

Enhancing Students' Questioning Ability

Students' questions are the heart of active learning. Students draw on their knowledge, feelings, and experiences to formulate questions worthy of study. Good questions are the link between prior knowledge and new information. When students develop their own questions they are more likely to bring commitment, focus, and self-direction to their learning. The inquiry they engage in as they follow their questions plays a central role in learning. Learning activities should include opportunities for students to question, search, and explore. They should encourage students to become problem solvers and help them appreciate their growing repertoire of skills and strategies. Sample recording sheets for questioning are found in Volume Two, Appendix 5 pp. 84–90. A reference list of ways of classifying questions is found in Volume Two, Appendix 3 p. 82.

Activity 1: Generating Questions

Assign question monitors to watch for and record all of the questions both students and teachers ask. These can be entered on a card file or a chart, and used to prompt discussion or for sorting/classifying activities. Discussion can centre around issues such as:

- Who asks most of the questions in our classroom?
- When are most questions asked?

- What kinds of questions are asked most often?
- What kinds of questions seem to start interesting discussions?
- What kinds of comments/answers seem to stop or discourage questions?
- How could we encourage more questions?
- How could we create more interesting questions?

At the end of each day, teacher and students review the most interesting or effective questions they heard or read, and select a favourite as Question of the Day. These special questions can be collected and used as models for various questioning activities. Students may enjoy selecting questions of the week, the month, the year, and so on.

Students can develop individual webs or lists of questions/topics they wonder about. These can be collected for a Burning Question Board, a class collection, or maintained as individual records.

A Burning Question Board can be developed from a list of 'hot topics' students contribute. Questions are reviewed from time to time to see which have been answered, which might be the focus for research or discussion, and which might be the subject of a class meeting or 'talkabout'. New questions can be added at any time.

Activity 2: Generating Questions

Invite students to share their ideas and feelings by asking questions such as the following:

- Would you rather ask a question or answer one? Why?
- About how many questions do you ask in a day? What time of day do you ask the most questions? What kinds of questions do you ask most often? Who answers most of them?
- What are some reasons why people ask questions? (You may wish to begin recording these as a collaborative list.)

Elaborate on students' ideas to emphasize that questioning is an important thinking and learning process, and explain that they will be working in small groups to practice generating questions.

Have each group of students select a recorder; then challenge them to see how many questions they can generate within a specified length of time (e.g. five minutes) on a topic appropriate to your classroom. Provide the groups with three or four questions to guide discussion and reflection about the activity:

- How did the kinds of questions your group generated change from the beginning to the end of the time limit?
- Which of your questions are most interesting or thought provoking?
- Are they at the beginning, the end, or in the middle of your list?

- What did you notice about your own thinking as the activity went along? Were you able to think of more questions later or earlier?
- How did other people's questions affect your thinking? How could you use some of their ideas to create new questions of your own?

Bring the students together as a class to share their ideas. Encourage them to try to formulate generalizations that can be collected under the heading 'Questioning and Thinking'.

Provide time for individual reflection and self-evaluation. Invite students to write about what they noticed about their own thinking in their thinking logs or reflective journals.

In a group activity, evaluation naturally focuses on the group rather than on individuals. Each group has an opportunity to engage in some self-evaluation. You can also keep the lists of questions each group generates and repeat the activity in a few weeks when students have had more experience with questions. Invite groups to compare lists to see how their questioning has changed. Students might note changes in the number of questions, types of questions, relative contributions of various group members, depth or interest level, and precision of questions.

Extension:

Ask students to collect questions being asked at home, around the school, or in their community and to share these with the class. Their collections can take the form of written lists, audiotapes, or videotapes, and can be used for other activities such as sorting and research.

Activity 3: Generating and Developing Questions In Journals and Thinking Logs

Explain to the students that they are going to begin recording and writing about questions in their journals or thinking logs. Elicit their ideas about what they might include, and why keeping track of questions might help their thinking and learning.

Adapt one or more of the following suggestions to stimulate their first entry about questions:

- Pretend there is someone who knows the answers to all questions. You are allowed to ask only three questions. What would you ask? (Christenbury and Kelly, 1983, p. 32)
- Burning questions: Sometimes the most interesting and important questions are ones that never really get answered. What 'burning question' have you wondered about for a long time? How have you tried to answer or explore it?
- Some of the most interesting questions are about people—their feelings, how they get along together, why they do some of the strange things they do. Make up ten questions that consider human interactions.
- Take your question journal with you somewhere that you can observe people without being rude or intruding on their privacy. Jot down all of the questions that come to your mind. Alternatively, you might choose to observe a nature scene, or even some buildings.
- What kinds of questions are difficult for you to ask? What situations or contexts make them more or less comfortable? For example, is it easier to ask someone for a favour in person, over the phone, or in a note?

Provide opportunities for students to reflect by discussing the activity with a partner, small group, or as a class. Students could respond to one or more of the following questions before joining a group discussion.

- How did you get along? What kinds of questions or ideas came first?
- How did you think of new questions?
- What kinds of questions did you compose? Are they all alike?
- Which question is your favourite? How did you think of it?
- What questions do you have about questions?

Activity 4: Generating and Classifying Questions, Interviewing

Students can interview each other, classroom guests, members of their family or community, or role-play interviews with fictional or historic characters. The following outline focuses on developing and classifying interview questions rather than on actually conducting the interview.

Invite students to share their experiences and observations about interviewing:

- Have you ever been interviewed? Interviewed someone?
- Think about all of the interviewers you have seen or heard on talk shows, news and sports broadcasts, entertainment, and current event shows. Which interviews do you especially like to watch or listen to?
- If you could interview anyone in the world, whom would you choose? Why? What are some of the questions you would ask?

Explain the context for the classroom, home, or community interviews they will be conducting, and have them brainstorm all of the questions they might ask. When their ideas begin to subside, you can provide prompts such as:

- Take the person through a day in your mind. Think about different parts of this person's life: home, school or work, entertainment, appearance, friends, possessions. Are there any areas we've missed?
- What questions might your favourite interviewer ask?
- How can you combine some of our questions to make a new question?

Have students work as a class or in small groups to sort their questions into groups or categories. You may wish to restrict the number of categories and provide a structure or some guidelines for the sorting. (See, for example, Brownlie et al., 1988, Chapters 4 and 5.)

Provide opportunities for reflection, perhaps in a question journal or thinking log, and discussion.

- What categories emerged? Which ones seemed to have the most interesting questions?
- What other ways could the questions have been classified?
- In what kinds of situations would each of the categories be most helpful?

Activity 5: Reciprocal Questioning

Students' questioning can be enhanced when they have guided practice in analyzing and evaluating questions. They learn ways of grouping questions, how different kinds of questions work, and what kind of thinking or learning they support. ReQuest or Reciprocal Questioning enables students to model the behaviours of expert readers and thinkers. They develop increased accuracy in predictions and learn to view reading as a process of creating meaning from the text by having a dialogue with the author (adapted from Brownlie et al., 1988).

Instructions

Provide multiple copies of the same selection or make an overhead transparency. Read the title and invite the class to make predictions about the selection, thus establishing a shared context for the activity.

Read the first paragraph of the selection together; then cover the text.

Ask questions about the selection, modelling different kinds of questions. Let the students know the category of each question:

- On the lines: the answer can be found directly in the text.
- Between the lines: the answer requires problem solving; the reader must 'think like a detective', using the 'clues' the author has provided.
- Beyond the lines: the answer requires moving out of the text and using your prior knowledge and your expectations or predictions.

Read the next part of the selection, cover the material, and invite students to ask you questions while you model appropriate responses. Remind them to ask all three types of questions and to specify which kind of question they are asking each time.

Continue to read the selection, alternating roles as questioner/responder with the students. Invite students to talk about the process: their questions, their thinking, and their learning.

When evaluating the activity, consider the discussion that resulted from the questions. How did it support thoughtful interactions? What did you notice about the new connections students were able to make?

Options and Extensions

- With younger students, use two types of questions: those which can be answered by looking back in the book (on the line); and those which require 'using your head' (between or beyond the lines).
- Invite a team of students to work with you as teachers when you are modelling the role of questioner. This adaptation increases student participation in ReQuest and allows you to collaborate with your 'team' to support those students in their questioning and responding.
- Divide the class into teams of four or five students. After each passage, have the student teams construct and record one or two questions in each of the three categories (on, between, beyond). Team members must agree on the type of question and talk about criteria for effective responses. Teams then pose their questions for other teams to answer.

Activity 6: Generating and Evaluating Questions, Interviewing

(Adapted from Jeroski, Fisher, McIntosh & Zwick, 1990)

Students work with a partner or in a small group to develop two to five questions that could help them get ready to introduce another person their age. Adjust the number of questions to the age level and experience of the students in your classroom.

Each pair conducts brief interviews with three other students using the questions they have prepared and recording the answers they receive. If possible, have the interviews recorded on audiotape or videotape. Older students may be able to work alone.

Partners reflect and report on:

- How each of their questions worked and what factors seemed to affect the success of the questions.
- Any changes they made to the questions as they conducted their interviews. What kinds of adaptations did they make for different individuals they interviewed?
- What advice they would give other students who were assigned the same project.
- The most important or interesting thing(s) they learned about questions or about interviewing.
- How they might be able to use what they've learned.

You may wish to have students record some of their reflections in their thinking logs or journals.

Activity 7: Student Generated Questions

(Adapted from Jackson, 1982)

This activity can be used with written or video material in any subject area.

Instructions to Students

Read/view the assigned selection independently and complete an overview or graphic outline.

In your group, talk about your thoughts, feelings, and reactions to the material. Each person speaks in turn, then in random speaking order.

As a group, generate a brief paragraph or outline of the group's generally agreed upon understanding/interpretation of the material. Each student takes notes.

Generate five to ten questions which reflect the group's depth of understanding and insight into the material and their knowledge of relevant content area concepts (e.g., in literature, the elements of the short story; in social studies, people, places, terms, events).

Within your group, reach consensus on the best three questions, those that show the greatest depth and scope of interpretation. Each student is to take notes.

Groups report to the whole class to create a class list of best questions. Presentation formats can include overhead transparencies, chart paper, chalkboard, talking without visual props. Discuss why these questions are considered to be the best, the most significant and thought provoking.

Return to your group to develop a brief set of guidelines for composing effective questions, or criteria for evaluating questions. These can be collected and posted for future reference.

Options and Extensions

- Have students work in groups to categorize the list of best questions.
- Students choose one question and respond in a paragraph, an essay, a web, or an illustration.
- One or more of the best questions prompts further discussion, a seminar, a debate, or research.
- Students identify direct quotations that answer various questions, and explain the thinking behind their choice of quotations.

Activity 8: Student-Selected Literature/Content Questions

Each student in the class is responsible for choosing and reading a short literary selection or a chapter from a textbook.

Students generate a paragraph or essay question of a pre-determined length for the selections/chapters they chose. The question should demonstrate one central aspect of the student's perception and interpretation of the text/information.

Students bring one copy of the selected material and their question to class. The selections and questions are placed in a pile from which students choose a question other than their own.

Students write essays or paragraphs on the selections they have chosen.

The student who initially devised the question is responsible for developing evaluation criteria and using these criteria to respond to the essay or paragraph written by another student on their topic. The peer response/evaluation is recorded after the two students have had an opportunity to discuss and agree on the results.

Students write in a reflective journal or thinking log about the process and the learning that occurred.

Teacher evaluation is based on evidence of the thinking that has gone into

- initial selection of the text or material;
- the development of the essay question;
- the evaluation criteria;
- response to the essay/paragraph written by another student.

If this activity can be repeated at intervals during the year or semester, teacher evaluation and self-evaluation can look for evidence that the questions students devise are becoming more sophisticated.

Activity 9: Developing Questions in Role

As students approach a new topic or selection, have them form small groups and assign each person in the group a role or point-of-view that they are to sustain throughout the activity. For example:

- In studying information about a classical archaeological dig, different students might be asked to think like a lawyer, a teacher, a scientist, a plumber, and a young child.
- Different students might approach a study of the Industrial Revolution in the roles of a landowner, a factory worker, a factory owner, a farmer, and a child labourer.
- Current political issues in Canada could be studied from the point of view of members of different political parties or special interest groups.

In their roles, students each compose five questions that reflect that particular point-of-view. For example: What five questions might a lawyer ask as he or she viewed the ruins of Corinth? What would a teacher want to know? A scientist? A plumber? A young child?

Students research their questions, then meet with their groups to share and integrate their questions and answers: Taken all together, what do these questions and points-of-view reveal about this topic? How does each person's information and insight connect to the others? You may wish to have the students develop and present a collaborative report.

Encourage the students to discuss and reflect on issues such as:

- How did your particular role influence the kinds of questions you asked? How did your role shape your thinking and observing?
- What did you notice about the particular kinds of information and ideas people with different roles contributed? How was their information similar? Different?
- What stands out in your mind about the topic? How is that influenced by your own roles/questions?
- What questions remain unanswered? Which questions do you want to carry with you and consider from time to time?