Defined Academy

LAUNCHPAD ACTIVITY
Effective Coaching

OVERVIEW OF THE TEACHING PRACTICE

Think about what a coach does to prepare athletes for a game or a competition. They create a vision for success; share their expertise; run practices; give feedback; pay attention to emotions; and celebrate success.

A teacher acts as a coach, too, in project-based learning or any kind of assignment where you want students to think deeply. In a PBL project, teachers prepare students in the same ways an athletic coach does. The project is like the game: it's when all the learning and practicing come together for the big finish, when students show what they can do. Part of the job of "teacher-as-coach" is to guide students in learning on their own, so they can perform independently–just as athletes do in a game.

When acting as a coach, a key strategy is asking "probing questions" when talking with students. A probing question is intended to help a student *think*. It does not have a simple, quick answer. Here's an example: "How did you decide to do that?" or "Is there another way to think about that?" A probing question is not a simple question of fact, such as, "What source of information did you use?" A probing question is also not a thinly-veiled recommendation; avoid questions like, "Don't you think it would be better if you did it *this* way…?"

Asking probing questions has several benefits:

- It helps students think more deeply about what they're learning and doing.
- It helps develop independent thinking skills.
- It creates opportunities for challenging and stretching students.
- It allows teachers to check for deeper understanding.

Once you get the hang of asking probing questions, you can even teach students how to ask them, so they can coach each other!

EXPLANATION OF THE ACTIVITY

TITLE: Asking Probing Questions
GRADES: K-12
TIME: No set amount of time

PURPOSE: To learn how to ask questions that help students think, so they can take action: revise or improve their work, try a different approach, come up with new ideas, reflect on what they're doing, etc.

OVERVIEW

In this activity, the teacher practices acting as a coach by asking "probing questions" during a suitable assignment or project. An optional activity is included for teaching students how to ask probing questions when coaching each other.

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STEPS

1. Decide when you will practice acting as a coach by asking probing questions. Choose an assignment or project that requires students to think deeply and over time. Probing questions could be given in writing, if you're giving feedback on something students have written, but for this activity, try asking questions verbally, when walking around the room or conferencing with students.

2. To start, choose a few questions to be your "go-to" questions. You can add more to your repertoire over time, as you become more comfortable in the role of teacher-as-coach. You could ask students to:

    - *Clarify their thinking:*
        - Did I hear you say… (paraphrase)?
        - Can you say that in another way?
        - How did you figure that out?
        - What do you mean by…?
        - How did you/what criteria did you use to make that decision?
        - Tell me more about…
        - Can you give me an example of that?
        - Why do you think that is the best… (way, approach, idea)?

    - *Expand their thinking:*
        - What would this mean for…?
        - What impact would that have on…?
        - What evidence do you have for that?
        - What would people who disagree with you say?
        - What are you assuming about…?
        - Why is that important?
        - How does this relate to…?
        - How would you apply this to…?

3. Try your questions out when students are working on an assignment or project.

4. If a student has trouble responding to a probing question, you could:
    - Rephrase the question.
    - Break the question down into smaller ones.
    - Ask a related question.
    - Give the student a clue, hint, or prompt.
    - Bring other students into the conversation.

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5. *(Optional - For Older Students)* If you want to teach students how to ask probing questions, explain the concept and its purpose, give examples, and have them practice with each other. Here's one possible activity:
    - Form two lines of students so everyone is facing a partner.
    - Make a statement about something students are interested in, such as "Instagram is better than TikTok" or "A vegetarian diet is better than eating meat."
    - Allow 2-3 minutes for students to talk with their partner and come up with one clarifying question and one probing/expanding question.
    - Ask pairs to share their questions with the whole class. If they correctly came up with both kinds of questions, they may sit down. If they did not, ask them to remain in the line.
    - Make another statement and have the remaining pairs go through the process again.
    - Debrief the experience to be sure students understand probing questions, and let them know they'll be using them to coach each other.

NOTES

- After you coach students and ask the probing questions, reflect on what worked well and what you could do differently next time.
- You can find many more examples of probing questions and how to ask them in an internet search.
- If you want students to coach each other using probing questions, make it an explicit exercise the first few times. Give them directions and examples or sentence stems, have them try it, and debrief afterward. Eventually it should become a habit, with only brief reminders needed.

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