

THE POWER OF QUESTIONS

Background and Context

It was only when Ray Krock asked the question, “Where can I get a good hamburger on the road?” that the concept of fast-food restaurants and McDonalds, in particular, was born. Indeed, questions have always been the principal catalysts for discovery and new knowledge. In this vein, Einstein once quipped: “If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes.”

The power of questions as a learning tool goes far back into history. The great Greek teacher, Socrates, taught by asking questions; he didn’t give lectures or write books. Socrates’ questions revealed the ways in which his student’s thinking was dogmatic, stifled and in error. Socrates’ approach was regarded as subversive by the governing elites of the time, and eventually he was accused of corrupting the minds of young men and sentenced to death.

Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner in their book, Teaching as a Subversive Activity, cogently observe: “Once you have learned how to ask questions—relevant and appropriate and substantial questions—you have learned how to learn and no one can keep you from learning whatever you want or need to know.” With this in mind, it more than a little peculiar that the most potent intellectual tool that humankind has thus far developed—the art and science of asking questions—is not taught in our public schools!”

Sadly, precisely because of our schooling, many of us are question-shy. Think about it. How many times throughout your schooling were you asked (along with your classmates): “Are there questions?” Even when you might have had a question, chances are you laid low, reluctant to call attention to yourself—i.e., you learned that “No” was the correct response to the query, “Are there any questions?” And with time we may have actually come to believe that we have no questions worth asking. Of course, the truth is that we are filled with questions—questions worthy of our attention. All humans are!

In this vein, imagine how it would be if the vector of teaching/learning in our schools was determined by our young people’s interests—their burning questions. This would be “subversive”; it would shift the focus from teacher to learner. Suddenly the student would be seen as having agency. What the student wants to know would be recognized as generative, the germ for discovery and the flowering of knowledge.

Check in:

What is the answer?

Activity One: Questions to Remove Masks

What questions would you like to ask the other people in the class? In other words, what would you like to learn about everyone here in this room? Write down your questions on separate slips of paper, then place the slips into a hat with those from the rest of your group.

Many of your questions may begin, “How many of you ... ?” And these questions are good questions. But, I have a question for you: Can you ask one question—one honest question—that provokes the strength of thought and heart-based contemplation that means some of your classmates may need the whole night to begin to come to an answer? Or, this: Can you

ask a question which begins in another way, a question posed to the universe, with only your classmates here to answer—so that, in this way, they tell you about themselves, even though you asked about something else. Remember, there will be anonymity to the questioner even though there will be publicity to the responder. Some questions to jog your imagination include:

- How many are working while you are in school?
- How many have doubts about your major?
- How many have doubts about this class and are considering dropping it?
- How many of you are vegetarians?
- How many of you love to play Frisbee?
- How many are an only child?
- How many have had a close friend die?
- How many think the world will be a better place in 50 years?

Instructions:

After a time, we will collect the questions in the hat and then begin to read them. Everyone has the opportunity to pull a slip from the hat and read the question that it poses to us. As always, if a question spurs a thought or another question for the group, please share.

Discussion:

- Did any one ask a question so powerful that you might want to paste it on your mirror...or write it on your palm?
- If you were born to answer a question, what would that question be?

Activity Two: One Hundred Questions

Knowledge—knowing—develops within individuals in response to their own particular questions. Michael Geldman in his book, Discover Your Genius, invites readers to rediscover what geniuses from Plato and Socrates to Leonardo da Vinci have known—that the cultivation of a questioning mind leads to self knowledge and wisdom. To crack us open to our life questions Geldman gives the following instructions:

In your notebook, make a list of a hundred questions that are important to you. Your list can include any kind of question as long as it's something you deem significant: anything from "How can I save money?" or "How can I have more fun?" to "What is the meaning and purpose of my existence?" and "How can I best serve the Creator?"

Do the entire list in one sitting. Write quickly; don't worry about spelling, grammar, or repeating the same question in different words (recurring questions will alert you to emerging themes). Why a hundred questions? The first twenty or so will be off the top of your head. In the next thirty or forty, themes often begin to emerge. And in the later part of the second half of the list you are likely to discover unexpected but profound material" (pg. 47).

To engage in this exercise is a first step toward both discovering one's own questions and toward taking one's life seriously. It is not enough just to do the list. Part of the richness comes in studying one's questions, ferreting out the themes and paying special attention to the questions that resonate with one's whole being. **What are your "One Hundred Questions?"**

Instructions:

- Take the next 25 minutes to ask yourself 100 questions ... about you, your life, this earth, this universe, your relationship with ..., etc. Write these questions down as you go.
- If you get stuck, remember, there are many ways to begin a question:
 - Who? - What? - When? - Where? - Why? - How?
 - Do, Does? - Is? - Can? - Could? - Will? - Would?

Discussion:

- What did you learn about this process of asking questions?
- What did you learn about yourself?
- What now?

Activity Three: The Power of Why—Uncovering Hidden Beliefs

The most important and powerful question might well be the simply one-word question, Why? The importance of asking "why?" is illustrated in the story of Primo Levi, a Jewish man who was forced to endure a long journey in a cattle car on his way to a concentration camp during World War II. Levi was hungry and very thirsty. Deep into the journey, the train stopped, and, spotting an icicle, Levi reached out to break it off, but before he could bring it to his lips a hulking guard grabbed his arm and snatched the icicle away. Levi looked at the guard and asked, "Warum" ("Why [have you done this]?"). The guard responded, "Hier ist kein warum." ("There is no 'why' here."). Reflecting on this incident, Fritz Stern wrote: "This 'Hier ist kein warum' stands against everything that is human and constitutes a form of verbal annihilation." (F. Stern, "The Importance of Why," World Policy Journal, Spring 2000, pgs. 1-8).

It is in the asking of Why? that we have the opportunity to unmask our underlying beliefs and assumptions. Derrick Jensen in his book, Walking on Water (2004) describes how he helps his students discover "the power of why" through an activity he dubs "the annoying child." The idea is to simply ask 'why' and then 'why' again, and again, and again.... This can be very powerful. For example, imagine that you are talking to your friend, Judith, about the meaning of "progress" and she declares, "As a society, we in America are making progress?"

You ask Judith, "WHY do you think we are making progress?"

She responds, "We are developing new technologies every day."

"WHY are new technologies a sign of progress?" you inquire.

Judith responds, "Because new technologies make life easier."

"WHY is an easy life a mark of progress?" you ask.

She replies, "An easy life means more free time."

"And WHY is more free time an indicator of progress?" you query.

"Free time means freedom to do whatever we want." Judith replies.

"And WHY is the freedom to do whatever we want a mark of progress?" you persist.

"I dunno, it just is," replies Judith.

Through your "annoying" whys you give Judith a gift—She gets to see that there are layers and layers of beliefs under her initial opinion that "we are making progress." Revealed are the underlying beliefs and hidden assumptions that frame her definition of "progress." But most important, through this simple process Judith is coaxed to discover what is dear to her... what really matters to her. . . . This is the gift of "why?"

There are many applications for “the annoying child.” For example, “Whying” can also be used to understand personal upsets. Suppose you notice, while attending a dinner party, that you become irritated every time a certain guest speaks. Noting this, you go inward and ask,

“Why this irritation?”

“Because he is so dramatic and he just goes on and on?”

“And why is this a problem?”

“Because he dominates the conversation.”

“And why are you against his dominating the conversation?”

“Because everyone thinks he's something, but he's not.”

"And why does it bother you what they think?"

"Because I am as quick, intelligent, and charismatic as he is, yet I'm not hogging the spotlight."

"And why do you need the spotlight?"

When performing this exercise, keep in mind that it possible for you to give an answer—and continue with the ramifications of that answer—which you perhaps do not wholly believe in. If at some point your realize that you gave a wrong answer, that you did not spend enough time and focus to truly respond, then go back. Tell your partner, "Let's go back a few questions, to when you asked me, ..."

Instructions:

- Pair up

- Partner A: Think of something or someone in your life that is causing you discomfort.

Explain this briefly to your partner.

- Partner B: Be an Annoying Child. Ask your partner, "Why?" And continue to ask, "Why?," after each response. Do this until both of you feel that some kind of bottom has been reached. If either one of you feels there are still more, 'Why's to ask, then keep asking them.

- Switch roles.

Discussion:

- Are there any stories to share?

- Did you learn anything about yourself or your situation?

Check Out

What's a question you would love to be asked?

Take-Home Message: Transform your relationship with questions from "fear" of questions to "delight" in questions and their power... which in turn might lead you to re-imagine what this thing called "a college education" is all about...

OUT-OF-CLASS FIELD STUDY: QUESTIONS

Introduction

Postman and Weingartner provide a blank page in their book, Teaching as a Subversive Activity, wherein they invite their readers to write down their questions. Imagine if the vector of teaching/learning in the classroom was determined by the student's interests—your burning questions. This would be “subversive”; it would shift the focus from teacher to learner. Suddenly the student would be seen as having agency, and would have it.

As Postman and Weingartner cogently observe: **“Once you have learned how to ask questions—relevant and appropriate and substantial questions—you have learned how to learn and no one can keep you from learning whatever you want or need to know.”** Questions are an essential starting point, a catalyst to learning. Yet, **“the most important intellectual ability man has yet developed—the art and science of asking questions—is not taught in school!”** (Postman and Weingartner, 1969, pg. 23). The result is that our households, communities, and nation are composed of people who lack this most basic skill.

We are not talking about questions like, “What is a noun?” or “What is the sum of 7 + 11?” or “What is the capital of Peru?” Such questions fail to invite exploration, thought or observation. Rather, what we have in mind are: questions that don’t have a known answer in the moment of the asking; questions that don’t have a single ‘right’ answer (such questions tend to stifle, rather than enlarge thinking); questions that present a problem to the learner that he/she truly wants to resolve.

“A good question is a question that matters; it is an attractor for energy and it generates energy, it opens up possibilities, it invites deeper exploration... it has some personal connection, it invites a variety of voices, it creates a certain tension, a certain dissonance between one’s current understanding and something bigger. **A good question has to be able to travel well**” (The World Café: Living Knowledge through Conversations that Matter, Juanita Brown, Ph.D Dissertation, The Fielding Institute, 2001 pg. 153).

1. College Questions

Some questions worthy of attention for University students are:

- Why have I come to the university?
- How do I know if I have learned something? What criteria do I use?
- How do I best learn?
- What am I learning while I am here? Is it worth my time/effort/money?

With these and related questions in mind, this coming week, I invite you to view your own life as a classroom. Specifically, I ask that you do an "evening review" at the end of each day, taking note of what, if anything, you **learned** that day. In cases where you didn't learn anything, consider why not? In cases where you did learn something, where did you learn it; who/what was your teacher; and how do you know you learned something—what’s your proof?

There is a lesson within a lesson here.... for as you go to class each day to learn you are at the same time “studying” yourself—i.e., making yourself into a potential teacher / classroom / lesson.

2. A Learning Manifesto

Now, and finally, after watching for indications of learning day-by-day and what **knowledge** you are gaining about yourself as a learner, draft your personal Learning Manifesto—that's right, draft a manifesto!

In Webster's dictionary, a "manifesto" is a public declaration by a person taking important action, making his/her intention, motive clear. In your Learning Manifesto be sure to make it clear what you will and won't stand for in your pursuit of an education (not to be confused with the pursuit of a diploma). Include your most important life questions. Make your manifesto clear and powerful. Make it honest. Truth speak! Check to be sure that each sentence resonates with the core of your being.

Though this manifesto might start out being several hundred words long, whittle it down to its essence.... and in so doing produce a version which is between 50 and 75 words long and then a second version that is 25 words or less. Include all versions from first draft to final manifesto in your journal.