Comprehension Connections

Bridges to Strategic Reading

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Questioning
Fuel for Thought

Asking questions can be downright dangerous. Damaging, even. I remember the night I learned this the hard way. It was suppertime at my granny’s house, a major event indeed. Aunts, uncles, and cousins crowded into the huge country kitchen to enjoy the best food in the state of Kentucky. The men had been out fishing all day, and Granny fried up the catch. We bowed our heads as Poppy rendered thanks. As the prayer went on and on, I remember raising my four-year-old head to notice just how many people were there for dinner. Would there be enough food for everyone? More importantly, would there be enough for me? As soon as I heard the decisive amen, I called out at the top of my lungs, “Can I have a leg?” My uncles doubled over in laughter and my aunts cackled until they cried. My compassionate mother leaned in to whisper, “Sweetie, it’s fish, not chicken.” How could I be so stupid? I knew fish didn’t have legs! I wanted to crawl under that great big table and hide. No surprise that this forty-year-old story is recounted whenever my extended family reunites. Yeah, it’s sort of funny now, but I can still feel the stinging humiliation. I decided that very night that I would not ask any more questions. It was much safer just to be quiet.

And so it goes with my students. The younger they are, the more willing they seem to be publicly curious. To ask questions. To wonder. My questioning lessons are initially more successful in the primary grades than with the older kids. I understand why. They’ve already had “fish leg” moments. They believe that asking questions is for dummies, and they know that far too many adults don’t appreciate inquisitive minds. Even worse, excessive
testing has taught students to spend their energies in pursuit of the one right answer, never mind any questions that the reader might have. Neil Postman echoes this thinking when he says, “Children enter school as question marks and come out as periods” (1995, 70).

As depressing as this may seem, hope lies within the renewed emphasis on student-generated questioning! When kids learn that their own questions have value, their confidence soars, and their thinking grows exponentially. “If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder . . . he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it” (Carson 1998, 41). Rachel Carson’s words remind me that I am that one adult to so many children. And so are you.

Michael J. Gelb’s national best-seller How to Think Like Leonardo da Vinci (1998) contains a chapter titled “Curiosita.” Before reading this, I thought I knew a lot about questioning. After all, I knew Bloom’s taxonomy backward and forward and could ask high-level questions with the best of them. In spending time perfecting my questioning skills, however, I’d neglected developing those of my students. Michael Gelb taught me so much about the teaching of strategic questioning:

- Teach kids to ask questions. It builds upon their natural impulse for curiosity.
- Trust that the ability to ask questions can be developed.
- Remember that sometimes there’s no need for answers . . . even in school.
- Believe that the questions we ask influence the depth of our thinking and the quality of our lives.
- Spend more time looking for the right question than the right answer.

At times I need to be prompted into a questioning state of mind. Overloaded curriculum maps and the pressures of test preparation quickly make me forget the value of wonder and curiosity. Here are some questioning quickies that can help shift the focus of your classroom.

- Hang a roll of adding machine tape in your classroom as a reminder of how questioning goes on and on and on. Encourage students to jot down anything they wonder about, without worrying about finding the answers to these questions. Soon the adding machine tape will be filled with the curiosities your students may otherwise have never
revealed. What a great way to get into the minds of your kids! I always begin the roll with some of the things I often wonder about: Why do roller-coasters make me nauseated? Will the Midwest have a mild winter? How can I be a better mom to Blythe and Brynne? Should my dad get that pontoon boat? Will I ever get a dog? How many children have I taught over the course of my lifetime? Will America cease to be dependent on foreign oil? Where did I put my glasses?

- Play the “conversation of questions” game. Partners attempt to make meaningful conversation using only questions. A great example can be found in the “questions only” game on television’s Whose Line Is It Anyway? Although this show is not suitable for elementary students, it can give you ideas for playing improvisational questioning games with your class.

- Teach your students to look for a second right answer. Don’t always stop after a first right answer has been identified. Soliciting plural answers drives kids to generate deeper questions of their own.

- Instead of asking students, “What did you learn today?” try asking, “What questions did you ask today?”

No other thinking strategy has compelled me to reconsider my teaching practices more than questioning. Allowing my students to be the intensely curious beings they are has transformed me from a question-asking machine to a learning companion for my students.

Launching Sequence: Questioning

Concrete Experience:
Questioning Rocks!

**Materials needed:** an object that holds personal significance for you, preferably one with a story behind it

My great friend and office mate Angie Ferguson travels to northern Michigan each July. As she
walked the shores of Lake Huron last summer, Angie spotted a smooth, egg-shaped rock, just the shade of purple I adore. The size of my fist, Angie’s rock is now part of my tried-and-true launching lesson for questioning. Kids love rocks: the weight in their hands, the unpredictable textures, the knowledge that rocks are so plentiful and accessible.

We begin in a circle. I place the rock in the palm of my hand and invite the kids to begin examining it. I don’t tell them much, only that this rock is very special to me. The thinking stems for questioning are posted within sight, although many children don’t seem to need them when wondering about nature. (See Figure 5–1.)

![Figure 5–1 Thinking stems for questioning](image-url)
We gently pass the rock around the circle, taking time to run our fingers around the smooth curves and notice the unexpected weight. Kids immediately fire off questions: “Where did you get this rock?” “Why is it special?” “How long have you had it?” “Is it from Ohio?” “What kind of rock is it?” “When did you first see it?” “Do you have a rock collection?” “Why does it look purple?” “How old is it?”

The questions that surface seem to sponsor new questions, until the students are satisfied that their queries have been voiced. I tell them what expert questioners they are, how their questions are even more thought provoking than the answers. I promise to provide more information about this special rock as the days go by. I compare it to reading a book; you don’t get all the answers at once. The author often strings you along, and your questions fuel the drive to keep reading.

Each day I reveal a little bit more about the story of the rock, displaying it in a prominent place to spur even more questions. One group I worked with recently even placed the rock on the classroom stool, along with trailing chains of sticky notes filled with questions!
Sensory Exercises: Questioning

Q: 24/7

Each month new teacher Shannon Liechte graciously invites me into her first-grade class at Willowville Elementary. We work with her students to launch new thinking strategies, creating memorable anchor lessons. Recently I related to Shannon’s students how great thinkers question all the time. The students took my language and quickly made it their own as we turned to talk. “We should question twenty-four seven,” I overheard as I listened in. I decided to follow their lead. It was no surprise that every child in this class was familiar with the popular phrase twenty-four seven. One student mentioned how the neighborhood Walgreens was open twenty-four seven. Another shared how her father was on call at the fire department twenty-four seven. “Wow,” I said. “It’s like we are in the business of questioning and we’re open twenty-four seven!” We decided to create a logo as a visual prompt for this new strategy. (See Figure 5–3.)

![Our questioning logo](image-url)
I talked frankly with the students about how difficult it is to maintain a questioning stance. We talked about excessive testing and the fear of being wrong. I reminded them that we could support each other by valuing all questions posed and encouraging each other to look for more than one right answer. A few creative kids began using the American Sign Language hand gesture for Q whenever someone posed a particularly thoughtful question. It wasn’t long before everyone caught on. Now months have passed since I launched the questioning strategy with Miss Liechte’s first graders, but it’s not unusual to walk down the hallway at Willowville and see a giggling child giving me the Q sign!

The Q Food

To get kids thinking about the practice of questioning before, during, and after reading, venture into a health food store. Pick up a bag of quinoa (pronounced “keen-wa”). Quinoa is a grain from the Andes Mountains, first used by the Incan civilization (for more information, visit www.quinoa.net). Uncommon foods are ideal for this lesson, since many students are not acquainted with the unusual names and flavors. Quinoa is inexpensive and is prepared much like rice; you’ll need to cook it at home so you can quickly warm it up at school. Introduce the food by displaying it before the students and writing its name on the board. Invite students to smell and view the food up close. Chart their initial questions.

- Do I have to try it?
- Is this from another country?
- Does Mrs. McGregor like it?
- Is it expensive?
- Will I like it?

Point out to students that they haven’t even tasted the food, yet they have so many questions already... just like when you pick up a book for the first time. You can have questions before ever “tasting” the words. It’s these questions that make you want to open your mind and dig in!
Pass out plastic spoons and encourage your students to try the quinoa. While they savor the taste, ask the students to identify any new questions they might have. Chart them in a second column.

- Do my friends like this?
- What other foods does it taste like?
- Can I have more?
- Can I spit this out?
- Where can my parents buy this?

Talk with the students about how questions formed in their minds even as they tasted the quinoa. Again, this is just like reading a good book. Questions surface at the same time you are experiencing the text. These questions help you understand what you’re reading.

Now that the students have experience with quinoa, explore what they’re wondering. What fresh questions exist? What lingering questions remain?

- Does my mom know about quinoa?
- Do I have to eat any more?
- Do kids in other countries eat this all the time?
- Am I a picky eater?
- Is quinoa a healthy food?

Point out how the quinoa has been tasted and swallowed (in most cases!) and still there are questions to be asked. When a reader finishes a good book, the thinking goes on and on. Questions incubate long after the cover is closed. This savory encounter with quinoa will anchor future conversations with your students about questioning with text.

*Note:* Other unusual foods require less preparation and can generate the same great questions from students. My creative colleague Mary Taylor suggests using any or all of the following: daikon radishes, prickly pear cactus fruit, Ugli fruit, star fruit, purple kale, kumquat.
Wonder-full Songs

Songwriters often fill their lyrics with questions. It’s great for kids to hear the power of questions within the context of music. As always, provide students with a copy of the lyrics. Ask them to notice how the questions are used, how the questions change their thinking, and if the lyrics give answers to the questions posed. These songs ask the listener one question after another:

- “Whose Garden Was This,” Tom Paxton
- “Blowin’ in the Wind,” Bob Dylan
- “Y,” by Mark McGuinn

Other songs might not use questions in their lyrics, but they surely generate questions in the mind of the listener. Students become fluent questioners as they listen and wonder. These titles have worked for me:

- “Eleanor Rigby,” the Beatles
- “The Living Years,” Mike and the Mechanics

Vermeer: Questions Beneath the Surface

The life of Jan Vermeer (1632–75) is shrouded in the unknown. Although much has been written about his modest life and sizeable family, most of what is known is based in supposition. Since no writings or letters by the artist have been found to date, not even any sales records from his lifetime, we can only guess about his artistic influences and personality. The little we do know makes us hunger for more. Novels like *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, by Tracy Chevalier (2001), *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*, by Susan Vreeland (2000), and *Chasing Vermeer*, by Blue Balliett (2005) attempt to satisfy us with inferred scenarios and creative speculation.

The same is true of Vermeer’s work. The situations depicted are ambiguous; the painted figures seem lost in furtive thought. At first the viewer might appreciate the beauty and tranquility of the paintings, but questions lurk just beneath the surface. Who were Vermeer’s subjects? What were they
thinking? Did we catch them by surprise? That our questions can never be answered only makes them more provoking...an ideal place to lead our students as they consider the power of questioning.

Build children’s schema by providing some background information about Vermeer. Tell them of his wife and eleven children, the family’s inn, and the rediscovery of his work two centuries after it was painted. Introduce students to the obscurity shrouding his work, and allow them to spend time studying some of his paintings. The questions are sure to come: dozens of theirs and a few of yours, too.

Kids seem to be especially interested in *A Girl Asleep* (c. 1657), *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* (c. 1657), *The Girl with the Pearl Earring* (c. 1665), and *The Love Letter* (c. 1669–70).

### The Wordless Books of David Wiesner

Nothing fills children with wonder more than gazing into the sky. Is a storm approaching? Where will that jet land? Could that be the Little Dipper? Doesn’t that cloud look like a dinosaur? Author-illustrator David Wiesner capitalizes on this inborn curiosity in three of his wordless books: *Free Fall* (1988), *Tuesday* (1991), and *Sector 7* (1999). In these inventive books, the sky is the setting for fantastic adventures and unending questions. Try a before, during, and after questioning session with your students.

**Before:** Have students ask questions while examining the front and back covers, the dedication, the blurb, and the biographical information.

**During:** Develop questioning fluency in students by encouraging them to ask their questions aloud during the viewing of the book. I do this without requiring students to raise their hands. When a question arises, the student simply asks it aloud. Kids are bursting in and out with their questions, popcorn style. Another option is to challenge kids to investigate these books with a friend, using only questions as conversation.

**After:** Have students go eye-to-eye with a partner and contemplate the following: What are you wondering? What doesn’t make sense? Which part of the story raised the most questions for you? How did
your questions propel you through the book? Are you left with unanswered questions?

With Wiesner’s wordless books, the sky’s the limit for questioning!

Quotes About Questioning to Get Kids Talking!

One’s first step in wisdom is to question everything.
—Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, scientist

The important thing is not to stop questioning.
—Albert Einstein, physicist

The answers aren’t important really…. What’s important is—knowing all the questions.
—Zilpha Keatley Snyder, author

It is better to know some of the questions than all of the answers.
—James Thurber, humorist

Not to know is bad; not to wish to know is worse.
—African proverb

Judge of a man by his questions rather than by his answers.
—Voltaire, philosopher

All men by nature desire to know.
—Aristotle, philosopher

The desire to know is natural to good men.
—Leonardo Da Vinci, artist
Time for Text: Questioning

No more wondering where to find great questioning lessons. Check out these ideas!


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