Dennis-Yarmouth RSD

Instruction Office Newsletter

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Improving the Quality of Essential Questions

(Originally titled "How to Make Your Questions Essential")

In this Educational Leadership article, Grant Wiggins and Denise Wilbur suggest ways to fine-tune Essential Questions so they will:

- **Spark discussion and debate;**
- **Demand evidence and reasoning because there's no right answer;**
- **Stimulate ongoing thinking and inquiry;**
- **Suggest multiple, arguable answers;**
- **Raise further questions;**
- **Recur throughout the unit or year;**
- **Point to the unit's big ideas.**

"Getting the questions right takes discipline, skill, and artfulness," say Wiggins and Wilbur. "But it's well worth the effort to ensure that students tackle inquiries that are important, intriguing, and revealing… High-level inquiries and questioning yield some of the greatest gains possible on conventional tests of achievement, as well as better student engagement." Their suggestions:

- ***Use the checklist above.*** Compare draft questions to see if they stack up. For example, *How do good readers use strategies to understand a text?* might become, *Which strategy should I use when I don't understand what I'm reading?*

Continued on page 2:

Important Dates

December 6 – 14	Hanukkah
December 8 – 10	Crisis Prevention Training @ DYH 4 – 8 PM
December 25	Christmas
December 26 – January 1	Kwanzaa
December 24 January 3	Holiday Break No School
January 4th, 2016	School Resumes

Important Notice:

Central office is a **fragrance-free zone** so please be respectful and plan accordingly when you visit.

Due to one of our members at the Central Office being highly sensitive to any type of fragrance, we ask that staff visiting/meeting at the Administration building refrain from using any scented products. Fragrances from personal care products, air fresheners, laundry and other cleaning products have been associated with adversely affecting a person's health. We ask that we all work together to make the environment a safe and healthy workplace for everyone.

Thank you very much for your cooperation!

Continued from page 1:

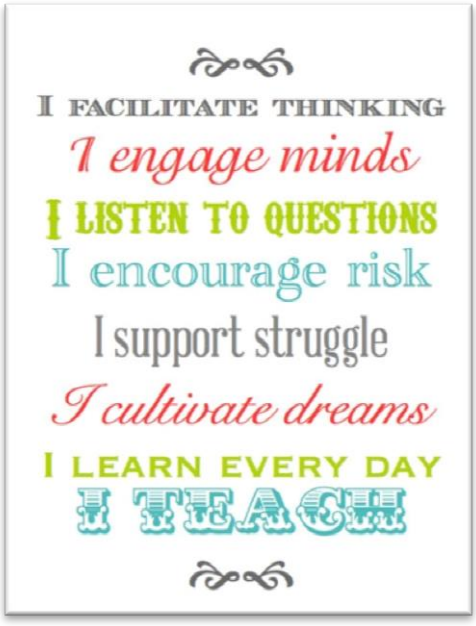
- ***Rephrase convergent or factual questions to invite inquiry and argument.*** For example, the question, What were the three major causes of World War I? could be tweaked to read, How important was World War I in shaping the modern world? Other helpful stems:
  - ***To what extent… ?***
  - ***In what contexts… ?***
  - ***How important was… ?***
  - ***What's the value of… ?***
  - ***When should we… ?***
  - ***When shouldn't we… ?***

Another first attempt, What is proper punctuation, and why is it important? could be improved to read, When is proper punctuation mandatory, and when is it optional?

- ***Shape questions that lead to big ideas***. "The best essential questions are, literally, of the essence," say Wiggins and Wilbur. They aren't just intriguing – they lead to the core understandings. For example, Where in the world do we find examples of similar triangles? could be revised to read, How much and in what ways would we most miss similar figures if they didn't exist?
- ***Stretch questions beyond the curriculum unit***. For example, How do Frog and Toad act like friends? could become, Who is a true friend? "We want a question that rewards us for revisiting it," say Wiggins and Wilbur. Another example: Why did we fight in Vietnam, and was it worth it? could be stretched to, Why have we gone to war? When was it wise, and when was it foolish?
- ***Avoid leading students to predictable, mundane, superficial answers.*** Explore likely misconceptions. Some first-draft questions: What's the difference between fiction and nonfiction? What can numbers help us do? Better questions: When is fiction revealing, and when is it a lie? What can't the language of numbers communicate? Why does a thrown ball move the way it does?
- ***Jot and then polish***. "Don't try to write and edit simultaneously," advise Wiggins and Wilbur. "Draft a bunch of questions first, then edit. The more versions you draft, the easier the editing will be."
- ***Keep your eye on the broader goals of instruction.*** "Essential questions aren't a teaching move," say the authors. "Rather, they're a design move intended to make it more likely that the work and talk get beyond low-level coverage." This question is too content-focused: When do we use mean, median, and mode? A better formulation: What's the fairest way to calculate grades? What are the strengths and weaknesses of each measure of tendency? When are measures of central tendency most abused, and how can we defend against such abuses?

"How to Make Your Questions Essential" by Grant Wiggins and Denise Wilbur in *Educational Leadership*, September 2015 (Vol. 73, #1, p. 10-15), http://bit.ly/1Jx67SJ; Wilbur can be reached at denisewilbur@gmail.com.

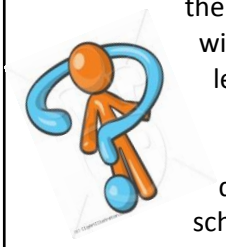
Grant Wiggins died in May as the article above was going into production. Here is a video of him talking about character and formative assessment, which his colleague Jay McTighe and his widow Denise Wilbur believe captures his essence: https://vimeo.com/98347339



The Power of Student-Generated Questions

(Originally titled "Let's Switch Questioning Around")

"We are kidding ourselves if we think our questions alone turn students into critical thinkers," says Cris Tovani (Commerce City, Colorado English teacher and author) in this *Educational Leadership* article. "Instead of spending time honing our questioning skills, it's time we help students hone theirs. Giving students opportunities to practice questioning will help them way beyond the classroom. People who wonder set a purpose for themselves. They know asking questions will propel them to continue reading and learning… Asking questions gives learners control."



Teachers fire off as many as 120 questions an hour, and by middle school, many students have become expert question-answerers – and perhaps teacher mind-readers. The problem is that with many of these questions, teachers are looking for a single right answer, which leaves little room for original thought. Getting students asking their own questions changes this dynamic. "It's a lot harder to fake an authentic question than it is to copy an answer from some Internet site," says Tovani. Here are some strategies she recommends:

- **Using students' questions to drive the next day's reading and small-group conversations.** "Students' questions provide a great deal of invaluable formative assessment data that helps me adjust instruction," she says.
- **Cruising around the classroom as students read and jot questions on their "think sheets,"** checking in with individual students and collecting the papers of those she didn't have time to talk with.
- **Being selective about which student questions she'll answer.** She responds to Who, What, When, and Where questions, but when students ask How or Why questions, she'll respond with another question, for example, Why do you think that's happening?
- **Sharing a text she's been reading and** annotating to show the questions she's asking as she reads and explaining that some questions deserve more effort than others.

"I'm humbled by my students' questions," says Tovani. "Often they are better than mine." They definitely help her differentiate instruction. "If students were all answering the same teacher-generated question, I wouldn't be able to tell who got it and who copied."

Of course Tovani does ask her own questions of students, and she's noticed that they fall into two categories:

Questions that create awareness:

- **What are you wondering about the book?**
- **What are you noticing about how the author is using time? Jumping forward, flashing back, chronological? What purpose do you think it serves?**
- **What background knowledge do you have about the book, topic, author, or characters?**
- **Did you notice the title? Any ideas on how it connects to the piece?**
- **What weird or unusual text structures are you noticing? Why do you think the author structured the chapter that way?**
- **What predictions are you making?**
- **What questions do you have? Which ones do you care about most?**
- **Which character's perspective are you connecting to most?**
- **Are there any objects or colors that keep popping up?**
- **How could you look at this information differently?**

Open-ended questions that inform instruction:

- **Why do you think that?**
- **What do you need?**
- **Is this boring or are you stuck? Why? What have you done before to get unstuck?**
- **Have you tried what we talked about in the mini-lesson?**
- **What's preventing you from working? What causes you to stop?**
- **What might you try tomorrow?**
- **What do you know now that you didn't know before?**
- **What's going on in your head as you read? What is your inner voice saying?**

"Let's Switch Questioning Around" by Cris Tovani in *Educational Leadership*, September 2015 (Vol. 73, #1, p. 30-35), available for purchase at http://bit.ly/1PHdPLP; Tovani can be reached at ctovani@hotmail.com.

Can Multiple-Choice Questions Be Instructionally Useful?

(Originally titled "Making the Most of Multiple Choice")

In this Educational Leadership article, consultant/author Susan Brookhart argues that multiple-choice test questions, often denigrated as measuring only superficial knowledge and skills, actually have some important advantages:

- **They don't require students to do a lot of writing or speaking,** which allows teachers to assess the thinking skills of students with limited language proficiency.
- **Because multiple-choice items are shorter than open-response questions,** it's possible to test students on a much broader range of material in a given period of time.
- **Well-written multiple-**choice items can measure higher-order thinking skills such as analysis and interpretation.
- **If incorrect answer choices are all plausible and written to include common errors and misconceptions,** test results can give teachers insights into what's confusing and frustrating their students.

Brookhart believes that "context-dependent" multiple-choice questions can be particularly helpful – that is, questions accompanied by visual or written material. "Because students have the material in front of them," she says, "their mental energy can be devoted to thinking about the material, not striving to retrieve it from memory." She gives three examples of this type of question:

- **Interpreting a map, graph, table, photo, or other visual** – The questions on a graph, for example, might challenge students to interpret data, draw conclusions, and practice inductive scientific reasoning.
- **Interpreting a text, story, or scenario** – A well-framed multiple-choice question on a speech by Jefferson Davis can assess students' powers of interpretation and kick off a class debate on the views and intentions of Southern leaders before the Civil War.
- **Critiquing the work of fictional characters –** The teacher could create a fictional scenario – for example, one person says combining ingredients to make a cake is a physical change while another contends that it's a chemical change – and then ask who is correct, getting students to defend their reasoning, and following up with key teaching points.

And multiple-choice questions aren't just for tests, says Brookhart. Here are two uses in regular classroom time:

- **Checking the whole class's understanding with an all-class response system –** By getting students to respond to well-framed questions using clickers, Internet-based systems (like Poll Everywhere), Plickers, holding up A B C D cards, or using hand signals, teachers can quickly gauge the level of mastery of every student and follow up with a "convince your neighbor" activity or an all-class discussion in which students justify their answers or explain why wrong answers are incorrect.
- **Open-ended explanations or extensions –** Students might be asked to read a passage from the Declaration of Independence, respond to a multiple-choice question asking which of four summaries best captures the main idea, and then explain how they decided which summary was correct. This approach assesses students' ability to analyze content information and practice their metacognitive skills.

"A basic point underlying all these methods is that selecting means making a decision, and making a decision means thinking," says Brookhart. "What

we must do is get better at writing multiple-choice questions that require students to think deeply."
"Making the Most of Multiple Choice" by Susan Brookhart in *Educational Leadership*, September 2015 (Vol. 73, #1, p. 36-39), available for purchase at http://bit.ly/1hsydVy; Brookhart can be reached at susanbrookhart@bresnan.net.

Richard DuFour on Effective Professional Learning Communities

(Originally titled "How PLCs Do Data Right")

In this article in *Educational Leadership*, PLC guru Richard DuFour looks back ruefully on his rookie teaching years in the 1970s. He remembers giving unit tests on Friday, marking them over the weekend, and giving them back to students on Monday. "I had a sense of smug self-satisfaction," he says, "because I believed that my challenging assessments, my willingness to devote hours to grading papers, and my commitment to returning tests promptly was proof positive that I was a great teacher."

As students looked over their papers, DuFour would go over problem areas. He then gathered up the tests, clearly signaling that the unit was over, grades were final, and he was moving on. "It never even occurred to me to review the results with colleagues, to use this evidence of student learning to inform and improve my teaching, or to provide students with additional time and support to master the content." The bell-shaped curve of grades was what it was. Students who performed well were a testament to his terrific teaching, and students who didn't do well either lacked ability or hadn't worked hard enough.

DuFour believes that over the last 40 years, we've made significant strides, shifting "from an era in which what was taught, how learning was assessed, what instructional materials were used, and how grades were assigned were all determined by the individual teacher to whom a student was randomly assigned. Now we're asking teachers to work in collaborative teams to achieve common goals for which they are mutually accountable." At the heart of the PLC process is teams analyzing the results of common interim assessments and asking themselves four questions:

- ***Which students were unable to demonstrate proficiency on this assessment?*** **The team identifies these students by name and need and gets them into a "system of intervention" that is timely (immediately after the assessment), directive (students don't have a choice), diagnostic (e.g., unable to subtract two-digit integers), and systematic (the school has a plan for additional time and help until all students reach proficiency).**
- **Which students are highly proficient and would benefit from extended or accelerated learning? Research has shown that these opportunities (as opposed to tracking) greatly improve learning. During the intervention/enrichment block in one school in Illinois, 3-5 additional teachers flood into the grade level to provide additional support and keep group sizes small.**
- **What can I learn from colleagues who got excellent results in an area where my students struggled? Transparency and candor are important at this point, making it possible for teachers to admit instructional failures and ask for help. The transfer of successful practices can take place through meetings, viewing videos, sharing lesson plans, or observing classes.**
- **What are we going to do about areas where none of us achieved the results we expected? Effective teams take a hard look at the data, reach out for ideas, set goals, and check back with subsequent assessments to see what's working best.**

DuFour is encouraged by the way PLCs are taking hold, but he's concerned about one missing element. Many schools agree on appropriate curriculum goals, give common assessments, and give students additional time and support. "What they fail to do, however, is to ***use the evidence of student learning to improve instruction,"*** he says. "They are more prone to attribute students' difficulties to the students themselves" – they need to study harder, do a better job on homework, or ask for help. "Rather

than listing what students need to do to correct the problem," says DuFour, "educators need to address what they can do better collectively."

"How PLCs Do Data Right" by Richard DuFour in *Educational Leadership*, November 2015 (Vol. 73, #3, p. 22-26), available for purchase at http://bit.ly/1MttlYw; DuFour can be reached at rdufour923@gmail.com.

Keep Learning Going During Holiday and Vacation Times

Suddenly, it seems like the class is falling apart. Classroom routines that were going smoothly just a few weeks ago now seem rough around the edges. More and more children are forgetting to follow classroom rules. The noise level is higher, and academic productivity seems lower. What's going on?

In the weeks leading up to winter vacation, what you're seeing may well be a case of the holiday season jitters. From November through January, children often become more fidgety, giggly, testy, and tired. There are many reasons: they may be distracted by the excitement of home activities, or they may be reacting to increased stress at home. At school, schedules are often disrupted at this time of year by assemblies, plays, and special events, and such changes in routine can throw children's behavior off. Plus, at many schools, recess is curtailed once winter weather arrives.

What can you do to help your students stay on track and learn at their best during this season? We've found that an extra measure of calmness, consistency, and structure can work wonders. Here are some strategies you might want to try.

Stick to Routines

As much as you can, stick to the routines that you've established to shape the school day. For instance, if a daily **Morning Meeting** is part of your routine, you may find it's even more helpful now. Starting off each day with Morning Meeting helps students make the transition to school through a welcoming experience that reinforces expectations for behavior and builds enthusiasm for the learning day ahead.

You can use each of the four components of Morning Meeting strategically to help get the school day off to a good start. For instance, choose a calm greeting (such as a simple "Hello" passed around the circle) to settle the group if they seem especially bouncy coming in the door. Or use seasonally-themed sharing topics to help students learn more about each other. Choose sharing questions that every student in your class can answer comfortably. For example, questions such as *What do you especially love about winter?* Or *Do you enjoy any special holiday foods?* Don't exclude children who don't have vacation plans or who don't celebrate holidays at home.

When the inevitable deviations in routine do come up, let the children know in advance what to expect and reassure them things will get back to normal. Remember that students learn by observing you: by handling schedule changes with good-natured calm and flexibility, you model that behavior for students.

Notice and Reinforce Success

Look for opportunities to remark on children's success in meeting classroom expectations. By giving children genuine information about their competence, you can prevent many behavior problems.

A few tips for noticing positive behavior and using **reinforcing language** effectively:

- **Commend behavior** you've actually seen, not behavior you hope to see. Saying, "Thank you for waiting for your turn to speak" sends a confusing message to a group that's busy interrupting each other. Instead, try a direct reminder: "Everyone, remember that we've agreed to wait our turn before speaking."
- **Be specific,** describing the behavior you want to commend in detail and explaining why it's helpful. For instance, "I saw classmates helping each other wipe off tables after snack. That really fits our classroom rule that says 'Take care of each other.'"
- **Use positive words** that do not single out any one child. For instance, "Lots of people lined up quickly today and waited quietly with hands and bodies under control. That gives us more time on the playground!"

Revisit Hopes, Dreams, and Classroom Rules

Any time children are going off track is a good time to review behavioral expectations. When planning such reviews, it's tempting to think about what the children "should" be able to do by now (*It's December—they should know how to sit quietly for sharing!*). But it's much more productive to keep your focus on what the children *can* do right now and what they need from you to help them do better.

Many teachers devote time around winter vacation to having students revisit the hopes and goals they chose for themselves at the beginning of the school year. Teachers guide students in considering how they've progressed on achieving their goals. Should they make adjustments? Is it time to choose a new goal? (If your students didn't name personal learning goals at the beginning of the year, it's not too late to do so. This season, with its focus on fresh starts and resolutions, provides a natural opportunity.)

The *Responsive Classroom* approach to creating classroom rules is grounded in the idea that classroom rules help everyone meet their learning goals. So, after students revisit their personal goals, the next step is to reflect on the rules. Are they working? Do they need any changes? You might have the children rate how they've been doing with rule-following lately and then share your own observations. Be sure to acknowledge that it's okay to need a brush-up; we all forget the rules sometimes, especially when we're stressed or excited.

For more ideas and resources on this topic, see Margaret Wilson's "**Revisiting Hopes and Dreams in the New Year**" post from December 2009 on the *Responsive* blog.

Keep Expectations High but Appropriate

Appreciate the extra energy your students may have during holidays or other exciting times and anticipate that they'll need to expend some of that energy. Although students will benefit from periods of calm, it's unrealistic to expect them to be quiet for long periods. Working in some talk and movement throughout the day helps children stay calm enough to learn. Some ideas:

- **Plan for partner chats** or "turn and talk" periods.
- **Alternate active periods,** such as science time, with more quiet periods, such as reading or writing.
- **Weave in energizers** to give children breaks without getting them too revved up. For example, you could play "Mirrors," where students silently mirror or copy your movements, or sing a peaceful song together, gradually removing words so that everyone is quietly humming by the end.

Read Aloud

Engaging read-alouds can really help children focus and calm themselves. Look for extra opportunities to read aloud, just for a few minutes. Vary your selections among picture books, chapter books, and nonfiction books. Read from joke, riddle, and poetry books when you have an extra moment in the circle or while the children are lining up.

Gauge the children's energy level before choosing a reading. Choose a beautiful picture book or a quiet but moving story for times when you want to create a more calm atmosphere. Select stories that are especially inspiring, thought-provoking, or suspenseful if the class feels scattered and you want to bring them back together.

Search for "read-alouds" on the ***Responsive* blog** to find descriptions of great books to read with students of all ages!

Keep the Learning Going

It's natural for children's behavior to veer a bit off track during exciting or stressful times. During such times, observe your students, hold them firmly but kindly to classroom expectations, and make a few simple adjustments in your teaching practice. You can keep learning going while helping the children meet the challenges or enjoy the fun of the season.