

# DIDACTIC QUESTIONING THAT RECONCILES DISCIPLINARY AND PEDAGOGICAL KNOWLEDGE



LÉANE ARSENAULT  
PERFORMA director

*Pédagogie collégiale* presents an interview with Nicole Bizier, educational advisor. The interview was conducted by Léane Arsenault who has taught at the college level for eighteen years and has been a pedagogical supervisor for twelve years. She is currently a member of the PERFORMA management team.



Nicole Bizier has taught in the Nursing Care program for 25 years. She has been an educational advisor at Cégep de Sherbrooke since September 2003 and since then she has been a member of the task force on didactics for PERFORMA.

## LÉANE ARSENAULT:

In the context of developing training activities for the teaching staff at PERFORMA, drawing on the concept of the reflective practitioner, you raised the issue of didactic questioning. How did you come to this idea?

## NICOLE BIZIER:

With the competency-based approach, teachers felt that knowledge for its own sake was no longer important; that it was necessary to focus on the use of knowledge and the competencies to be acquired. Fifteen years later, we have sufficiently mastered this approach to realize that disciplinary knowledge is also important and must take its rightful place. So it is that didactic questioning brings teachers back to the trail of the fundamental meaning that motivated their choice of discipline, and it re-awakens their passion and capacity to act as *cultural guide and awakener of minds*, as described by Inchauspé (2007). Didactic questioning allows teachers to reflect on their profession

and the concept they have of their discipline and thereby to make or remake choices regarding which curricular knowledge to teach.

When these questions are raised within a group of teachers, the discussion soon turns toward the final objectives of the program. So the choices are not based uniquely on the interests of individuals for their discipline, but also on the objectives of both the program and its courses. When, as teachers, we are able to identify the essential attitude that is to be developed in a discipline while covering the territory of the program, we also grasp the overall picture and the milestones which mark the contribution that our profession or our discipline makes to the program. And, while on this trail, we are in the process of giving meaning to the term “contribution”, as used in the expression “contributory discipline”.

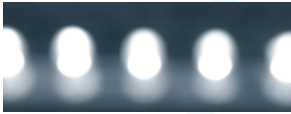
Didactics allow us to give meaning to knowledge; to transform disciplinary knowledge into knowledge to be taught and then into knowledge to be learned.

It allows us to send this knowledge into a channel which will provide it with a meaning X, in order next to develop competencies Y and Z.

This channel is what the task force<sup>1</sup> on didactics, of which I am a member, calls the *essential attitude* of the discipline.

This search for the essential attitude of the discipline is relevant for all teachers, regardless of the program in which they teach. For example, in general education, teachers are grappling within a very tight framework in terms of literature and an obligation to prepare students for the standardized French test. They are at risk of losing sight of the very essence of the attitude to be developed in the students. Fundamentals like love of the spoken and written word and love of storytelling could get lost in the mix of program demands. The challenge facing teachers is therefore to continue

<sup>1</sup> The PERFORMA task force: Francine Authier, Nicole Bizier, Lise Lapierre, Louise Leblanc and Françoise Ruel.



to transmit a passion for words within the confines of the school program: that is, to write for the pleasure of writing and not just to pass the standardized French test! The more technical side of writing, such as choosing, building or sharing a subject, developing the body or drawing a conclusion, must not cause students to lose sight of the creative side of writing. The course should inspire them to open up to culture. This framework of didactic questioning also applies to teachers in technical programs. It enables them to choose content based on typical professional situations; it gives them tools for choosing concepts to be respected based on the logic of professional situations; and it provides them with a basis for discussion regarding the learning of a profession or a discipline.

In this sense, didactic questioning enables us to put into words a framework for reflection that leads us to articulate our choices, and in so doing, it enables teachers to re-connect to their passion for their discipline.

So, according to you, these basic principles are linked to teachers' motivation to teach; that is to say, to their passion for their discipline?

**nb** Yes, using didactic questioning, we return to the essence, to the attraction the discipline has for the teachers, to the passion that inspired them and to their own relationship to the discipline. This becomes the profound meaning that teachers bring to the classroom.

It is the concept of *essential attitude* that relates in a fundamental way to the discipline itself. This involves asking oneself these questions: "What is fundamental in this discipline? What do I basically want students to learn? What does it mean to do philosophy, to do

physics?" In this way teachers are led to clarify the specific role their discipline plays within the program. They focus on the meaning of the discipline in relation to the students' learning, and that takes them beyond the main objective of transmitting knowledge. This is an important distinction to make. It enables teachers to discern the main idea, the basic orientation of the course. And the course content will revolve around this orientation.

The task force on didactics recommends a set of training activities that foster didactic questioning. For teachers, what does this mean exactly?

**nb** As I already mentioned, didactic questioning requires teachers to be explicit about their knowledge relative to the subject matter they teach in terms of the disciplinary or professional knowledge regarding the content to teach, the students' concepts of the subject matter, and the didactic material and its related strategies.

Within the framework of our research on college-level didactics, we have developed a concept called *the metaphor of the didactic flower*<sup>2</sup>, a reflective structure for use in this kind of questioning. Guided by the dimensions represented by the five petals of this flower, teachers question themselves on their knowledge of the discipline, on the choice of curricular knowledge to teach, on the understandings their students have of the course content, on the didactic material and on their own pedagogical strategies.

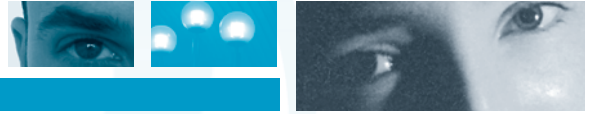
Another angle of reflection has to do with certain distances to take. From a didactic perspective, authors Simonneaux and Legardez (2006)<sup>3</sup> speak of three distances that

teachers must measure in order to reach students: the distance between what they know and what they will teach in the course or program; the distance between what is in the syllabus and what will be covered in the classroom; and, the distance which teachers try to bridge between the students and the course content in order to make it accessible. This distancing is often difficult for teachers. They have the impression that they must relinquish part of themselves when some of the course content is removed. For example, if my discipline is literature, I must learn to distance myself from my knowledge as a teacher of literature in order to concentrate on what must be learned and the students I am teaching. That is, the choice of authors must be filtered while at the same time being consistent with the course objectives; and this while also taking the students themselves into account.

Making the basis for one's choices explicit is just as demanding for new teachers as it is for those with more experience. It is an important step that calls for reflection and which enables teachers to construct meaning first for themselves and then later for their students. It is a meaning-construction process that can be shared with younger teachers as a way of helping them to construct their own meaning relative to their courses. This is what tutors do within the framework of micro program activities for professional initiation to college teaching.

<sup>2</sup> See the article by Nicole Bizier in this issue for a detailed account of the concept.

<sup>3</sup> LEGARDEZ, A. and L. SIMONNEAUX, *L'École à l'épreuve de l'actualité, enseigner les questions vives*, Issy-les-Moulineaux, ESF, 2006.



How does having teachers rekindle their passion for the discipline allow for reconciliation between knowledge and pedagogy?

**nb** Our work has led us to observe a reconciliation between passion for one's discipline and pedagogical choices. The fact of reaching teachers by starting with who they are in terms of their passion, their initial motivation for choosing the discipline and their pedagogical concerns, offers greater possibilities for enhancing their teaching.

We reinstate knowledge to its rightful place within the didactic triangle after pedagogical developments of recent years had given priority to the teacher-student relationship and to the student-content relationship. The didactic framework helps us to make more judicious choices as to knowledge to be taught, whether these choices relate to teaching a discipline or to a profession. In fact, what do students need to know? What do they need to be able to accomplish within this discipline? What difficulties might they encounter in their learning? After responding to these questions, it becomes easier to choose learning and evaluation strategies. It is here that the didactic component blends into pedagogy... It is a question of balance between the choice of content and the choice of methods, between what I know, what I must teach and what the students must learn, between them and me, and between transmitting knowledge and generating action.

It seems to me that answers to such didactic questioning can only lead to greater success. A well-defined *essential attitude* will become the course orientation in keeping with program objectives, with content

that actualizes this orientation and, finally, with strategies which take into account at the same time the knowledge, the learning difficulties of students and their relationship to this knowledge.

How do you see the role of the educational advisor relative to didactic questioning?

**nb** Just as the bases for choices and orientation of a program as a whole are important when developing and evaluating the program, being able to identify essential attitudes with respect to curricular knowledge is paramount. The educational advisor can guide a team of teachers and help them to make easier and more coherent choices. It is therefore extremely interesting for an educational advisor to move from a procedural perspective in program development or evaluation to one of being a didactic questioning coach for groups of teachers.

This reflection framework is also worthwhile for an educational advisor when coaching a teacher seeking advice, for example, on why half the students failed the first exam. The advisor can then help the teacher analyze the key mistakes made by students by examining the results of the exam. Later the advisor can bring the teacher to question the learning activities, the concepts, the time, and the content which may perhaps be either too complex or not sufficiently elaborated. And they can conclude by revisiting the whole issue or question by reviewing the dimensions of each of the five petals of the frame of reference.

The educational advisor can also coach teachers with regard to distancing themselves from their own knowledge in favour of choosing the curricular

knowledge to be taught according to the didactic guidelines. Teachers are not asked to renounce what they consider to be important in their discipline. They are asked to make choices that are not solely based on their personal interest for the discipline but rather on essential attitudes, on orientations that are specific to their discipline or profession and which relate to the objectives of the program in which they teach. This gives scope and meaning to the discussions, writings, practical exercises, and films to be viewed by the students. These choices also help the teachers construct the meaning of what they will teach as well as the meaning students will construct during the course.

What do you think is the importance of this type of questioning?

**nb** This type of questioning is important because it gives teachers, who are involved in a continuous performance situation in their everyday practice, the means by which to distance themselves from their discipline and to reflect on the foundations of their teaching. It enables them to examine from a different perspective the many choices made previously, to question these choices and to revisit them in relation to content. According to Lise Lapierre, a college lecturer, didactic questioning is a way of creating a space, of surveying a territory, the area of a discipline or a profession, from the viewpoint of program objectives; and this has an impact on the overall professional development of teachers. ◀