



The Right Answer Game

By Doug Bartholomew

We can involve our students more fully if we play the right game

I want you to think about a game we've all played. I call it "First one to the right answer." You know the game I mean. The teacher asks a question and students contribute answers. The game is finished when the right answer surfaces. The individual student who contributes the right answer is the winner. There is no clear winner if the teacher, after four or five inaccurate responses, looks up to the ceiling, eyes rolling, and in despair complains, "What's wrong with you? We went over this yesterday. The answer is three sharps." The main feature of this game is that once a correct answer has been given, another question can begin a new game, but the point is to arrive at a particular answer. This is one of the common educational models I've encountered. I've played this both as a teacher and student more times than I can count. Encouragement to play this game comes from several sources. Educational research indicates that asking questions is positively correlated with student achievement (Single 1991) and so we try to use questions in our teaching. The way we field student's responses to questions probably reflects a common model of teaching. Calling on students until the correct answer is given is efficient, and once the intended answer has been aired, the purpose of the questions has been accomplished. Or has it? What is the purpose of asking questions? In the game described above, the purpose of the question would seem to be a public statement of the correct answer. If this is the only purpose, however, it would seem more efficient for the teacher to just say what the answer is.

Other purposes for the question arise quickly. We could use questions to involve students in our lessons, to stimulate discussion, to review previous content to gather information, to assess student understanding, and to trigger thinking. With such a list of purposes, no wonder we play the "right answer" game in school so much. Unfortunately stating a purpose and accomplishing it are two different things. Which of these purposes can the "right answer" game accomplish and with which is it at cross-purposes? The first thing to notice is that there are two parts to the game. The first is the question and the second is how we field answers. While it might make sense to begin by exploring different types of questions, it is how we field answers that give the "right answer" game its character. Many textbooks list different types of questions but few consider how our responses might differ. Let's look at how we field student answers.

Scene 1: Our Monday morning class has just settled down. I instruct them to open their music book to page 34 and ask, "What is the first note of the song on page 4?" There is some shuffling and mumbling, and several students raise their hands. Sound familiar? A question has been asked, but it's not yet clear why. Before we move to Scene 2, consider the kinds of responses we could expect: "B", "B flat," "D," "DO." "What's that note on the first space called?" "Which one is the first note," and "I can't remember the name, but I play it with the first valve."

Each of these reflects a level of understanding. Some are easily understandable. One response confuses bass and treble clefs, perhaps. Others may reflect previous instruction, maybe in another class. Knowing that other answers are possible and they may have reasonable explanations, help us to craft our response to the answer.

Scene 2a: I call on Sara who says, "B." "No, that's not right, Sara." Three hands go down, four more go up, and several grunts and "pick me" noises are heard. "Tim?" Tim calls out, "G." "Way off," I say, "Look closer." More hands go down. "Kim?" "Isn't that B flat?" "Right. It's B flat because of the key signature. Here's a B flat, let's sing the song now." My response clearly indicates that Sara and Tim "struckout." Students who were going to give the same answer as Sara or Tim put their hands down. There is another reason why some of the hands might have gone down, however. Some students may have been made unsure of themselves as they watched Sara and Tim swing and miss. Scene 2a is a good example of the "right answer" game. What purposes are accomplished?

If it was to involve students in the lesson, we need to recognize that only three students answered, and that as a result of the teacher's response to the first two students, some may have actually decided to limit their involvement. If the purpose was to address student understanding, again only three students were heard from. It is difficult to make any firm assessment on data that is this weak. Was it to collect information? Of the three pieces of information, two were thrown out. Not much information is left! No discussion ensued, and what thinking was triggered would seem to be limited in character and little evidence of it surfaced. The purpose seems to be the fairly narrow goal of identifying the first note. We could accomplish other purposes, but we would have to field the answers differently.

Here is a different approach.

Scene 2b. I call on Sara who says, "B." I acknowledge responses, but continue to call on other students without commenting on the answers. Tim says "G." Three more hand go up. Mark says "B," Kim says "B flat," Mike says "B," Tim's hand goes back up; Emily says "B;" I come back to Tim who says "B flat" this time. It's easy to see that by continuing to call on students, I can get a better sense of how many students know the name of this note and how secure this knowledge is.

Perhaps no more thinking is encouraged than in Scene 2a, but more students have had the opportunity to be involved. Calling on seven students will take more time than calling on three, but it may also encourage more students to take a chance on answering aloud.

This is still not collecting much information or stimulating any in-depth thinking. However, there is more basis to assess student understanding. It would seem that they might need some extra help!

Scene 3: I continue by saying, “We’ve heard several different answers. Don’t forget to look at the clef sign and key signature. And remember ‘Empty Garbage Before Dad Flips.’ This phrase can help us name the notes. Look again at the first note of the song. What do you think the first note is now?” This follow-up reviews materials and reminds students how to find the name of a note. Notice that it lets students check their answers, whether they had raised their hands or not. Self-assessment is possible for the students.

Scene 4: “Before you answer, check with someone next to you. Tell him or her how you figured out what note it is.” Give time for this checking to take place and continue, “Mary and Elaine, what did you decide the note is? Why did you decide this?” Identifying a single note is not likely to stimulate much critical thinking. On the other hand, scene 4 illustrates that it is at least possible to go further than to simply name the note. Discussion of clef, key signature, and search strategies arise. How we respond to the answers our students give is as important as the kind of questions we ask. How we respond tells students how much we value their presence and their contributions. While it’s easy to see that we should avoid belittling and demeaning students because of their answers, we need to be aware of the effect that echoing and reworking student answers might have on further responses. Assuming what the student means and over-interpreting the answer can have misleading consequences. How we respond tells students what our purpose is in asking.

If we need to save time, we will play the “right answer game” If we want to encourage student response, trigger thinking, make meaningful assessment, or collect information, we will need to do more than stop at the first right answer we hear. The next time we field an answer, let’s be clear about our purpose. *This article first appeared as “Fielding Answers,” (1994), Cadenza, 38 (2) 18-19.*

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