Multiple Choice Questions

Multiple choice questions (MCQs) are nothing new in education but are sometimes viewed as a shallow form of assessment. There is evidence that well written MCQs can be used to promote higher order thinking and with increased use of testing apps and the recent increase in online home learning, getting MCQs right is important.

Writing high quality MCQs is hard, but used correctly they have a wide range if uses. As Daisy Christodoulou writes, they can be used formatively as a class activity and generate great class discussions, or when used summatively, 'they are easier to mark than essay questions, which have the reverse effort profile: ie, relatively easy to set, relatively effortful and time-consuming to mark.'.

Good MCQs should make pupils think hard about the answer. Thought needs to go into how questions are phrased, how they are structured and the choice of answers pupils are given. Teachers can learn as much from the incorrect answers that pupils choose than the ones they get right. So how do you write a good MCQ?

In his researchEDLoom talk, Stuart Kime outlines the research around MCQs and offers the following advice:

- Questions should be aligned with the curriculum and avoid irrelevant material.
- Avoid negative phrasing - asking pupils to identify which is *not* the answer.
- Ask a focussed question - avoid 'fill in the blanks'
- Keep the answers similar and avoid adding more detail to the right answer
- Randomise the order of questions to stop pupils 'knowing' which will be right
- 3 answers are enough. The correct answer, a clearly wrong (yet relevant) answer and a plausible answer.
- Don't use 'none of the above' - pupils choosing this won't give you any useful information.

The distractors you use can tell you a lot about pupil misconceptions. Collaborate with colleagues to identify common misconceptions when writing banks of questions and reflect on the answers pupils give to see if there are any you weren't aware of.

In a recent blog post, teacher Dawn Cox explores how multiple choice quizzes can be used to differentiate and shows how you can increase complexity. Thinking about the vocabulary you use can help identify pupil knowledge. Deciding where to include subject specific vocabulary can change the complexity of what is essentially the same question. Asking pupils to 'identify the incorrect statement' is more challenging as pupils will need to read all the answers carefully, and this can be made more complex by asking pupils for the 'best answer' as the distractors can be correct but less likely or important. She recommends using extended explanations where 'more complex (literary based) reasoning is needed'.

She suggests the easiest way to increase challenge without increasing demands of literacy is to ask pupils to select multiple correct answers. You can extend this by not telling pupils how many are correct. She also suggests giving the option 'I don't know yet'. There is, of course, the chance pupils can guess answers so this can be used to find out if they don't know something. Be aware that this requires a level of vulnerability from pupils, particularly if a question is high-stakes.

Finally, she looks at the use of 'carefully crafted distractors'. As mentioned above, knowledge of misconceptions can be really useful and you can use these to challenge pupils further.

https://youtu.be/iFqxgg6b-II Stuart Kime   https://missdcoxblog.wordpress.com Dawn Cox

Edited by Beth Greville-Giddings

Relay

Great Teaching Toolkit

Published in June 2020 by Evidence Based Education, the Great Teaching Toolkit Evidence Review is the start of a project to identify the kind of professional development that leads to improvement in specific areas of practice.

They have reviewed existing research studies and frameworks to help teachers make better decisions about what they can best do to improve their effectiveness. The review identifies four priorities for teachers who want to help their students learn more and presents a model that comprises of four overarching dimensions, with a total of 17 elements, that 'may be worth investing time and effort to work on to build a specific competency, skill or knowledge, or to enhance the learning environment', within them.

The intention is not to reduce teaching to a 'set of techniques' but set out how evidence suggests 'the best route to expertise is likely to involve a focus on developing competencies, guided by formative feedback in a supportive professional learning environment'.

This first stage of the project to create a 'toolkit' to support a personalised curriculum for teacher learning, providing feedback and coordination of networks, also aims to bring together a community of thousands of educators working towards a shared aim, supporting each other and creating the evidence we need.
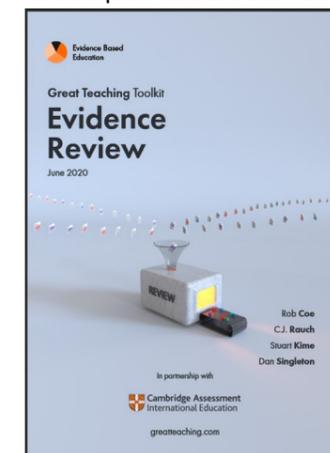
Four priorities for teachers who want to help their student learn more:

Understand the content they are teaching and how it is learnt

Create a supportive environment for learning

Manage the classroom to maximise the opportunity to learn

Present content, activities and interactions that activate their students' thinking

https://bit.ly/GTTEvReview

Instructional Coaching

Moving away from traditional, one-size-fits-all CPD to a more individualised model, an increasing number of experts argue that instructional coaching is currently the best-evidenced form of professional development we have.

What is Instructional Coaching?

Instructional coaching involves an expert teacher working with a novice in an classroom observation-feedback-practice cycle. The same specific skills are revisited several times to focus on how the novice needs to improve. There are different models of instructional coaching which include those that follow a rubric to more prescriptive models that specify techniques, which can be used with teachers at all stages of their career.

How is instructional coaching different from other types of coaching?

Other models of 'coaching' that people might be familiar with are those often used in business where a coach uses questioning techniques to help a coachee reflect and draw out answers to questions or problems. Instructional coaching has a focus on a specific, directed technique that is learnt and improved with expert support.

How effective is instructional coaching?

Researcher Sam Sims has written about four ways in which he thinks the evidence base for instructional coaching is superior.

1. Evidence from replicated randomised controlled trials
2. Evidence from meta-analysis
3. Evidence from A-B testing
4. Evidence from systematic research programmes

He outlines in a 2019 article how research shows that instructional coaching is more effective than traditional CPD for improving teacher practice, and student outcomes. Having 'looked hard at the literature [he] cannot find another form of CPD for which the evidence is this strong'.

He acknowledges weaknesses in the evidence base including scaling up of programmes and differences in evidence between subjects however he suggests that school leaders strongly consider implementing instructional coaching as professional development.

Are there any considerations for implementation?

There is a history of high-stakes observation of teaching in schools and a culture of trust is vital to ensure open and developmental dialogue between expert and novice. Teachers need to be invested in the process. Many staff may be wary of opening up their practice to perceived criticism and leaders should separate developmental observations from evaluative ones.

It is also crucial that experts are well trained in terms of both their own knowledge and instructional coaching techniques. Teachers need confidence that they can build a professional relationship that will challenge them to improve and coaches are able to support teachers to move towards their target performance.

Instructional coaching is a focused, context-specific and sustained form of professional development that can be implemented for teachers at any level.

Further links to resources available on the RLT COVID-19 Hub: **bit.ly/RLT-COVID-HUB**

Edu-Blog Spotlight

Rachel Ball is a history teacher and assistant principal in charge of teaching and learning. She tweets as @MrsBallAP and blogs at theeducationalimposters.wordpress.com

Rachel was recently prompted to reflect on attitudes to differentiation and high expectations in her post 'Teach To The Top'. Whist she has used differentiated learning objectives in the past, she didn't think this was something that happened in schools any more.

The Educational Imposters

The Boys Don't Try? podcast reminded her that differentiated learning objectives or outcomes tell pupils that some parts of the curriculum are only for 'some' – not all, and sets lower expectations for pupils at different levels in a class. In addition to telling pupils they aren't worthy of some knowledge, it 'encourages laziness and a lack of motivation'. She argues that this extends to tasks within a lesson where the main task is set for all pupils but certain pupils have an additional 'challenge' indicated on their worksheets or slide. She quotes Ross Morrison McGill who says "Putting on 'challenge' at the end of the lesson means it failed to challenge in the first place."

She considers that the answer to this is to 'stop thinking about different routes through the lesson or a scheme of work' and teach to the top, regardless of the pupils in our class, using scaffolding to support pupils to access our lessons. We need to think about how we take pupils to the next level by identifying the support each pupil needs to succeed - whether that's by perhaps chunking tasks or teaching vocabulary.

When it comes to differentiated learning objectives she thinks it is useful for students to know the big picture of the lesson; how it fits into the broader curriculum, aims for that lessons and the reasons why they are learning, quoting Matt Pinkett, "Yes, it helps students if they know why they're learning iambic pentameter. Or the causes of the Wall Street Crash. Or quotations from Genesis. But, rather than wasting time with Learning Objectives, just tell 'em. "We're learning about X today because it's going to help you with Y next week and one day you'll be able/need to use it for Z."

The way she does this is to have a learning goal for every lesson that is communicated to the pupils without them wasting time copying it down. She suggests teachers consider whether their 'bolt on' challenges are actually serving to restrict pupil achievement and think about how to motivate all pupils with challenging material.

Full post available here: https://bit.ly/2Wkab6t

Decoding the Diary Sheet

You've been asked for some information or a pupil report for a meeting, but what do all those letters mean?

TES

TES is a weekly magazine formerly known as the Times Educational Supplement, aimed at education professionals. Originally a pull-out supplement in The Times newspaper, it became a separate publication in 1914.

TES focuses on school-related news and features with a range of contributors including classroom-based teachers, other educational professionals, academics and celebrities.

TES also runs a popular website featuring breaking education news and comment, teaching jobs, forums, and classroom resources that are uploaded to a marketplace by teachers.