

Asking Better Questions

NORAH MORGAN

JULIANA SAXTON

2nd Edition



Contents

Acknowledgments	6
Foreword by John O'Toole	7
Introduction: Questioning as a Democratic Skill	9

1 What Seems to Be the Problem? 13

How do we view the student in the educational process?	15
What is a vigorous learner?	16

2 A Question of Thinking 18

So, what is thinking?	19
"Where is the boy . . . ?": Kinds of thinking	20
1. Questions that draw upon knowledge (Remembering)	20
2. Questions that test comprehension (Understanding)	21
3. Questions that require application (Solving)	22
4. Questions that encourage analysis (Reasoning)	22
5. Questions that invite synthesis (Creating)	23
6. Questions that promote evaluation (Judging)	24
Reflecting on Bloom and Little Boy Blue	24

3 A Question of Feeling 27

The Taxonomy of Personal Engagement	27
Interest	28
Engaging	29
Committing	29
Internalizing	29
Interpreting	30
Evaluating	31
Ownership through deepening engagement	31
The role of the taxonomy in questioning	31

4 The Example Lesson: Snow White 34

The lesson plan	34
The lesson: What actually happened	36
Reflections on the use of two taxonomies	44

5 A Classification of Questions 45

A classification of questions by general function	45
Category A: Eliciting information—On the line	46
Category B: Shaping understanding—Between the lines	48
Category C: Pressing for reflection—Beyond the lines	51
Flexible, non-hierarchical use of questions	54

6 The Example Lesson: Finding Areas	55
Session 1: Is there room for a football field?	55
Session 2: Why does a farmer need to calculate areas?	58
Session 3: How can settlers ensure that land is divided fairly?	59
Reflections on the lesson	61
7 A Glossary of Questions	63
From higher-order to unanswerable questions	63
Alternatives to questions	72
What's in a name?	73
8 Fewer Questions, Better Questions, and Time to Think	74
Classroom discourse—Talking in wide circles	74
Characteristics of effective classroom discourse	75
Characteristics of a good question	77
Characteristics of an active responding process	78
Why do teachers ask so many questions?	79
Thinking time	80
9 Putting the Question, Handling the Answer	82
General teaching requirements	82
General teaching techniques	83
Distribution, or targeting, of questions	85
Reinforcing for success	87
Probing for deeper thought	89
When <i>not</i> to ask a question	90
Dealing with answers	91
Responding to answers: Some things to avoid	93
10 The Case for the Student as Questioner	99
Why aren't more questions coming from students?	100
Addressing the pressures against the teaching of questioning skills	100
Teaching in ways that promote responsibility for learning	105
11 Switching Places: The Student as Questioner	107
Modelling how to question	107
Overt ways to model questions	108
Training and practice in questioning	109
12 The Example Lesson: Ann Graham	119
Session 1: Raising questions	119
Session 2: Building a story through questioning	122
Session 3: Writing based on information gathered	126
Session 4: Examining how questions helped build the story	127
Raising difficult questions	128

Appendixes

- 1: Differences between social talk, classroom discourse and discussion 130
 - 2: Who asks questions? 132
 - 3: Building questions upon questions 134
 - 4: Thinking as someone else 136
 - 5: Evaluating questions on Ann Graham 139
 - 6: Questioning behaviors 141
 - 7: Changing perspectives in the classroom 142
 - 8: Getting started: A thinking process for teachers 145
- Bibliography 149

© Hawker Brownlow Education

Introduction Questioning as a Democratic Skill

Nothing is more terrifying to . . . people than someone who thinks in public—that is, someone who questions himself openly. The public itself has been soothed to such an extent by scripted debates imbued with theoretically “right” answers, that it no longer seems to respond positively to arguments which create doubt. Real doubt creates real fear.

—John Ralston Saul (1993, p. 534)

. . . perhaps political leaders everywhere would prefer that the majority of our young people not engage in critical thinking and remain ignorant of these matters. This preference is one that seems to have endured for centuries.

—Nel Noddings (2004, p. 494)

In any nation that works under a democratic system, it is understood that the power rests with its citizens. Elected representation and government are the responsibility of every member of society and each individual is responsible for monitoring the operation of government and for changing that representation when it no longer meets the needs of that society.

In a democracy, the voices of minorities have as much right as the voice of the majority. For both, that right carries with it responsibilities: to see the issues clearly; to cut away the rhetoric and seductions of short-term advantages and to understand the implications; to give expression to concern through constructive action; and to be able to mediate individual concerns within the collective vision.

These responsibilities depend upon the skill of every member of society to ask questions: What is this really about? Whose values are being addressed? Who or what will benefit? Who or what will be diminished? What actions are possible? What am I prepared to give up? The ability and the courage to ask such questions lie at the core of the democratic process.

In *The Unconscious Civilization*, John Ralston Saul (1995) writes that a “citizen-based democracy is built upon participation” (p. 195), and participation, he points out, is “the very expression of permanent discomfort.” He is not talking about a physical discomfort but a mental attitude that recognizes and accepts the “tension of uncertainty,” that will not allow us to be lulled into passivity and acceptance, into the attitude of mind “What can I do about it? I’m only one person. I have no power to change anything.” Saul’s “unease” is the kind of “unease that wards off complacency and compliance, that . . . awaken[s] people enough to move them to act” (Greene, 2006, p. 596). For Saul, “the acceptance of psychic discomfort is the acceptance of consciousness.” To be conscious is to be alive; alive to oneself, to others and to what is going on in the world; prepared to do something whenever “what is going on” is seen as counter to the good of the whole—not one’s *own* good, but the good of the whole.

To be alive to ourselves can be painful! It requires us to have a clear understanding of who we are and what are our wishes, needs, and dreams and the personal history and ethics that created them. To be aware of what is going on and to question that is destabilizing. Doubt can be frightening, as Saul suggests, but learning to question and consider answers helps us tolerate the ambiguities of this infinitely complex world that we inhabit. It is only when we understand our own narratives, writes Jerome Bruner (1996, p. 42), that we can truly begin to develop a responsible sense of self. Being alive to others demands the

A democratic society requires that citizens recognize their common interests and that they fully and openly discuss issues related to common priorities.

—Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh (2006, p. 601)

Habits of Mind

- The ability to imagine new possibilities
- The ability to develop theories that predict the consequences of actions
- The ability to explore relationships from multiple perspectives
- The ability to explore ideas, meaning and emotion through multiple forms
- The ability to reflect upon, assess and adjust behaviour
- The ability to sustain coherent collaborative action
- A generosity of spirit; to be forgiving of mistakes through recognizing that the process is long-term rather than immediate
- The ability to elaborate detail with infinite patience

Personal Dispositions

- Persistence and resilience
- Risk-taking
- Focus and discipline
- Respect for authentic achievement; a reluctance to accept “junk”
- A great sense of joy in the challenges; a delicious sense of achievement in the effective completion of the task

—Richard Deasy (2001)

exercise, not just of sympathy but of that much more difficult quality—difficult because it is active rather than passive—the act of empathy. We need to be able to place ourselves in others’ shoes and know from our own experience what another could be feeling and thinking. It is an essential characteristic of the human condition, demanding a generosity of imagination. It is also often very painful because it means mediating personal needs for the good of others.

A responsible sense of self, allied to a sense of the larger society and commitment to the common good, is not all that is required. Taking action—the participatory, observable part of citizenship—requires the exercise of what Saul describes as “the rights of the citizen”: to criticize and to reject conformity, passivity, and inevitability. These rights demand the ability to think and opportunities to express that thinking in the social context; to acquire habits of thought that go beyond thinking *about*, to thinking *why* and thinking *what if*; to see democracy as an “open possibility” (Greene, 2006). We need to be able to construct in the mind edifices of thought that enable us to see the history and possibility of things. Only then is it possible to discover the questions and create the solutions, to have the courage (and the language) to express that thinking, to risk going against the grain of popular opinion or the authority of the power structure; to stand up for ideas when others are busy blending in. Only with practice in thinking can we come to the understanding that what some may see as the inevitable is as much a human construct as anything else that humans do and is, therefore, equally open to question. The practice of citizenship within a democratic society has *always* to be negotiated.

Negotiation involves citizens in compromise. Compromise requires flexibility and, because there are many right answers, there are always ambiguities and complexities that we have to live with, as well as doubts that the choices we make may, in the end, turn out to be wrong. But think of the exercise of democracy in the civil rights movement; the resistance to the Vietnam War; the ongoing resistance in Canada to the clear cutting of forests and the selling off of water resources. Citizenship, writes Saul, is not about minding your own business. It is not an “easy style of life, but it is perhaps the citizen’s primary weapon in the exercise of his or her legitimacy” (1995, p. 169). Becoming a citizen is not easy, and acting as one requires a great deal of practice.

The words Saul uses to describe what is involved in being a good citizen are words that we recognize as components of the *hidden* curriculum—the courage to risk, to question, to think deeply—the habits of mind and personal dispositions in which skills and knowledge, in a wholistic education, are embedded.

We must be aware of this hidden curriculum. We are in danger of producing a generation of young people who have lost the art of conversation, who have lost self-motivation, who see their lives valuable only in response to an external reward system that they did not set up, and who have discovered that taking time to think about, to question, to fail, to move around an issue and see it from different points of view is not valued. If we allow ourselves to bend to political expediencies and directives that have little or nothing to do with what we know to be education, then our culture will be changed and our ideas of democracy will shift significantly (Miller and Saxton, 2004a, p. 41).

The classroom has been described as the cradle of democracy and the teacher as one of the most influential nurturers of the democratic process. We know that questioning is the means by which teachers help students to construct meaning. We also know that the collective construction of action that gives voice to that meaning is dependent upon students' skills in *asking* productive questions. This book is offered in the hope that, by examining how to question, we may arrive at answers that will generate richer classroom interactions and provide our students with opportunities to develop and practise that essential democratic skill.

About this book

This book is intended to help teachers understand why questions are so important to teaching and learning in the 21st century. It examines why many teachers are insecure as questioners and why students are so often shut out of the questioning process. It suggests an uncomplicated way to classify the questions that teachers need to ask in order to acquire information, build understanding, and generate reflection. Finally, it offers models, techniques, activities, and examples that promote better questioning by teachers and students.

The first section of the book examines the two structures that form the matrix of all educational processes: (1) the structure for thinking and (2) the structure for feeling. Until almost the end of the last century, these two operations were seen as separate. Rationality and objectivity have been and still are regarded as characteristics of higher intelligence even though neither is completely possible simply because we are human beings. Feeling is indispensable to effective thinking. Understanding how these structures work will enable you to use them as guides both to evaluate what *has* happened in your classroom and to plan what you *would like* to happen. Most important, they help you understand what is happening *as it is happening*. This, of course, has particular implications for questioning. Although you can and should plan one or two questions, part of effective questioning techniques is to ask the *appropriate* question at the right moment *inside* the give-and-take of classroom talk and activity.

The middle section looks at a simple three-part classification of general functions for questions: questions that tap into what is already known and that elicit a sense of responsibility towards the conduct of and approach to the work; questions that build a context for shared understanding; and questions that challenge students to think critically and creatively. Within this classification, there are many kinds of questions that we present as a glossary so that you may see the wide potential of questions for generating thought and feeling.

In the final section of the book, we concentrate on building questioning skills for teacher and students, suggesting techniques for posing questions and dealing with answers. We offer a variety of teaching stances for questions and for answers that will elevate language and encourage divergent thinking. We suggest roles and situations that will engage students as questioners and as answerers, and we provide practical exercises for developing these skills.

Each of the three sections is illustrated with an example lesson, drawn from our own experience or those of our colleagues and students.

The ability to question inside the "action" is part of the technique of teacher response that Philip Taylor calls "Reflection-in-action" and is essential to becoming an effective teacher.

—Betty Jane Wagner (1998, pp. 215–216)

This is not a linear text that builds its arguments sequentially. You may, of course, begin at the beginning and work your way through to the end, but you might prefer to leaf through and start where something catches your eye. Whatever focuses your attention can provide an entry point from which you may move back and forth through the text as your interests and needs dictate. Wherever possible, we have talked about teachers and students, but there are times when we talk about *a* teacher and *a* student. We follow the principle that the teacher will be referred to as "she" and the student as "he," unless a specific example dictates the gender.

Although some things have been synthesized for clarity and brevity, everything described throughout the text has been test-driven in the real world of the classroom.

Beyond the three main parts of the book, this new edition features activities to help you clarify what you are reading or provide opportunities for practice. Many things that are *not* good for us are habit forming, but effective questioning happens only with practice and it is *very* good for us!

Assessing and recording questions

Since *Asking Better Questions* was first published, we have used the text for our own reference and also as a source for workshops that we were invited to present. Rereading the text, we discovered that much of what we had to say was still relevant and quotations that still apply we have kept. For this edition, we used the latest scholarship as a gloss on the earlier research, enabling readers to consider the history of questioning as strategy and technique and, in particular, the pedagogical rationale for questioning as a means of educating citizens. *Tout ça change; tous c'est la même chose*. Changing the way we educate is like turning the *Queen Mary II* around in the St. Lawrence River—it takes a long time—but that doesn't mean we shouldn't keep on turning!

We all know how to ask questions—after all, we have been doing it almost since we could talk—but as you likely realize, becoming an *effective* questioner is hard. It takes time and it takes diligence. Think how long it took you to learn to type or to know what seasoning would make that recipe taste better. Give yourself time and permission to try things out and keep on working away at it. Let your students in on your quest—they can help you and themselves. One day, you will notice that it is beginning to happen without as much effort. You will realize that you have asked spontaneously a question that really shook up your students and made them think—and made *you* think, too.

Apart from the questions that you will discover through the activity sheets in this resource, you might like to keep a file of questions that proved effective in your lessons, whether you had planned them or they arrived spontaneously as part of the classroom conversation. Remember to record the questions students ask as they are also useful to consider when you are re-planning. Note any questions you come across in your reading that make you think. That is how we found many of the questions you see in the sidebars. It's a useful exercise that somehow doesn't interfere with enjoyment. Remember, wonderful questions may be found in all sorts of writing and when you apprentice yourself to them, they become your models for learning.

Keep Eric Booth's advice in mind as you start your travels through this book.

The key question is not whether schools can support the development of democratic citizens, but whether they choose to make this goal more than a rhetorical priority.
—Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne (2003, p. 12)

Posing questions is the central act of reading the world: it must become a habit. I wish I could give you a handy kitbag of reliable questions to try, but there can be no prescribable set of sure-fire questions. The whole game is one giant improvisation . . . the questions themselves are far less important than the habit of questioning.
—Eric Booth (1999, p. 210)