

Teaching Students to Ask Questions Instead of Answering Them

by Matthew H. Bowker

Philosophers, cognitive scientists, anthropologists, and psychologists have argued convincingly that the act of questioning is central to thinking, to storing and communicating knowledge, even to several important types of social interaction.¹ But while scholars of higher education have written extensively on the topic of questioning for more than a century, they have focused on how teachers ask questions and how students answer them, largely neglecting to consider that helping students develop their own questioning skills might be a valuable pedagogical objective in itself. In my teaching, I practice a question-centered pedagogy that is different from the Socratic, critical, and problem-based approaches found in many college courses. I have found that requiring students to create their own questions about course material helps them understand how the answers we have come to accept are connected, contingent, and contextual, how they rely on, imply, and beg additional questions. In this question-centered pedagogy, the questions themselves are the answers.

When Marshall McLuhan wrote that “the problem today isn’t that we don’t have the answers, but that we don’t have the questions,” he meant that our capacity to generate answers is often less important than our ability to interrogate the answers we already have, especially as they change, falter, or overlap.² The flaw in most Socratic, critical, and problem-based approaches is that the teacher retains control of the inquiry. Students are asked to generate answers in accordance with their roles as naïve interlocutors, while the teacher plays Socrates. When the teacher is the one who constructs the most interesting questions, problems, or critical challenges, students become dependent upon the teacher to catalyze inquiry. On the other hand, a question-centered pedagogy proposes that these question-posing, problem-making functions be carefully handed over to students, so that students engage the course material as independent thinkers.

Teachers may object to this pedagogy, fearing that teaching questions instead of answers somehow impoverishes students. But we should recognize that teaching answers without questions deprives students of crucial learning experiences while inculcating a dangerous ideology. Imagine students of American history who have been taught only answers—perhaps several thousand historical facts. These students of “the pedagogy of the answer” would be incapable of generating interesting hypotheses, inferences, or questions about American history.³ Not only would they lack practice and confidence in the arts of hypothesizing, inferring, and questioning; worse, they would be likely to see history as little more than a set of facts, a domain where things were what they were and are what they are, much as a favorite saying of contemporary Americans goes: “It is what it is.” Learning answers without learning questions produces a kind of ideology in which everything is already settled, in which contingencies appear as necessities, in which social constructs appear as natural inevitabilities, in which everything “is what it is” and nothing more or less.

Convinced that such a state of affairs must be avoided, I have for several years practiced a question-centered approach to teaching whose *primary* objective is to improve students’ ability to ask insightful questions about course material. Such an approach does not trivialize answers, but uses answers as stepping-stones from question to question. Nor does a question-centered approach demand that I continually question students; in fact, it is possible to teach a question-centered course without posing any questions to students, as long as the teacher’s declarations entice students to



ask progressively better questions. In fact, several studies have shown that students demonstrate greater thought-complexity, initiative, and engagement when teachers do not ask questions but, instead, state propositions or offer non-question alternatives.⁴

To understand more about what a question-centered pedagogy entails, it is necessary to think a bit about what a question really is. The British philosopher R.G. Collingwood's definition of the act of questioning as "essentially a suspension of the activity of asserting" is succinct and to the point.⁵ While a question demands that we make certain presuppositions, it

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also requires that we cease to assert others. Even to ask a simple question like "What is this?" means that we have refrained, at least momentarily, from asserting, "This is such and such."

An important requisite of asking questions is the ability to abstract from things, to unlock their properties, histories, meanings, causes, correlates, or consequences from the web of givenness that would otherwise make them impenetrable. If I notice a tree, I may admire the tree, or even chop down the tree, without much thought. But if I ask myself why the tree is here, I must imagine the tree not being here, or the tree being over there, or some likely causes of the tree, or some of the scenarios in which those causes were not present. In questioning the tree, I unlock the tree from its place in my experience and open up possibilities of no trees, trees elsewhere, different trees, trees across time, and so on.

All this means that questioning involves speculating about possibilities both real and unreal, given and hypothetical. To question is an immensely creative act because questioning requires that an object be not *just as it is*. If every object were just as it is, then questions would serve no purpose, for the only answer we could give would be to point at the object and say, "But here is your answer." On the contrary, questions are designed to probe, to find something that is *not* already there, to discover relationships and possibilities that are not given.

Therefore, to believe that all students can spontaneously generate great questions is perhaps even more naïve than believing that all students can spontaneously develop great answers. Rather, the difficult and creative work of questioning requires sustained practice and guidance: "Purposeful

inquiry does not happen spontaneously—it must be learned.”⁶ In the classroom, questioning must be nurtured, questions must keep apace with answers, and both questions and answers must be appropriate to the levels of experience, familiarity, and cognitive functioning of the inquirers. If questions are not taught but merely demanded, if answers are not offered to transition students from question to question, or if the level of question and answer is inappropriate to students, then resistance, frustration, and even hostility to questioning may ensue.

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My suspicion is that many of us have had negative experiences with questions, painful experiences of annoyance, frustration, and anxiety. The most basic requirement for a successful question-centered pedagogy, therefore, is the rediscovery of enjoyment, meaning, and value in questions. Of course, this is easier said than done, for most teachers and students have built up defenses against the discomforts of questioning. One common defense is an insistence upon absolute objectivity: “Every question has a certain answer. Either we can find this answer or we can declare the question unknowable and move on.” This argument may be proffered by the surprising number of students and teachers who adhere to the “banking concept” of education: the idea that the purpose of education is to store up definitive answers in one’s mind as in a bank vault.⁷ Indeed, teachers often resist question-centered approaches, claiming they are too nebulous, too uncertain, that students will gain no “real” knowledge at the end of the day.

Likewise, students new to undergraduate research often appear to be uncomfortable asking questions whose answers are not objective, “bankable,” and easily located in a textbook or on the Internet. The preliminary research questions students submit to me are often of the following type: “When did steroids become a problem in major league sports?” or “Are more Americans depressed today than in the past?” When I explain that they need to create more analytical, reflective, and open-ended questions, they protest: “How am I supposed to write 20 pages on a question I don’t know the answer to?” The underlying problem here is not only a lack of confidence in generating questions and answers, but a belief that questions are nothing more than provocations, test items, or evidence of one’s ignorance of “the facts.”

A different source of resistance—opinion-oriented relativism—tells us everything is a matter of opinion. What is the point of asking questions, one asks, if every answer is relative? This prejudice looks a bit like the democratic tolerance that institutions of higher education rightly strive to instill. But reducing all ideas to matters of personal opinion is a form of hyper-individualization, a product of cultural narcissism, and even a step toward nihilism. If I am locked in my perspective and you are locked in yours, we can't communicate; a seemingly benign tolerance here becomes a curious mix of radical relativism and fundamentalism.

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For a question-centered approach to succeed, such resistances to questioning must be overcome. We should start by admitting that questions without definitive answers *can* be frustrating for teachers and students alike. We should also remember that teaching questions does not exclude the teaching of answers. On the contrary, students must have access to a great many answers in order to devise a single educated question. The difference between question-centered and answer-centered approaches is a *structural* one, a matter of making the questions the milestones of conversation, while tentative answers guide students from question to question. As I inform my students on the first day of class, “We start with answers and end up with questions.” This means we begin the semester (and each class day) with some answers we thought we knew, but the discussion prompts students to generate questions that complicate those answers. We leave the classroom with more substantial questions than we had when we started. This notion often elicits laughter from students, but it is the sincere promise of a question-centered pedagogy.

The multiplication and progression of questions in a question-centered approach demands of both student and teacher a real tolerance for ambiguity. To sustain this tolerance requires a delicate touch. Careless questions, pushing students to frustration, or simply repeating “Why?” make questioning into something maddening, even frightening. The teacher-student relationship must be caring, equitable, and responsive. The classroom environment must be free, but not too free; safe, but not too safe. The tone may be playful and creative, but the classroom needs enough regularity that chaos is controlled, so students can think, converse, listen, and question without feeling either lost or crushed.

In several respects, the teacher must create something that resembles what the British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott called a “holding environment,” a space where students feel secure enough and free enough to question.⁸ Winnicott used the term “holding environment” to describe the setting a parent establishes for an infant who, from a state of utter dependence, gradually learns to interact independently with the world. As in the parental holding environment, the teaching environment must begin with a reassurance that the students will not be abandoned, forgotten, or embarrassed by the teacher or other students. From this security arises students’

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ability to tolerate the frustrations and anxieties associated with not having all questions answered.


Applying a parental metaphor to the teacher-student relationship might seem paternalistic (or maternalistic), patronizing, or insulting to students, but what is involved is very different from paternalism in the usual sense. The purpose of a holding environment is not, of course, to “hold” students close or to “hold” them to dependence upon the teacher. Quite the opposite. The holding environment “holds” class members and course content together by “holding” anxieties, frustrations, and conflicts in check so that students can creatively explore new and potentially dangerous questions without getting lost or hurt.

The wonderful paradox of “holding” is that, if it is done with respect for students, it represents a kind of liberation whereas both authoritarian environments and “anything goes” environments are types of imprisonment. The teacher who “stays on top of students,” who allows little independent questioning, or who “squeezes” work out of students may produce students who have assimilated the material, but not students who have critically learned. Likewise, the teacher who “lets students go” in their questioning, who “drops” them into discussion as in a freefall, without guidance or assistance, is creating chaos. Against this chaos, students will be required to call up their own defenses to protect themselves. Although for different reasons, both the authoritarian classroom and the laissez-faire classroom are likely to make student questioning seem destructive, combative, or pointless.

Because teachers of questions must help students avoid becoming lost or hurt, it is crucial that the teacher be comfortable with questioning. If a teacher dreads students’ questions, or dreads the idea of being unable to

answer them, then the teacher is likely to shut down the questioning environment in favor of greater security. The absolute knowledge that many teachers aspire to possess, that enlightened state in which every question receives a perfect answer, is actually *not* conducive to teaching questions because it deprives students of the need to explore on their own. Part of the student's freedom in questioning derives from the open space created by the teacher's failure to provide final answers. In this open space, the student may explore a question more independently, trying out and revising successive answers.

If students struggle with this process (and some do), I have found it important to have frequent, frank conversations where I explain that the course is ultimately concerned with a set of problems to which we have several answers, but not *the* answer. I explain that we don't have to figure out the answers alone, and we probably won't figure out *the* answer at all, but we do have to puzzle with the issues by asking smart questions. Such conversations seem to relieve many students' anxieties, but not all, and not completely.

Finally, I have found it extremely important to learn to practice silence in class. This means being comfortable with one or two minutes of silence, if necessary, while the conversation stalls. If the teacher is always ready to comment or ask a provocative question, then students do not have the room (or the need) to take on those responsibilities. Often, after a long silence, students will pose the question that has left them feeling stuck with the material. Sometimes that question is simply, "Who cares?" which I take to be a crucially important question, one I explore as often as possible. Perhaps this simple question reminds us of a final benefit of the question-centered approach: that by posing questions *they* want answered, students learn to invest themselves more fully and to care more deeply about the bodies of knowledge they interrogate. 

ENDNOTES

Note: In developing my theory and practice of teaching, I have been fortunate to know the example of my teacher and friend, C. Fred Alford.

1. See Dillon, *The Practice of Questioning*.
2. Quoted in Berson et al., *Social Studies on the Internet*.
3. Freire and Faundez. *Learning to Question: A Pedagogy of Liberation*.
4. Dillon, *The Practice of Questioning*.
5. Quoted in Somerville, "Collingwood's Logic of Question and Answer."
6. Baird, "Metacognition, Purposeful Inquiry and Conceptual Change."
7. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.
8. Winnicott, *Through Paediatrics to Psycho-Analysis*.

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Matthew H. Bowker is visiting assistant professor of interdisciplinary studies at Medaille College in Buffalo, New York, where he teaches courses in political science, philosophy, critical thinking, and undergraduate research and writing. He holds a Ph.D. and M.A. in political philosophy from the University of Maryland, College Park, and a B.A. in political science from Columbia University. Bowker's current research explores the psychosocial dimensions of absurd literature and philosophy. He welcomes correspondence at mhb34@medaille.edu.