designed to promote student thinking and understanding. The teacher creates a genuine discussion among students, providing adequate time for students to respond and stepping aside when appropriate. The teacher successfully engages most students in the discussion, employing a range of strategies to ensure that most students are heard.
2. The teacher uses a variety or series of questions or prompts to challenge students cognitively, advance high-level thinking and discourse, and promote meta-cognition. Students formulate many questions, initiate topics, and make unsolicited contributions. Students themselves ensure that all voices are heard in the discussion.
3. The teacher’s questions are of low cognitive challenge, with single correct responses, and asked in rapid succession. Interaction between teacher and students is predominantly recitation style, with the teacher mediating all questions and answers. A few students dominate the discussion.
What’s the Level of Performance?

4. The teacher’s questions lead students along a single path of inquiry, with answers seemingly determined in advance. Or, the teacher attempts to frame some questions designed to promote student thinking and understanding, but only a few students are involved. The teacher attempts to engage all students in the discussion and to encourage them to respond to one another, with uneven results.
Level of Performance Answers

1. Effective (Rubric Level 3)
2. Highly Effective (Rubric Level 4)
3. Ineffective (Rubric Level 1)
4. Partially Effective (Rubric Level 2)

Any surprises?
Level 3: Critical Attributes

- The teacher uses open-ended questions, inviting students to think and/or offer multiple possible answers.
- The teacher makes effective use of wait time.
- The teacher builds on and uses student responses to questions effectively.
- Discussions enable students to talk to one another, without ongoing mediation by the teacher.
- The teacher calls on most students, even those who don't initially volunteer.
- Many students actively engage in the discussion.

Level 3: Evidence

- The teacher asks, "What might have happened if the colonists had not prevailed in the American war for independence?"
- The teacher uses the plural form in asking questions, such as "What are some things you think might contribute to...?"
- The teacher asks, "Student M, can you comment on Student T's idea?" and Student M responds directly to Student T.
- The teacher asks a question and asks every student to write a brief response and share it with a partner; the teacher then invites a few students to offer their ideas to the entire class.
Level 3 Sample Video

(Insert Benchmark B.... 5:10)
Level 2: Critical Attributes

- The teacher frames some questions designed to promote student thinking, but only a few students are involved.
- The teacher invites students to respond directly to one another’s ideas, but few students respond.
- The teacher calls on many students, but only a small number actually participate in the discussion.

Level 2: Evidence

- Many questions are of the "recitation" type, such as "How many members of the House of Representatives are there?"
- In a lesson on plot structure in a Dickens novel, the teacher asks: "Where was Shakespeare born?"
- The teacher asks, "Who has an idea about this?" but the same three students offer comments.
- The teacher asks, "Student M, can you comment on Student T's idea?" but Student M does not respond, or makes a comment directly to the teacher.
Level 2 Sample Video

(ELEMENTARY: Insert High Rangefinder…. 3:36)
(MS: Insert Benchmark A…4:12)
Level 1: Critical Attributes

- Questions are rapid-fire and convergent, with single correct answers.
- Questions do not invite student thinking.
- All discussion is between teacher and students; students are not invited to speak directly to one another.
- A few students dominate the discussion.

Level 1: Evidence

- All questions are of the "recitation" type, such as "What is 3 x 4?"
- The teacher asks a question for which the answer is on the board; students respond by reading it.
- The teacher only calls on students who have their hands up.
Level 1: Sample Video

(ELEMENTARY: Insert High Rangefinder... 5:00)
(MS: Insert Benchmark A... 5:13)
Level 4: Critical Attributes

In addition to the characteristics of a level of performance 3,

- Students initiate higher-order questions.
- Students extend the discussion, enriching it.
- Students invite comments from their classmates during a discussion.

Level 4: Evidence

- A student asks, "How many ways are there to get this answer?"
- A student says to a classmate, "I don't think I agree with you on this, because..."
- A student asks other students, "Does anyone have another idea as to how we might figure this out?"
- A student asks, "What if...?"
Level 4: Sample Video

(ELEMENTARY: Insert Low Rangefinder...3:25)
(MS: Insert Benchmark A...4:24)
After reviewing the Performance Levels for Domain 3b: Using Questioning and Discussion Techniques, do you think you could distinguish between them?

Did the sample videos of each of the performance levels in this component help to provide clarity in what each of the performance levels looks like?

Reflect on your classroom practices.... What would the performance level of your classroom on a typical day be as it relates to this component?
Remember...

Our performance goal is to LIVE in 3… and vacation in 4.
Session Reflection & Exit Card

- An insight I had as a result of today’s session is…

- Concepts from this session that are most applicable to my teaching practice are…

- A question I have related to today’s session is…