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To Learn from Anyone and Everyone: Ask

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Abstract: *Only humans ask questions. As early as 375 B.C., Plato emphasized the importance of teaching children how to ask and answer questions. As humans, learners have a unique disposition to increase their knowledge---and they do that by asking questions. In an instructional setting, asking questions to learn from anyone and everyone is a unique skill set. Research suggests that asking is the one thing that consistently allows one to peer into the heads and hearts of other people. In an academic environment, the intent in asking questions is to learn directly from others to surface what they know, think, and feel. Illustratively, this paper details nine examples of asking questions to determine what both learners and colleagues know, think, and feel.*

1. Introduction

Asking questions to learn from anyone and everyone is a unique skill set. While a body of research highlights the relationship between asking questions and ongoing learning in diverse environments, asking teachers and classmates questions to learn from them is a unique skill (Wetzler, 2024; Isaacson, 2017). In a mosaic of settings, asking questions can be a deceptively straightforward way to learn more, for example, about an array of societal and socio-technical issues (Wetzler). In a vibrant instructional environment, the questions themselves never disappear because questioning never ceases (Straus, 1955). When insightful questions go unasked or unanswered, however, individual, and collective learning is constrained for educators and learners alike (Bowman, 2018b). Harvard professor Clayton Christensen highlighted the beckoning opportunity for teachers and students to travel together to a new destination when he tweeted: "Without a good question, the good answer has no place to go."

In an academic setting, the type of questions related to learning *directly* from others begins by figuring out what one might not know that others can teach us. In classroom discussions on topics such as climate change, intermittent homelessness, community-police relations, or the societal impact of technological advances, the instructional intent in asking questions is to learn from others by surfacing what they *know*, *think*, and *feel*. In a classroom setting, "asking questions is a conversation---a journey to a new destination traveled together" (Bustin, 2015, p. 18). Understandably, perceptive classroom teachers are adept at sensing when students' questions come from a place of genuine curiosity and when they do not. Thoughtful educators also recognize that in a disruptive, tumultuous social and political environment, individuals frequently hold back from telling others what they are genuinely thinking and feeling. Recent research, however, suggests that there is "one thing that consistently allows you to look into the heads and hearts of other people: *asking*" (Wetzler, 2024, p. 92).

2. Theory into Practice: Using Incisive Questions to Promote Insight

Only humans ask questions. Infants are questioning beings at the core of their existence (Straus, 1955). The first question that arises in a newborn's life is whether to trust or not to trust one's caregiver. As humans, learners have a unique disposition to increase their knowledge---and they do that by asking questions. In discussing provocative issues like climate change, for example, learners' questions function as data in helping an educator to better understand the culture of the classroom and the dispositions and thinking of one's students. Instructionally, questions are speech acts which place teachers and students in direct immediate interaction. In responding to questions regarding climate change, for instance, students and educators are forced to make choices regarding how to respond: Individually or collectively, broadly, or narrowly, past or future-oriented, positively, or pessimistically (Goody, 1978). In a word, questioning in an academic environment compels educators and students to

recognize that asking and listening to other people's questions is a vital social process in understanding oneself and others in a free society (Lauritzen, 2022a).

3. Theory into Practice: Nine Illustrative Instructional Activities

Who matters? An Illustrative Instructional activity

In an array of academic environments there is an evocative moral question that is tacitly held but rarely voiced: "Who matters?" The answer reflects the circle of moral concern that educators and students hold for themselves, their school, and their community (Bowman, 2024; Chapman & Sisodia, 2015). In a classroom setting, reflecting on the foundational ethical question "Who matters?" invites students to calibrate their inner moral compass: one's integrity, ethical principles, character, wisdom, knowledge, temperament, words, and actions (Hock, 2000).

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger argued that what distinguishes human beings is the ability to take a stand on what and who we are. Teachers as moral leaders awaken learners' curiosity related to what and who they are by asking provocative questions. Imagine an educator beginning a social studies or science class, for example, by inviting students to consider global cultures that have lived sustainabIy sometimes for thousands of years but are currently suffering from the effects of people today who are polluting their natural environment (Spodek, 2023; Bowman, 2024). Moreover, imagine inviting students to focus on two questions written on the classroom whiteboard: "Do disenfranchised people around the globe genuinely suffer from our collective polluting and depleting? Is our living sustainably not deprivation if we do so to alleviate the suffering of others with love?" (Spodek, p. 74) In a follow-up small-group discussion, imagine that the classroom teacher invites students to generate a list of specific personal actions that will be required to "live with love" to ensure clean air, land, water, and food for everyone.

Eliciting what learners know, think, and feel: Illustrative instructional activity

Imagine a social studies teacher beginning a new unit on the American judicial system by recounting this narrative: You are riding in a car driven by a close friend after a football game. In the dark, he hit a pedestrian. You know that your friend was going at least thirty-five miles per hour in a zone where the posted maximum speed is twenty miles per hour. There are no witnesses other than you. His lawyer says that if you testify that your friend was driving only twenty miles per hour, you will save him from serious legal consequences (Seidman, 2007). In a small-group discussion, imagine that the teacher invites students to consider three questions: What *right* does your friend have to expect you to protect him legally? How would you resolve the tension between your obligations as a sworn witness and your loyalty to a close friend? Might the solution be viewed as cultural? That is, a universalistic characteristic of the Western world is to "tell the absolute truth." In parts of the non-Western world, however, the culture tends to be particularistic in valuing the "love and loyalty" to a friend very highly (Seidman).

Asking to reveal an elusive truth in a classroom, laboratory, or societal setting

In *Truth and Method*, the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960) argued that one cannot build experience and solve problems without asking questions of others. In a thinking classroom, a thinking laboratory, and in a thinking society, questioning is the beginning, not the end, in confronting and resolving scientific, societal, and personal challenges (Heffernan, 2012). Einstein argued that asking questions is not about getting an immediate answer in an uncertain world but rather about solving problems. The Spanish poet Antonio Machado framed the challenge engagingly: "There is no path. The path is made by walking."

In the early 1950's, for example, Oxford University's Dr. Alice Stewart began her medical career as a pioneer in the field of epidemiology (Bowman, 2018a). The core of her medical research related to discovering patterns in disease. Dr. Stewart's research focused on an especially perplexing *question*: Why were so many young children, many of those from very affluent families, dying of cancer in Great Britain? Her exhaustive research findings suggested that by a rate of two to one, the mothers of the young cancer victims had received pre-natal X-Rays (Heffernan, 2012). Predictably, her findings flew in the face of conventional wisdom: Medical practitioners who are dedicated to helping patients achieve optimal well-being do not consciously harm them. Regrettably, it took twenty-five years of persistent questioning and contentious debate before the medical establishment in both Britain and the United States abandoned the practice of pre-natal X-Rays (Heffernan).

Using questions to elicit what students know, think, and feel: Illustrative Activity

Imagine a first-year science teacher beginning a class period by sharing a disquieting situation that she has encountered professionally: The number of students involved in emotional outbursts and physical altercations in diverse school settings, together with both frequent disruptive and listless student behavior in the classroom. In an impulsive reaction to their teacher's humanistic concerns, one student exclaimed, "Kids in our school don't really care about each other, so they fight." A second student blurted out, "Our school is boring, and our classes are boring." A third student remarked, "We're either on our cell phones or playing video games all night, so we come to school tired and irritable." (Bowman, 2019)

In an "Ah, ha" moment, the science teacher pauses reflectively to *question* the role of sleep deprivation on student disruptive behavior and academic engagement. Intuitively, the teacher senses that beginning a class with anecdotes, stories, or questions that are emotionally engaging to students creates and sustains instructional engagement. Relatedly, the science teacher invites students to share their personal story regarding their sleep habits by gathering in small discussion groups to address two *questions*: "Is sleep deprivation the real cause of classroom disruptive behavior and diminished learner motivation in school and instructional activities?" Have you *creatively* developed a ritual to ensure that you get restorative sleep nightly? Finally, in preparation for the next class period, the teacher invites students to research a list of eight-to-ten sleep hygiene strategies that a student could adopt to promote healthy sleep habits (Bowman, 2019).

Social psychologist Graham Wallas (2014) outlined the four stages of the creative process: Preparation: Start with the *question*; Incubation: Look for answers; Illumination: Find answers; Verification: Try and test. For educators at diverse grade levels, questions are frequently the jumping-off point for student-initiated creative activities. On a granular level, the questions posed by the science teacher regarding the effects of sleep deprivation were intended to elicit authentic student responses related to what students *know, think, and feel* about an admittedly complex issue. The related implication for educators is that "while non-stories provide information, resonant stories teach, inspire, and motivate students by engaging them emotionally and intellectually" (Bowman, 2018a, p. 2.)

What do we owe to one another? An illustrative instructional activity

In psychiatrist Viktor Frankl's (1959) *In Search of Meaning*, the author argued that what is important is not what we expect from life but rather what life expects from us. Imagine a high school social studies teacher beginning a class period by posting Viktor Frankl's question regarding "what life expects from us" on the classroom whiteboard. Imagine further that the teacher starts the class period by characterizing our recent national elections as a "cauldron of raw emotions" in which citizens and students were relentlessly exposed to a world where individuals heard ideologically only what they wanted to hear, always confirmed and never contradicted, in which visceral dislike became hatred, anger became narcissistic rage, opponents became enemies, and dismay teetered on despair (Wheatley, 2013; Bowman, 2020b).

Using a small discussion-group format, the teacher subsequently invites students to consider three questions:

- Does this characterization of our recent polarized presidential election in the United States represent or misrepresent what you know, think, or feel?
- What do politicians and voters "owe one another" in engaging in political discourse in future elections?
- Is civility about the character of who we are? That is, does civility bring core values to life in one's behaviour?

An illustrative instructional activity: Can civility be taught and learned?

In a class debriefing following the students' small-group discussion regarding the recent U. S. presidential election, imagine that the social studies teacher shared the following historical account: When he was a young student in Virginia, George Washington copied a list of 110 "Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation" compiled by French Jesuit priests in 1595 and reprinted in English in 1640. The rules had such a "profound influence on Washington at age 14 that

they shaped America's first president and guided many of his decisions and actions throughout his life and presidency" (Dilenschneider, 2013, p 12). The 110 "Rules of Civility" included:

- Honor and obey your natural parents although they be poor.
- Every action done in company ought to be with some sign of respect to those who are present.
- Speak not injurious words neither in jest nor earnest; scoff at none although they give occasion.
- When another speak, be attentive yourself and disturb not the audience.
- Sleep not when others speak, sit not when others stand, speak not when you should hold your piece, walk not on when others stop.
- Show not yourself glad at the misfortune of another though he were your enemy.
- Use no reproachful language against any one, neither curse nor revile.
- Being to advise or reprehend anyone, consider whether or not it ought to be in public or in private, and presently or at some other time (Brookhiser, 2003)

As the class period nears an end, imagine that students are invited to reflect on the spirit of the 110 Rules of Civility while journaling a response to two questions: When intolerance, self-indulgent anger, and vitriolic rants are threatening the civility on which democratic government depends, are the 110 "Rules of Civility" more relevant than ever? Can civility be taught and learned in an academic environment?

Asking colleagues pedagogical questions to reveal what they know, think, and feel

Imagine a faculty-association seminar featuring a panel of successful educators selected to address three evocative questions before an audience of beginning teachers and staff members: "In a moment of self-reflection: Why do you do the work that you do in the classroom? Why is this work important? How can you and your colleagues make a difference in learners' lives and in the development of society? Ideally, the panelists' responses to these three questions will serve to help participants: Clarify what is vital in effective classroom teaching, capture the contextual challenges embedded in life in classrooms, and connect aspiring professionals with each other in a shared goal---the development of students and society.

Directing questions at colleagues to dialogically inspire innovative teaching and learning

In "Man, a Questioning Being," neurologist Erwin Straus (1955) argued that there is no better way of mapping the collective intelligence of a group than by directing thoughtful questions at *one another*. Imagine a faculty-development seminar in which a panel of experienced educators is invited to address this multidimensional question: How can educators inspire learners to

- Become more aware of themselves?
- More empathic towards others?
- More tolerant of others' opinions and beliefs?
- More sensitive to their ecological surroundings?
- More confident in responding to an ambiguous, fragile future, and
- More willing to embrace diversity and inclusion in creating collaborative solutions to societal and organizational challenges? (Winkler & Pelzmann, 2023)

Addressing the pedagogical questions above serves as a collegial reminder that teaching is not an individual practice. It is a complex portfolio of ever-deepening relationships (Bowman, 2020a). Thoughtful educators share an innate desire to be heard (Luna, 2022). In daily practice, each educator brings something unique and vital to one's work--- points of view and strategies that are oriented professionally toward the co-creation of imaginative teaching and learning. Through dialogic interaction, educators bring out the best ideas in each other and enable colleagues to become aware of and adopt innovative instructional strategies. Collaboratively, the co-creation of transformative teaching and learning provides a learnable, continually replenished source of ideas and experiences for a faculty and school community (Organizational innovation, 2021).

Directing Questions at Colleagues through Digital conversations: Illustrative professional activity

A panel discussion or workshop format is but one among many ways that colleagues can learn from directing questions at one another. Imagine, for example, educators across a school district engaging in asynchronous one-on-one digital conversations related to a set of thoughtful pedagogical questions and ensuing collegial responses to those same questions. In practice, these online conversations would serve to create a collective reflective space for educators to focus on one or more of the same questions, reflect deeply on how to respond, and learn from one another. Importantly, responding to thoughtful questions in a digital format would empower everyone to take responsibility for the instructional context that they are a part of. Additionally, it is also easy to imagine colleagues individually journaling responses to one or more of the online questions to hone one's metacognitive ability---the ability to think about one's own perspective regarding the purpose and practice of teaching (Fleming, 2021). Finally, perhaps committing a few quiet minutes of self-reflection during one's daily planning period to addressing one or more of the proposed digital questions might well allow a specific topic to take root within one's instructional practice, while also serving to make reflection an integral part of the workday instead of just another task to fit into an already hectic schedule that is, in the words of William Wordsworth, too much with us

4. Discussion

As early as 375 B.C., Plato emphasized the importance of teaching children how to ask and answer questions. In the past 2,400 years, however, there has been an unspoken contract that says that lawyers, judges, journalists, corporate leaders, and educators are more entitled to ask questions than others (Lauritzen, 2022a). In contemporary classrooms, "the ability to master the science and art of asking questions is rarely exercised," with the memorization of right answers too often replacing thoughtful questioning (Bustin, 2015, p. 22). Inflection points in academic environments occur across time. New strategies in teaching and learning tend to begin with accepting things "exactly as they are and exactly as they are not" (Logan, King, & Fischer-Wright, 2008, p. 128). Deciding who is allowed to ask questions in a classroom setting and who isn't carries a subtle message about relationships, about relative status, and assertions of status while also functioning as a potentially powerful way to distribute responsibility in an instructional environment (Lauritzen, 2022b; Goody, 1978). Today, confronting the challenges of climate crises, biodiversity crises, endemic viruses, mass migration, and unrelenting technological advances, it is more urgent than ever to democratize the power of questioning in making room for everyone to ask their own questions, without disqualifying anyone.

5. Conclusion

In the everydayness of teaching and learning, thought-provoking questions catalyze an array of responses which reveal who learners are experientially, where learners are going instructionally, and how educators and students connect relationally (Bowman, 2018b). Knowing that it is psychologically safe to ask and respond to others' questions helps learners feel engaged in discovering new ways of thinking, understanding others' point of view, learning from one another, and dealing with uncertainty in a volatile world. In practice, engaged questioning and intentional listening are requisite tools in developing and enhancing students' thinking skills in enlarging their perspectives on life's most compelling concerns. The profound inclusion of artificial intelligence (AI) in the evolution of society, for example, compels the consideration of diverse perspectives and the *questions* that arise regardless of their origin.

A final word

In the Broadway show, *Hamilton*, there is a stirring musical ending which asks an evocative question: "Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?"

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