

The Question Ledger

A practice instrument for the classroom question economy

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What this instrument is

Every classroom operates an unwritten market in questions. Some students ask freely and repay their confusion daily. Others have learned the price of asking and stopped paying it — and their silence is then recorded as personality. The Question Ledger makes that market visible. It measures question debt (the compounding cost of unasked questions) and question surplus (the state of leaving a session carrying askable questions outward), the two balances of the question economy, defined in the Center for AI Equity and Access concept papers this instrument accompanies. The frame in one sentence: the question economy is the market, debt and surplus are its two balances, and the Question Ledger is its book.

The Ledger exists so that a claim every teacher feels can become a fact a teacher can chart: who is asking, who has stopped, what the classroom's rules are actually pricing, and whether the repricing is working. It is designed to be administered before and after a change — a new practice, a new tool, a new term — so that movement is measured rather than assumed.

The instrument has three components, because the question economy has three observable surfaces: what students experience, what teachers can count, and what the classroom's rules actually are. The components travel together; each one checks the others.

The Student Page — the experience scale

A brief self-report. Students respond to each statement on a five-point scale: Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, Always. Administer anonymously at the classroom level by default (see Administration and Ethics).

Debt items.

1. When I don't understand something in class, I keep it to myself.
2. I wait to see if another student asks my question first.
3. I worry that asking a question will make others think I'm not smart.

4. I have stopped asking for help in this class even when I need it.
5. I would rather stay confused than ask out loud.

Surplus items.

6. I leave this class knowing what I want to ask next.
7. There is at least one adult I can ask anything.
8. When I don't understand, I know exactly what I will do about it.
9. This week I carried a question out of class and actually asked someone.
10. Asking questions in this class feels safe.

Scoring. Score Never as 1 through Always as 5. Sum items 1 through 5 for the Debt subscale (5 to 25; higher means more suppression) and items 6 through 10 for the Surplus subscale (5 to 25; higher means more carrying). Report the two numbers as a pair, never as a single combined score: a classroom is a profile, not a point. The classroom average matters less than the shape of the distribution — a middling average can hide a room where half the students are thriving and half have gone silent.

The Teacher Page — the weekly count

A teacher-kept behavioral count, one week at a time, requiring nothing beyond a class list and tally marks. Record which students asked at least one authentic question this week, through any channel — aloud, written, private, or after class. An authentic question is one the student actually wanted answered; procedural questions (may I sharpen my pencil) do not count.

The ledger's most important output is not the total. It is the distribution. A classroom where six students ask everything and eighteen ask nothing has a concentrated question economy, and the ledger makes the concentration visible in a single glance down the tally column. Watch the distribution widen as repricing takes hold: the goal is not more questions in total, it is more askers.

Optional secondary counts: private-channel versus public-channel questions (a rising private share means the second channel is working); repeat questions (a healthy sign — the re-ask protocol is being used); parked questions serviced within the stated window (a promise-keeping measure).

The Classroom Page — the environment audit

A teacher self-assessment of the classroom's actual rules, answered honestly: Yes, Partly, or No.

1. Question time is budgeted into my lesson plans, not borrowed from them.
2. Parked questions are serviced within a stated window that students know.
3. Students have at least two private channels for asking.
4. My participation grade explicitly counts questions, and students know it.
5. I have not said "asked and answered" this term.
6. A deferred question gets a scheduled redemption window, on the spot.
7. I audit my own micro-responses to struggling students' questions.
8. I model my own questions aloud, as competence rather than confession.
9. Sessions end with students writing questions they are carrying out.
10. The classroom has a visible place where carried questions live.

Each Yes is the tariff repriced; each No is a tariff still being collected. The audit is not a judgment of the teacher — most of these tariffs were installed by structure, not by choice — but it is an honest map of which prices are still posted in the room.

Interpretation zones

Stated plainly and without false precision. Surplus-positive: students report safety and carrying, the ledger shows wide distribution, the audit is largely Yes. Balanced: movement in the right direction, concentration still visible. Debt-accumulating: the self-report shows suppression, the ledger shows concentration, and the audit shows unpriced tariffs. The zone names are deliberately non-clinical. This instrument describes an economy, not a child.

Administration and ethics

The Student Experience Scale is administered anonymously at the classroom level by default. Individual administration is permitted only with deliberate, documented purpose — an evidence entry, a support plan reviewed with the family — because an instrument built to expose the price of asking must never itself become a price. Results are never used to grade, rank, or label a student.

The Ledger counts behavior, not ability, and its tallies are the teacher's working record, not a student-facing display.

What this instrument is and is not

It is a practice and screening instrument, not a validated psychometric scale. It makes no diagnostic claim about any student. A record showing that a student does not seek help should be read as a symptom of the pricing system, not a trait of the child — and this instrument exists to measure the system. Validation — reliability, factor structure, sensitivity to change — is future work; educators and researchers who collect Question Ledger data are invited to share findings with the Center.

Suggested citation line

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Usage notes

The name is never abbreviated — it is the Question Ledger, in full, everywhere. The instrument is free: schools, districts, researchers, and families may reproduce and administer it in full without permission, license, or attribution, though the citation above is appreciated and, for partial quotation, expected. The three pages travel together; administering one surface alone invites the wrong conclusion. This is not a token economy: there are no classroom dollars, no rewards to distribute, and nothing to purchase. The currency being measured is the questions themselves — who can afford to ask them, and what the students are carrying when they leave.