

Questioning

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Since Socrates, the use of questions to promote learning has been a primary form of discourse in instructional situations. In today's classrooms, we see patterns from the ubiquitous Teacher Initiation-Student Response-Teacher Evaluation (I-R-E) and its variations to questioning among students as they engage in inquiry activities and literature discussions during book clubs. In this entry, we explore four areas important to understanding questioning practices and related strategies: (a) the contexts where questioning activities and strategies occur, (b) frameworks to guide effective questioning, (c) teaching students about questioning, and (d) students use of questioning strategies.

Classroom Literacy Contexts for Questioning Activities

In K-12 classrooms, questions serve three primary functions: (a) guiding conversations, (b) probing for information, and (c) assessing understanding. Questions can be teacher- or student-generated and can range from ones designed to promote critical analysis to those seeking low-level, literal responses. Classroom literacy contexts vary in the kinds of questioning activities they invite. For example, when teachers read to their students, questions may be rhetorical ones designed to model reading strategies (e.g., "What ever will Marty do to help this poor dog?) or to underscore important

information (e.g., “I’m not surprised that Jess and Lesley have become friends, are you?”). When teachers read with their children in shared reading, questions may focus students’ attention on text ideas or features (e.g., “Why do you think the poet wrote two words on each line when she had space for more words than that?”). In contrast, during guided reading, questions scaffold students’ text comprehension (“What does the word *civil* mean when you see the term, ‘a *civil* war?’). Reading by children invites questions that probe for understandings (e.g., Why did Jess feel guilty?), that redirect their attention (e.g., “Are you sure that word is ‘spent?’”), or that model comprehension monitoring, (e.g., “Does that make sense?”).

Contexts in which questions are prevalent include guided reading groups, writing conferences, student- and teacher-led literature discussion groups (see entries on Peer-Led Discussions, Literature Circles, and Book Clubs, this volume), inquiry groups (see entry on Inquiry Based Learning, this volume). and whole-class discussions. Teachers’ roles vary across contexts, from teacher-led to student-led interactions. In teacher-led activities, questions are used generally as a part of explicit instruction, modeling, or scaffolding. When the teacher and students share responsibilities for discussion (e.g., Eeds & Wells, 1989, description of “grand conversations”), the teachers’ roles are more likely to be facilitator (i.e., orchestrating turn-taking, but not limiting the topics discussed) or participant (i.e., the teacher is one of the discussants with no authority or responsibility for framing, directing or summarizing the discussion).

In student-led activities, questions students ask of each other often mirror those that they experience in teacher-led settings. In paired reading, observers may see the more able readers prompting the less able through questioning, using questions to

monitor understanding, or to direct attention. In book clubs (see entry on Book Club, this volume) and related “fishbowls” (a book club group performing while classroom peers observe them) or readers’ workshop, appropriate questioning involves seeking new information or interpretations, clarifying confusions, finding points of personal contact with the text being discussed and intetextual connections between texts.

Frameworks to Promote Effective Questioning

Some frameworks that promote effective questioning guide teachers in leading discussion with their students (e.g., KWL, Ogle, 1986; ETR, Au, 1979). In these frameworks, discussion leaders emphasize questions in ways that elicit and/or build students’ background knowledge at appropriate times, focus their attention on text specific information, and help them make links to their own experiences. For example, in KWL (see entry on KWL, this volume), teachers begin whole-class discussions with a framing question, “What do I KNOW?”, move to an inquiry question, “What do I WANT to know?” and, after inquiry, ask, “What did I LEARN?”. The questions give a specific purpose for learning, motivating and guiding readers in acquiring information. Similarly, in ETR (Experience-Text-Relationship), teachers begin guided reading group discussions with a background building question, “What experiences have you had like...?”, then move to questions focusing on meaning-construction from text, and, after reading, ask students to consider the relationship between their experiences and the ideas in the text.

Many frameworks that help students develop effective questioning practices embed questioning within a set of strategies that students are to internalize and use independently. Like the frameworks above, these are designed to promote comprehension, engagement with peers, and monitoring. Unlike the ones above, they are

designed to promote students' independent use of the taught strategies. Two such examples are Reciprocal Teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1989) and POSSE (Englert, Tarrant, Mariage, & Oser, 1994).

Reciprocal Teaching (see entry on Reciprocal Teaching, this volume) emphasizes four strategies designed to foster comprehension, and throughout, questioning plays a central role. Question generating is the first activity; here students create questions about the text, first about main ideas and then about supporting details. After summarizing text content and predicting upcoming topics or events, students again turn to questioning, this time to clarify confusions. Question-asking and answering is modeled by teachers as they introduce students to reciprocal teaching, emphasizing their use in whole class settings, in small groups and on their own. By integrating reciprocal teaching into all classroom reading (content area, poems, silent reading books, etc.), teachers have multiple opportunities to model, and students to practice, question-asking and answering strategies.

POSSE is a framework to guide teachers and students through prereading, during reading and postreading activities designed to facilitate comprehension, particularly for children with reading problems. POSSE stands for Predict (predict what the story will be about), Organize (organize your knowledge into categories and details), Search (read to identify the main ideas and details or story parts) Summarize (name the main idea) and Evaluate (ask a question, compare, clarify and predict) where questioning practices are embedded within the Predict, Search, and Evaluate activities.

A teacher-led questioning framework in contrast to Reciprocal Teaching and POSSE is the "Shared Inquiry Discussion" format found in the Junior Great Books

Curriculum, featuring a reading/writing exercise designed to promote thoughtful reading and critical thinking. In this method, the teachers/leaders continue to be a very important component to this form of inquiry; however, they are trained to avoid asking questions which cause the participants to speculate about events outside the text or that ask for predictions. The founders promote what they call interpretative questions — words, phrases or sentences that can be understood in more than one way — that focus students' attention on the text, while challenging students to think independently.

Teacher-led frameworks for questioning have also focused on modeling effective independent study strategies, such as SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and Review). Developed nearly 50 years ago by Francis P. Robinson (see Gunning, 2000), SQ3R incorporates many of the strategies recommended by cognitive psychologists. These include predicting, setting goals, constructing questions, monitoring, and summarizing. Thus, readers survey headings and summaries for an overview of the text; ask questions before reading to set comprehension goals, read, then recite what has been read to support memory for the content, and finally review their understanding of major ideas to identify relationships among ideas.

Making Questioning Visible to Students

How can students become proficient in using questions effectively in their own learning? There are two major challenges associated with this question. First, while prevalent in any classroom, questions are so common that teachers and students simply take them for granted, rather than analyze how they work. That is, how questions are formed, the purposes they serve, the information sources they probe are both abstract and invisible. Second, even assuming ways to make questioning practices public, students

need opportunities to engage in questioning practices themselves, with the goal to increasing their text understandings.

Making thinking public through “Think Alouds” — the sharing through language of what are otherwise invisible processes such as those associated with reading (also see entry on Think Alouds, this volume)—is one way to make a relatively common or invisible process such as identifying important information more visible. When teachers use Think Alouds, they model or demonstrate strategy use and in the case of questions, the vocabulary of Question Answer Relationships is valuable. Taffy Raphael (1986) developed Question-Answer-Relationships, or QARs, to help students and teachers develop a shared language for making this relationship visible and for discussing how particular questions are designed to function. Such knowledge is important for both the prevalent question-asking and question-answering that characterizes the contexts and the activities within the frameworks described earlier.

Raphael framed QARs in terms of the knowledge and information that someone would need to draw upon to answer a particular question. Thus, a question asked could require a response that is part of the learners’ background knowledge—an “In My Head” QAR. In contrast, a question may require a response which is obtained from a text—referred to as an “In the Book” QAR. Each of these two QARs has two more specific relationships between the question generated and the kind of response elicited.

An “In My Head” question may require a response only available from the learner’s background knowledge. Asking a question such as, “Have you ever been surprised on your birthday?”, clearly cannot be addressed with information from text, even if the book describes someone’s surprise birthday party. Thus, while the question

relates to the text, it cannot be answered by information in the book. In contrast, an “Author and Me” QAR requires the learner to combine his or her own background knowledge with information from a text. For example, a question such as, “What might Sam have done if he didn’t have the pole with him?” requires both understanding Sam’s dilemma within the story and drawing on one’s own background to solve the problem in a new way.

Similarly, an “In the Book” QAR can be subdivided into two types. A “Right There” QAR has information in the book, generally a detail. Moreover, many times the words used to form the question base can be found in the sentence in which the detail information is provided. Other “In the Book” QARs are more complex, requiring readers to understand how texts are structured since to respond to the question appropriately, they must “Think and Search,” putting information together from with a text or across multiple texts. These questions may invite comparison/contrasts across characters, sequencing key story events, detailing an explanation for how an event has occurred, and so forth.

When both students and teachers understand the terms associated with QARs, they have a language that supports both asking and answering questions in a range of classroom contexts. QARs can be used to clarify expectations, such as a teacher stating, “Well, you are asking each other a lot of ‘Right There’ questions in your discussions, but I was hoping you would use more ‘Author and Me’ and ‘Think and Search’ ones.” It can be used to promote discussion in book clubs or literary circles, such as an assignment that asks students to come to group with at least one “Author and Me” and one “On My Own” question for the others in their group.

The specific contexts described earlier (e.g., reciprocal teaching, ETR, KWL) provide meaningful sites within which teachers can think aloud to model and scaffold questioning practices, draw on QAR knowledge and support students' learning to use this knowledge in the context of their reading and discussion. In more restrictive contexts such as the Great Books discussions or when taking tests, shared knowledge of QARs can be helpful in delineating the boundaries of the strategies to be used for responding to questions asked.

Students' Use of Questioning Strategies

In student led groups or in an individual context, students can begin to take over the responsibility of using questions to help foster deeper understanding of text. There are several approaches that students can use to support their discussions and enhance their thinking. Kathy Short and Jerome Harste, with Carolyn Burke (1996) developed inquiry learning to encourage students to become more involved in the decision making process of what to study and what activities will support successful learning (see entry on Inquiry Groups, this volume). Students take an active role in exploring, finding and researching their own questions. In inquiry based learning, the students develop the questions and then research the answers to support their responses. Inquiry is not always a specific question but can also be a "wondering" of something the student wishes to investigate. There is not one correct answer to meaningful questions but through the inquiry process, students actually gain understanding, generate more questions to ponder and further issues to research. This technique helps provide students with a structure for looking through texts and sorting out relevant from irrelevant information.

Another approach in students use of questions is Questioning the Author, developed by Isabel Beck and her colleagues (Beck, McKeown, Sandora, Kucan, & Worthy, 1996). They created this strategy to help students build understanding of text ideas. Questioning the author begins by having the student read a text. The student stops the reading at critical points to pose questions on small segments of text that explore what the author is trying to say. Such queries include “What is the author trying to tell me?” and “What does the author mean by that?” Questioning the Author differs from other questioning strategies because it takes place during the first reading of the text. This distinguishing feature helps students construct meaning from the text ideas.

Students also use questioning in guided reading lessons. Before reading a text, either fiction or nonfiction, students develop predictive questions as to what they will learn. Students then read and stop at various points to reconsider their original questions. They eliminate ones that are not correct, confirm those that are, and ask further questions about the text. After the reading, they review and confirm those that were accurate.

Student- centered literature discussion groups, also known as literature circles (see entry, this volume), literature study groups, conversational discussion groups and book clubs (see entry, this volume), allow opportunities for students to engage in conversational interactions through the use of questioning. Literature discussion groups are student centered, heterogeneously grouped in composition, and provide opportunities for students to discuss and question ideas that have surfaced from their reading. In most studies of literature discussion groups the same book is read and discussed by the participants. Students apply what they’ve learned about question-asking in journals or

reading logs in preparation for their discussion, as well as during the conversation and the discussion itself.

For example, Carolyn Frank, Carol Dixon and Lois Brandts (2001) describe a second grade classroom in which literature discussion groups similar to adult book clubs were formed. The purpose was to join together and talk honestly about their literature selection. Students chose their own storybook and four or five students met once every other week to share conversations about different books they had chosen. After modeling the process, the teacher relinquished the role of leader and the students took charge. Members of the book clubs asked questions of themselves and of one another. Questions centered on author intent such as, “Did the title fit this book?” In addition, students asked questions to other group members to clarify what was said in the discussion. This included questions about characters’ traits, problems in the story and the student’s favorite parts of the reading. These types of questions provided students with understandings that could also be used in other curriculum areas.

Through the use of questioning in whole class activities, student-led groups and in working individually, students engage in the social processes fundamental to learning. Sociocultural theory suggests that all individual learning begins in the social plane through interactions in which learners can interact with more knowledgeable others. Questions serve as one vehicle for promoting such engagement. Further, in terms of interacting with text, questions promote deeper readings and more conscious attention to sense-making. Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis (2000) suggest that students question-asking and search for answers indicate that they are monitoring comprehension as well as interacting with the text to construct meaning.

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