



Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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September 1994

Some Answers about Questions

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We ask questions in the classroom to elicit a lively and educational discussion. But underlying that goal lies a more fundamental concern: to teach students how to ask and answer questions on their own: "One is not engaged in pouring knowledge into an empty vessel; one is trying to activate an intelligence to begin learning on its own." (Scott 141)

Over the summer I researched teaching critical thinking and discovered that asking the right kinds of questions lies at the heart of developing independence in learning. One surprising insight: ask questions to which I *don't* have an answer. Questions without direct answers come in at least three different varieties:

- _ those that have no "answer" (Is there grace in the grotesque?)
- _ those that have debated answers (Why did the South lose the Civil War?)
- _ those to which I just don't yet have an answer (Which Dickens' novels deal with factory working conditions?).

The not-so-obvious corollary to the no-answer question is: *never answer any question*. Then why did I spend all that time (and money!) in graduate school?! To find out the interesting questions, that's why, and *not* to demonstrate how well my investment paid off. Silencing myself forces students to come to terms with the topic themselves, and it forces them to confront each other. As they articulate their own

opinions, they learn to back up those opinions with knowledge gained preparing for class (Gravett 300). When responsibility for the class discussion falls on them, students learn to embrace learning for their *own* purposes, like doing extra research in order to prove a point they made in class.

Now the teacher becomes a moderator, not a fountain of wisdom, and this demands a whole new set of teaching skills: listening, summarizing, clarifying (only when necessary!), asking for clarification ("I don't understand what you mean by . . ." or "what does . . . suggest to you?") and making connections. The teacher listens, and redirects the conversation by summarizing ("Some of you seem to think *a*, while others of you are saying *b*, but now can we turn to *c*?") Not easy, moderating requires a solid knowledge of the subject, perceptive listening skills, tact, diplomacy, and leadership. It would be a crime to abdicate that responsibility to the class in favor of being the one "who has all the answers." On the other hand, the teacher can't give up all authority or the discussion becomes a free-for-all. The teacher keeps the momentum going, making connections between students' responses and between this text and others. I want to avoid forcing them down my predetermined path of thought, following an "edifice of questions," that deadens rather than livens discussions. And yet, without a definite plan, we could get into an area for which I *have not prepared*. Knowing this could happen will force me to think about the kinds of issues the students may raise—a good way to approach my planning anyway. I can

start by asking them what **they** notice in the text, and their observations may lead to the issues I want them to explore.

I'll spend some class time interrogating the logic behind statements made. One new history professor openly debated the merits of students' ideas in front of the class, and found that his demand for logical, defensible arguments spawned an ethos of serious inquiry (Frye 170). I can establish a similar classroom ethos in an English classroom by asking students to offer textual evidence for their claims, and by inviting them to evaluate each other's claims and evidence. I can ask them to explain their logic, "How did you arrive at that?" Such classroom work teaches students how to critique their own logical processes, a valuable skill they'll need to have internalized by the time they write their papers.

As discussion moderator, I'll prepare a list of intriguing study questions to accompany reading assignments. These might include questions I have myself, like "What is an emperor of ice cream?" or tried-and-true questions ("What is the central idea of this poem/essay/story?") In class, I may ask the same question of several students and then compare their reasons for their choices. I will also include questions that ask students to compare characters, "Who is a foil to King Lear?" and groups of characters, "How do the townsmen's responses compare to the townswomen's?," in order to examine text structure. I'll ask them to compare works, authors or methods, too, but not by asking evaluative "what's better?" or speculative "what if?" questions because these lead discussion away from the text (Gravett 301). Instead I will ask interpretive "how?" and "in what way?" questions that invite students to return to the text to support their claims.

Students get more deeply involved when they solve problems *in the manner of the discipline*. Assigning broad questions ahead of time gives them a reason to scrutinize the material. The questions should be the BIG

knotty ones of the discipline, either esoteric ideas being pursued and published by PhD candidates, or the still-debated central issues (Scott 141). In teaching Dickens' *Hard Times* this fall, I'll ask students to describe how, to what extent, or if this novel makes a plea for better working conditions. After completing a couple of these mini-projects, students' confidence will rise, and their classroom articulateness will rise commensurately. Clearly, the earlier they do these projects, the sooner the benefits will materialize. Finally, in the interest of encouraging self-motivated learning, I'll ask students to devise their own questions about the topic, and I'll use a selection of their questions as the basis for next meeting's discussion.

A couple of related tips:

- ◆ Tone of voice matters—stay aware of how your voice says "good, excellent, not-so-good" even when your words don't (Barell 86).
- ◆ Be willing to admit error—it makes it easier for students to do so (Scott 144).
- ◆ Try to help the student feel more and more confident as time goes on—*never* judge a student's idea as stupid, even when it proves undefendable. Show interest in each student's contribution, and *be* interested (Scott 144).
- ◆ Keep thinking about the education process—that's what makes it work (Scott 144).

Works Cited

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