

Consulting through Questionnaires

What follows is edited from a report by John McBeath on Project 2's task of developing a "toolbox" of useful techniques, adaptable in different contexts, for consulting pupils. We focus here on questionnaires only because they are so widely used. Other approaches illustrated in our book (see page 4) are talk-based approaches (conversations, discussions, interviews) and image-based approaches (drawing, painting, taking photos, making posters) as well as approaches that require more extended writing (such as diaries and logs).

“Not another questionnaire”, an all too familiar refrain!

Questionnaires are the most popular and most over-used format for gathering data but we still persist in using them for a whole variety of purposes. They have, however, played a significant role in educational research in, for example, school effectiveness studies, in out-of-school learning, in comparative international studies, in the evaluation of large scale government reform, as well as in numerous studies of pupils' attitudes to school and to learning.

Questionnaires have traditionally been viewed as the province of researchers and it is only in recent years that schools have been using them for consulting pupils. In any context there are dangers of overuse and misuse but there are also benefits to be gained from instruments that are well designed, fit for purpose and genuinely about consultation. Michael Fielding has identified four different approaches to consultation which, in the context of questionnaire use, may be seen as a progression from lowest to highest level.

students as a data source - providing data for the researchers to interpret and use

students as active respondents - playing an active role in interpreting questionnaire data

students as co-researchers - involved with teachers in the design and processing of questionnaires

students as researchers - playing the leading role in constructing their own instruments

These four categories have proved helpful to schools in critically reviewing the why, what, when and how of questionnaire design, administration and use. Identifying your purpose within this framework does imply that there is a climate of openness and self-knowledge and a belief that students as researchers is an aim worth pursuing.

The one single finding that emerges most clearly from our project is that questionnaires are likely not only to be futile but even counter-productive if they are not followed by a critical exploration of their meaning and implications for the work of teachers and pupils.

Horses for Courses

Within the project, questionnaires were used for different purposes. These included:

- to establish a baseline at the beginning of the project*
- for feedback on teaching and classroom climate*
- for diagnostic purposes in learning*
- as an agenda for discussion*

A Matter of Design

Statements

A questionnaire may be constructed in terms of questions but it is more often couched in terms of statements to which people are asked to agree or disagree, give an importance rating, or make some other response - for example, to indicate how typical this is in school or classroom.

Categories

- crucial / very important / quite important / not important
- strongly agree / agree / disagree / strongly disagree
- true of all / true of some / true of a few / true of none
- always / most of the time / sometimes / never

The Double Sided Questionnaire

This style of questionnaire asks people to respond twice - once in terms of how true the statement is of the school or class and then how important they think it is. Fulfen Primary School created their own version of the questionnaire. It was completed by all pupils in year 6 and followed by discussion of the findings. These are some examples of the questions they formulated and how they were framed:

Teachers listen to my ideas, even if they don't agree with them.

<i>in my school</i>	<i>its importance for me</i>
<i>true</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>very, very important</i> <input type="checkbox"/>
<i>mostly true</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>very important</i> <input type="checkbox"/>
<i>rarely true</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>important</i> <input type="checkbox"/>
<i>not true</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>not important</i> <input type="checkbox"/>

I take responsibility for what I learn in school.

<i>in my lessons</i>	<i>its importance for me</i>
<i>true</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>very, very important</i> <input type="checkbox"/>
<i>mostly true</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>very important</i> <input type="checkbox"/>
<i>rarely true</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>important</i> <input type="checkbox"/>
<i>not true</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>not important</i> <input type="checkbox"/>

I can use a variety of different ways of learning things.

<i>in my lessons</i>	<i>its importance for me</i>
<i>true</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>very, very important</i> <input type="checkbox"/>
<i>mostly true</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>very important</i> <input type="checkbox"/>
<i>rarely true</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>important</i> <input type="checkbox"/>
<i>not true</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>not important</i> <input type="checkbox"/>

The double sided questionnaire has a number of advantages:

One is that it allows a comparison on any given item - as shown in this example:

Pupils' views are listened to and taken seriously

The comparison here is between how important pupils think it is and whether it happens now.

92% **important**

55% **happens now**

The comparison here is between teachers' and pupils' perceptions of pupils being listened to.

82% **teachers' views**

65% **pupils' views**

What could be better in Maths?

In Penny-dre School a questionnaire was used to get pupils' opinions on the teaching of Maths. The questionnaire was based on an instrument used to assess service quality in social workers. It was given to pupils in Year 7 and results were then discussed with the class. The single most commonly agreed inhibitor of learning was disruption. Some also felt that Maths lessons could be improved by pupils being based in one room

A number of ways of improving lessons were suggested: rearranging the boy-girl seating to give 'calmer lessons' was one. Longer lessons/double lessons were seen as a good idea, because this would give more continuity. Pupils also suggested more breaks before going to a lesson and it was suggested that Maths should take place in the morning and English in the afternoon as "Maths needs more concentration". (This was not an idea that the English Department found persuasive!)

TOP 10 WAYS OF LEARNING

The following were rated on an 8 point scale as helping most with learning

- 8/8: working as a group
- 8/8: doing experiments
- 8/8: role-play
- 8/8: taking notes from books
- 7/8: working in pairs
- 4/8: using IT
- 3/8: making models
- 2/8: video
- 0/8: listening to tape
- 0/8: teacher talking

Talking about Learning

Richmond School used questionnaires to consult pupils about their learning preferences. Year 8 and 9 teachers used them in Design Technology, Science, French, English, History and Geography. Pupils were asked for their views on different teaching methods, pacing and on management of lessons, and to say what kind of activities were most beneficial for their learning. They also gave their views on target setting.

One teacher used the *What works in teaching and learning?* questionnaire. This asks for two responses, one about the frequency of a particular classroom activity and the other about how well (in pupils' judgements) it helps with learning.

Findings were discussed among pupils and teachers and they explored what aspects of classroom management and instruction could be changed to make learning more enjoyable and effective.

Pupils preferred shorter more achievable targets, but not necessarily easier ones. They preferred 15 minute long tasks with frequent recaps rather than long unbroken passages of teacher talk or sticking with one task. Less able pupils asked for more structure, less choice of activity and clearer direction as to what was expected. More able pupils, on the other hand, preferred more individual choice.

When lessons began to take these preferences into account, pupils responded with greater enthusiasm. They said they had achieved more than before. Their confidence and attitude to class work improved as a result of consultation and, as a consequence, teachers are now introducing a wider range of activities such as role playing and model making.

"History is a lot different. Doing all the games like getting into groups and looking at the picture then drawing it on the paper, it stays longer in my head."

"I've found history and geography a lot more interesting - I think the memory games we do work very well and they were fun to do."

Questionnaires as Tin Openers

In all the schools which used them, questionnaires came to be seen more as a starting point than an end point. They raised questions, suggested leads to be followed up and demonstrated the inadequacy of the questionnaire as a single tool for consulting pupils about their learning. But in so doing they played an important role as tin openers - sometimes opening a can of worms! - but in all schools they led teachers and pupils into further inquiry and different and more sophisticated strategies.

Discussing Questionnaire Data with Pupils

"Teachers praise me when I do things well."

This was an item that pupils in the class had rated both as important and as true of their school but one pupil had said it was *not* important although true. In the follow up discussion of the data, the one dissenting voice identified himself and volunteered this illuminating comment:

"I don't need praise. If I'm satisfied with the work that's all that matters. I praise other people, though. I praise them because their work is often better than mine. Not always, but when it is."

This one item sparked a long discussion about praise, its effects, types of praise, 'cheap' praise and praise that really was valued by pupils, but valued differently by different individuals.

What Teachers Said

"We found that pupils responded very positively when they were involved in deciding what it was they needed to learn. They very much appreciated being asked to evaluate service quality via the questionnaire."

"We found that in a lot of cases merely the process of asking them about their learning improved it because they felt special. they felt cared for, they felt that they mattered."

"I'd dearly love other faculties in the school to take this questionnaire and adapt it for their own use."

"I'm hoping to use the students to formulate the questionnaire, older students who can reflect back and then guide the kind of focus that the questionnaire needs to look at."

"I think we need to be careful, as far as the pupils are concerned, about what can be death by questionnaires."

This issue is based on material in the first of four publications:

- * Consulting Pupils: A Toolkit for Teachers (MacBeath, Demetriou, Rudduck and Myers)*
- * Students as Researchers: Making a Difference (Fielding and Bragg)*
- * Pupil Participation: Building a Whole School Commitment (Bragg and Fielding)*
- * Consultation in the Classroom: Pupil Perspectives on Teaching and Learning (Arnot, McIntyre, Pedder and Reay)*

They will be published by Pearson Publishing, Cambridge, the first one in July 2003 and the other three in the Autumn. The first one will be free to all Network members.

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