



## How A Simple Question Can Be A Powerful Motivator

By Michael Linsin

After giving directions, it's common for teachers to ask, "Are there any questions?"

Which isn't a bad idea, per se, especially if the teacher follows with an extended pause.

After all, it's good practice to allow students a moment or two to ponder the directions given and ask clarifying questions.

Doing so saves time, trouble, and confusion.

But the question itself, the way it's asked, unintentionally targets more responsible students.

It targets those you're least concerned about, those who are motivated, attentive, and most likely to speak up.

The rest of your class, those who most need to consider your question, are unlikely to say a word – even if they have no idea what you expect them to do.

So what's the solution? How do you ask a checking-for-understanding question in a way that specifically targets those who need it most?

**You ask a negative.**

"Is there anyone who *doesn't* know what to do?"

This question effectively skips past the high-achievers – who will almost never respond to it – and lands directly in the laps of those who urgently need it. It shines a spotlight on anyone daydreaming, half-listening, or blasé about the task at hand.

By flipping the script, by asking if anyone *doesn't* know what to do, you're challenging every student to consider your question. It's a self-checking device that makes students productively uncomfortable.

It causes their brain to click on and their mind to turn and question their readiness. *"Oh no, the teacher is talking to me. Let's see, I think I'm supposed to . . . Oh my gosh, I'm not sure."*

The effect is twofold:

First, when students grow accustomed to you asking questions in such a direct and challenging manner, they become more motivated to listen.

They sit up straighter. They follow you with their eyes. They test themselves internally, so that when the question comes, they can honestly refrain from raising their hand.

Second, it compels those who aren't sure what your expectations are to boldly raise their hand and ask clarifying questions, which tend to be better, clearer, and more pointed than before.

Now it's important to note that both benefits are made stronger by your actions while your students are carrying out your directives. Too many teachers turn their attention away from their class to multitask with preparation, organization, and the like.

This is a huge mistake.

Your students must feel your weighty eyes upon them. They must feel the urgency to prove how well they listened. There is a surprising amount of pride in this, and you mustn't take it away from them by turning your back.

Another cool thing about negative questions is that you can use them in so many different situations:

*"Is there anyone who isn't going to have their homework completed?"*

*"Is there anyone who doesn't remember the recess rules?"*

*"Is there anyone who doesn't feel prepared for the math test?"*

You can follow up your question with something like, “I want to know now, so I can help you. I don’t want to find out when it’s too late and you’ve failed the test.”

Questions that challenge students and target the pride living inside each of them have great power. They unseat lazy thinking patterns, inspire personal responsibility, and [jump start motivational engines](#).

And far from resenting the challenge, students love it. They love being trusted and counted on.

They love proving themselves to each other and their teacher.

They love the quiet contentment of a job well done.