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Foreword: The Mercurial Character of Contemporary Questions

There is something beautifully open about questions. Questions have a modesty about them; *we do not always have answers*. Questions imply curiosity; *we are keenly interested*. Questions beget more questions; *we grow and evolve through inquiry*. Questions can transport people into new imaginings and into new ways of thinking.

But questions can also bedevil and confront us. *Where were you? What are you doing? How old are you?* Questions like these can make people feel uncomfortable, maybe even scared. So, one cannot be naïve about the power of questions.

It is more pressing than ever for young people to be equipped with critical understandings about questions and asking the right types of questions, not only in relation to the questions people ask, but also in the *how, when, why, and where* that people ask them.

People ask questions for a whole range of reasons: to find information, to be polite, to probe more deeply. I am reminded of Leo Tolstoy's story "The Three Questions" when young Nikolai asks: *When is the best time to do things? Who is the important one? And, what is the right thing to do?** These questions strike me as bigger life issues or inquiries that can be asked at different points in life. They lie somewhere between questions that shape understandings and questions that call for reflection.

What screens, social media, and even emails have ushered in are ways of asking questions without eye contact and contextual cues — these are mediums that allow for all kinds of deception and anonymity. Honing the art of questioning and listening attentively has never been more foundational to being informed and educated.

In this book, the authors carefully and intelligently offer three categories of questions: questions that elicit information; questions that shape understandings; and questions that press for reflection. In this third edition of *Asking Better Questions*, what the authors excel at is moving questioning and inquiry into a digital age which begs its own set of questions: How are questions different now compared with the past? Through what mediums do we ask our big questions? And to what degree are the answers real, fake, or embellished?

One could say that there has never been a greater need to put "facts" to the test and ask the right questions.

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* "The Three Questions" appears in Leo Tolstoy, *What Men Live By and Other Tales*, translated by Louise and Aylmer Maude (2011). The original work was published in 1885.

Introduction: Engaging with Things That Matter

The 2006 edition of *Asking Better Questions* simply acknowledged the advent of the digital age and an interest in inquiry-based curricula, but in the years since, there have been some extraordinary transformations for those of us who teach and learn. In a world moving so swiftly that it hardly leaves us time to think, now, more than ever, we need to provide students and participants, as well as their teachers and facilitators, with better and more varied kinds of questions. Doing so will enable them to unlock the deeper meanings of their complex environments. Furthermore, the ways in which we access, process, and create information through new technologies offer different conditions for, and challenges to, that thinking.

In this book, we offer readers opportunities to develop their questioning skills and to examine how they might enable students to take on a more critical stance through questioning and acting on the answers they find. Our hope is that this new edition not only reframes familiar strategies and techniques but also introduces ways of working that address media opportunities and enhance the processes of student-centred inquiry.

Information technologies have become so pervasive that recent research has shown that, for many young people, there is no distinction between being online and offline (Carrington 2017). Very young children are using digital tools and practices and, although physically in the material world, they are also moving “seamlessly across online and offline spaces, such as playing with toys that are connected to the internet” (Marsh et al. 2017, 3). These changes disrupt pedagogical practices and change learning dispositions, yet many of the pedagogical models for teaching practices and the physical conditions of learning in school remain 20th century constructs. As Robin Goodfellow (2014) points out, “critical judgment and the truth value of knowledge continues to dominate much teaching and most assessment practice, even in contexts where new subjects and new means of communication are reshaping the curriculum” (11).

The Role of Questions in Developing Critical Awareness

Goodfellow’s assessment, inevitably, drives us to ask further questions that lead us to the central theme of this new edition: How do we help our students develop an ethical stance that supports and sustains them in a “post truth” world? How do we help them consider critical and reflective questions, so that they may better sort out their political, social, economic,

The *Oxford Dictionaries* define *post-truth* as what happens in a world in which “objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” The online resource recognized *post-truth* as its international Word of the Year 2016.

The Key Question Driving This Text

How can we encourage deep learning, support the exploration of meanings, and generate engaged conversations about things that matter?

and personal worlds? How do we help students and participants, novice teachers, facilitators, as well as seasoned educators, develop the necessary knowledge, skills, and strategies to “distinguish ‘spin,’ ‘truthiness,’ ‘fake news’ and the ‘my facts are as good as your facts’ rationalization of somebody’s subjective views of reality” (Johnson 2018, A8)? As Ronald Vale (2013) puts it, “the most important skill for the 21st century . . . is learning how to judge and integrate information from multiple sources to generate conceptual understanding or a new idea” (4).

As authors, we recognize that the readers of this text will be working in a variety of contexts. Some will have well-funded extensive computer access and classroom sets of laptops and iPads; others will work with limited or no technological resources. For many people, technological resources are non-existent; instead, safety, nourishment, and shelter are of primary importance. Whatever the situation, what we present depends only on a commitment to explore the driving question of this text: How can we encourage deep learning, support the exploration of meanings, and generate engaged conversations about things that matter?

For most people, asking questions is a direct way to discover information and to learn how people think and feel about many topics, issues, and matters of interest. But in some cultures, question-asking may be viewed as challenging the power of an authority figure or what peers are saying in a discussion. As a result, participants may prefer a more conversational or storying approach.

It is important, therefore, to be mindful of these differences when creating the kinds of safe environments necessary for critical, empathic, and reflective talk. As suggested in a British Columbia Aboriginal education document (n.d.) from School District No. 22, facilitators and teachers need “to be aware of the ‘agency’ of participants and the hierarchy of power relations that influence the ways participants may experience the situation, and whether they will be able to join in” (69). As in any teaching context, we must be clearly aware of our own reasons for emphasizing the importance of asking questions and questioning answers as much for ourselves as for the students we teach.

Several ideas presented in this resource were first explored by us in *Drama, Theatre and Performance Education in Canada: Classroom and Community Contexts* (Miller and Saxton 2015). As drama teachers we work in classrooms in which social justice, respect, and a sense of self are the media through which students engage in discussions, conversations, and chat. Race, status, culture, privilege and oppression, access and exclusion, competition and collaboration, differences and similarities, domination and empowerment, as well as all manner of states of in-betweenness, represent some of the content explored and questioned through drama. We recognize that, for many, this is also the content of any number of classes and that the issues of today’s curricula in project-based, inquiry learning models are much the same.

What Enables Effective Questioning

Regardless of the discipline, questioning is at the heart of whatever we teach, and we must acknowledge that effective learning — and teaching —

When we think, “[w]e don’t just speed a thought through our neural networks — we inhale it, hold it, wait for it to send ripples through the whole of our being.” — Sven Birkerts (1995, chapter 10, n.p.)

takes time. This time for thinking enables critical thought and allows for consideration of both thinking and feeling. Time is what allows for reflection. It enables students and participants to see the shape of their own identities come more clearly into focus. We seem unable to make time, and yet it is time that creates the space for making effective questions.

The means of nurturing critical thinkers lies in the ability of teachers, facilitators, and students to ask the sorts of questions that develop thoughtful reasoning, invite reflection, and promote the ability to assess, appraise, and criticize. We have always known that. Today’s profoundly complex world also demands the ability to deconstruct patterns of meaning. Yet the digital component raises a concern. While offering a convenient, personalized, and much richer multimodal landscape it can — without intentional guidance or the exercise of a more critical eye — encourage a kind of broad grazing that generates its own learning demands. This often comes at the expense of a critical ear, eye, and heart.

A Reflection of Contemporary Understandings

This third edition reflects changes in curriculum design. Here, we include more integrative examples that embrace digital ways of learning as well as the more traditional means. Where appropriate, we have updated the material; however, we have retained the framework for creating questions because it remains valid. We build on the research, scholarship, ideas, strategies, and lessons offered in 2006 while recognizing that digital media have changed our understanding of how to communicate. Furthermore, this third edition explicitly recognizes that contemporary classrooms are increasingly diverse culturally, linguistically, and ethnically.

Here, in brief, is what this text does:

- It includes opportunities for teachers and students to explore content through digital media. It does so by building on students’ interests and capacities for complexity and change, and their facility with media.
- It presents our research on the use of conditional language (I wonder if it’s possible . . . ?) to enhance discussion, dialogue, deliberation, and conversation through effective questions (see Chapter 5).
- It recognizes the reality of a change in classroom dynamics. Today Google, Siri, Alexa, our peers, and digital contacts may have as many answers as the teacher.
- It addresses recent concerns on the loss of empathy due to a lack of ability to connect face to face.
- It recognizes a paradox. A digital world is typically two-dimensional, but we live our lives in a three-dimensional physical and social context. That means we have a responsibility to find ways to mediate healthy accommodations.
- Finally, it offers strategies and techniques for finding the means to move beyond the comfortable echo chambers of sites that hold only ideas with which we are already familiar and comfortable.

In summary, this new text is written within a critical literacy framework that acknowledges that technology can play a role as a medium for

learning. It focuses on an understanding of cultural contexts with attention to the power dynamics, conflicting perspectives, unwritten assumptions, and biases inherent in most of the materials taught and accessed. We begin with a brief historical overview that highlights past pedagogical thinking and how it resonates with current educational changes.

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