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What Do We Want for Our Children?

It's hailing. The school yard is being covered with a blanket of white, but the year 6 students are oblivious to what is happening outside. They have been engaged in a discussion about racism, looking at different global examples throughout history. Last week looked at the Stolen Generation in Australia; this lesson looks at the issues surrounding the internment of Japanese Americans in the United States during World War II. In preparation for the discussion, the children viewed the CD-ROM *Presumed Enemies* (Wassermann & Wigmore, 2000), that presented information about Japanese history; the opening of Japan to the West; the bombing of Pearl Harbor; the conditions that led up to the internment; and the consequences of the unique Executive Order 9066, under which the US Army was given the power to make American citizens of Japanese descent prisoners in their own country. Following the viewing of the CD-ROM, students worked in small study groups to discuss questions that called for examining the overt and hidden agendas behind the issues. Discussions about the ethics and morality of Executive Order 9066 generated very heated debate, as did the government's role in making amends to those interned 40 years later. The teacher, Roger Stevens, planned to use this initial experience to launch a much larger unit on prejudice and injustice not only in the lives of the students, but in the global arena. He was reaching far but considered the issues well worth the time and effort.

For the whole-class discussion that followed the viewing of the CD-ROM and the study groups, Roger had prepared a list of open-ended, higher-order questions to promote further examination of the issues. During the discussion, Roger did not offer an opinion, nor did he judge students' responses as "right" or "wrong". Instead, he used questions to bring about further reflection about the issues, by asking for examples, or for data to support a particular point of view, or for comparisons to be made, or for the kinds of observations that led to a particular belief. At one point he asked a student to offer hypotheses to explain how such a law might have been passed and whether students thought it possible for such a law to be enacted today.

As no one noticed the hail, neither did anyone look at the clock, so that the 3:30 bell took the class and teacher by surprise. No one wanted to leave; there was more to

be said! As the students reluctantly rose and went for their bags, Roger said, “We’ll pick this up tomorrow. In the meanwhile, don’t hesitate to talk about these issues with your parents and get their views on them.”

I asked Roger what would happen next, and he was clear that the issues needed more discussion before the choosing of individual or small-group projects, in which students would follow up with background reading and conduct further studies applying what they had learned. Roger had prepared a list of potential projects that students could choose from, but was open to any student-initiated suggestion that was not on his list. Some of the projects on his list included

1. Making a photocollage of the various internment camps in the United States and writing an essay called “Life in the Camps”
2. Designing future immigration laws to include/exclude ethnic groups, identifying the criteria for inclusion and exclusion
3. Investigating the role played by Japanese American soldiers in World War II
4. Writing a short story or a play about Japanese Americans returning home from years of internment and finding signs everywhere saying, “No Japs wanted”
5. Creating a scrapbook that chronicles evidence of ethnic prejudice in governmental policies
6. Compiling a clipping file on events that depict racism
7. Debating between two teams, offering different points of view about the Japanese internment
8. Reenacting a radio broadcast announcing the bombing of Pearl Harbor
9. Developing a computer reenactment of the bombing of Pearl Harbor
10. Making a documentary video or DVD characterising where injustice is found in a particular community

I followed the students into the hallway after class and asked if I might raise some questions with them. They were eager to tell me what they thought.

I love this class. It has had a big effect on how I learn because if I don’t understand something, I feel free to ask. Everyone has a chance to voice their opinion, and I believe this kind of learning helps to bring our class together.

When coming to this class, I had no idea of some of the problems in the world today. Now I feel as if I know a lot more. I can now sit in class and look at different points of view, rather than just seeing my own. Not only have I noticed my change, but my family and friends have too.

This way of teaching has broadened my way of thinking. I have learned to listen to other people and to understand that there are many different interpretations of one topic.

From a textbook you can only get facts, but I found that with this kind of discussion and follow-up, you find out how others feel about certain issues and from these beliefs you can make a judgment.

He [Mr Stevens] never tells us our ideas are wrong. I've grown more confident in speaking in class and am not afraid to give my opinion. But he does want us to think about what we are saying. (Hah Hah)

As I leave the school I pass through the main entranceway and notice the large poster on the bulletin board facing the entranceway:

Our school goals – what we want all students to become

Caring	Reflective
Good communicators	Risk takers
Inquirers	Principled
Knowledgeable	Thinkers
Open-minded	

I can't help noticing that four out of the nine goals are related to "thinking" and how Roger Stevens is enabling his students to attain these goals.

EDUCATIONAL GOALS FOR THE 21st CENTURY

Educators and other leadership groups have, for at least the past 40 years, identified the need for our students to become more reflective, more critical minded, more effective problem solvers:

The basics of tomorrow are skills considered to be of a higher level today. These skills include: evaluation and analysis skills; critical thinking; problem solving strategies (including mathematical problem solving); organisation and reference skills; synthesis; application; creativity; decision making given incomplete information; and communication skills through a variety of modes. (Education Commission of the States, 1982, p. 165)

The National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise, an initiative of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, has worked with business and education leaders to identify the skills that college graduates will need. The learning outcomes encourage the development of advanced skills – the kind that can make use of technologies to push towards creative and innovative reasoning (Lewis, 2007).

It's easy to see why we would wish to aim for such educational goals. The adults we admire most – those who have shown themselves to be successful across a wide spectrum of talents – are people who manifest such abilities in "spades" (see, e.g. Gleick, 1993; Green, 2006; Greenhouse, 2006; Kristof, 2008). Such adults and children are an inspiration to us all. Their self-initiative, resourcefulness, creativity, high degree of problem-solving abilities, and thoughtfulness fill us with admiration. In short, these adults and children are prototypes of the fulfillment of the goals of Roger Stevens's school. Isn't this what we want for all children?

THE WELL-ORCHESTRATED DISCUSSION

It is obvious that the well-balanced, productive discussion is not made up entirely of a string of questions, no matter how well each meets the various criteria for provoking thought. The framing of productive questions is only one measure of good discussion teaching. The other lies in the teacher's ability to listen, to attend to what the student is saying, and to intersperse productive questions with other responses that require students to re-examine their ideas. A discussion that consists only of questions will drive the discourse upward and outward too rapidly, without allowing students a chance to think in and around the big ideas. New questions invariably shift the discussion to new issues. Before doing this, teachers will wish also to use responses that dig more deeply, before shifting gears into new territory.

Here is an example of how this might work in a Year 4 discussion on the Zuni Indians:

Teacher: Tell me what observations you made about the ways of life of the Zuni.

Harry: Well, they were agricultural.

If the teacher chooses a question at this point – for example, “What other observations have you made about them?” – this question immediately shifts the discourse away from the reexamination of the student's idea that the Zuni's way of life is agricultural, to other aspects of their way of life. To require the student to reach for deeper meanings, the teacher might respond with

Tell me more about how being agricultural marked their lives. (Asks for more information – for the student to elaborate on what is meant by “agricultural”.)

By responding directly to the student's statement, the teacher calls for a reexamination of the idea presented. This is done for several reasons. First, such a response communicates that the teacher has heard the student's idea. Second, when the idea is “played back” for the student to reexamine, the student takes responsibility for it. Such attention to students' ideas creates habits of thinking. Students must think before they speak. They learn that what they say will be subject to critical self-scrutiny. Moreover, it requires that the student go beyond that response to dig into the meaning of what it meant to be agricultural. The search for more understanding is abetted by such responses.

Harry: I think it means that they grew all their own stuff. Like their food and stuff.

Teacher: (Options for responding)

- They grew their own food. (Paraphrases)
- What did they do for those things they were not able to grow? (Challenges; asks student to go beyond the idea of being agricultural and examine other ways in which the Zuni obtained other necessities of life.)

- What did they grow? (Asks for specific information; asks for answers)
- So they did a lot of farming. (Interprets the student's statement.)

As the teacher-student dialogue evolves, the teacher listens and apprehends and has a variety of options with respect to a subsequent response. Choosing a paraphrase allows for deeper examination of what it means to depend on farming for food; the challenge question would shift the discourse into another realm, and away from the further examination of an agricultural culture; the information question redirects the inquiry towards a discussion of the types of food grown and limits the inquiry to specifics. The interpreting response examines “agricultural” from the type of work that involved. The teacher chooses to “interpret”, to continue the examination of what it means to be an agricultural society from the vantage point of the work involved. The student responds:

Harry: Yeah. They had to do a lot of farming to grow their own stuff. But I think it was the women who did the farming but the men went out to hunt.

Teacher: (Options for responding)

- The women were the farmers. They were the ones who grew the food. (Paraphrases)
- So some of the food was grown, but the men hunted for other kinds of food. (Paraphrases and interprets what the men hunted)
- Why do you suppose that men needed to hunt for other kinds of food? (Challenges; asks for hypotheses)

If the teacher chooses to paraphrase, she will keep the inquiry focused on the food growing and the role of the women in an agricultural society; if she chooses to paraphrase and interpret what the men hunted, she opens up the possibility for the dialogue to shift to the kind of food not grown; if she raises the challenging question of asking why hunting was needed to supplement what was grown, the discourse shifts into new territory. The choice the teacher makes will, of course, direct the pathway of the inquiry. The teacher chooses to paraphrase and interpret, and Harry responds:

Harry: I think that growing stuff wasn't enough. They had to have meat and you can't grow that.

Teacher: (Options for responding)

- Even in an agricultural society, the food from farming wasn't enough. They needed meat as well. (Paraphrases)
- Why do you suppose they needed meat? (Challenges; asks for hypotheses)
- I see. Thank you, Harry. Does anyone else want to comment on what Harry has told us? (Appreciates Harry's contribution and shifts gears to ask for other students' contributions to the inquiry)

- Discuss what you consider to be the importance of speaking and writing clearly.
- Discuss the problems you had in writing clear responses to these activities. How did you deal with those problems?
- Discuss the kinds of feedback you were able to give to help others in these activities.
- Where do you think you need more help?
- Discuss what you consider to be your best work in these activities.

Questions that call for the examination of the quality of students' thinking for each activity are included in Chapter 5.

ACTIVITY 7: LISTENING – A KEY TO INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION (YEARS 3–8)

Learning Goals

- To promote awareness of the need to develop listening skills to understand what is being communicated
- To promote skill in listening for general understanding and for obtaining specific information

Big Ideas

- Listening means being able to hear and to understand what is being said.
- Listening requires our careful attention to what is being said.
- Listening and understanding are very important skills in interpersonal communication.
- Good listening skills help to develop better interpersonal relationships.

Thinking Operations Included in This Activity

- Observing, comparing, interpreting, examining assumptions, suggesting hypotheses, evaluating and judging, making decisions, applying principles to new situations, creating and imagining, summarising

Materials Needed

A collection of “discussion leaders”, that is, sample dialogues, for each group, for example,

Andy: I had a bad day at school.

Grandma: You didn't wipe your feet when you came into the house!

- Writing a story is different from telling a story. You can say words that you can't write, but in writing you get more than one chance to tell your story. You can write your story over and over again, changing ideas; taking out boring parts; adding interesting facts; and correcting spelling, punctuation and errors in sentence structure. All writers do this. It's called the process of editing and making revisions. You may not want to bother doing all this for every story you write, and that's OK. But sometimes you will. You will want to do this because you will know that your story is worth working on again and again, until you get it just right for you. Usually this happens when you write something you care about and you know about. Unless you can actually say to yourself, "Yes, I do care about this topic," and, "Yes, I do know a lot about this topic," there's not much point in starting. So always question yourself this way before you start.

Now, work with a friend. Talk together and try to remember some of the most boring topics you have ever written about (What I did on my summer holidays? Aaarrgh! My favourite fish? Bleh! Spring comes to the zoos? Ugh! Igneous rocks I have collected? Pggghht!). Use a computer, if possible, and, working together, make a list of those topics. Now, use your computer program to put your list in order with the most boring topic at the top. Make a printout of your work and compare your lists with those of another pair of students. What are some of the similarities about the most boring topic of each pair? Try to decide what it is that makes these topics so boring. What role did feelings play in any of these topics? Discuss your ideas with each other.

- Work with a friend to compare the following two stories.

I was in a big sailboat with my friend. It was his dad's boat and we planned to look for sharks because we had all of the stuff that you use. We got it from a shop that you can buy whatever you want. When we got to the place, where we wanted to go, we got all of the stuff on the boat and went into the water first. We just swam around the bottom of the ocean and then we were looking around and we saw a big white shark.

A Year 6 boy wrote this story. His sentences are clear. You can understand what he means. But do you really care about what he is saying? If you don't, it's probably because there's not a lot of feeling behind those words. If you are going to write a story about sharks, try to think of some feelings you do know and do care about that are related to sharks.