

CHAPTER 1

Kids These Days

Creating Deeper Learning Experiences Framed Around Student Questions

A favorite opening question of mine in designing professional development workshops for teachers is this: What do you struggle with the most as a teacher? And the answers are almost always the same:

1. Students are apathetic, unmotivated, or disengaged.
2. Students don't value education.
3. Parents aren't supportive.
4. Kids don't believe in themselves.
5. Kids are distracted by technology.

During a presentation for K–12 teachers, a man stopped me during the break to ask me when I was going to get to the point in the workshop where I talk about how spoiled kids are. “They need to understand that in the real world no one is going to care about their ideas,” he said. “Are you going to show us how to tell them that?”

No, I wasn't.

Instead, I asked him if he felt ignored. “Do you feel like no one cares about your ideas? That you can't make decisions for your classes and your students?” He stopped talking and just stared at me. It made me wonder:

What if we've taken away our own efficacy as teachers by giving in to these assumptions about our students? If we really think this, then why aren't we giving them opportunities to test their ideas in the real world? Why aren't we setting up opportunities for work that requires real and sustained effort?

Maybe one of the reasons students are apathetic is that we've taken all of the choice away from them. Then, we get irritated and annoyed when they can't "think on their own." Too often as a teacher coach, I walk into classrooms where any 19th century student would feel at home: desks in rows, textbooks open on desks, the teacher at the front of the room talking. This classroom design is so familiar that it's almost invisible; we accept it as the default setting for children's learning.



One of our basic human drives is connection. We want and need the company of others. Further, we become smarter by participating in social learning, according to Vygotsky's social development theory. The theory emphasizes the importance of the learning environment in determining how children think and what they think about (Vygotsky, 1962/1986).

This is especially true for adolescents whose developmental needs are centered around a need to discover who they are. If we're not meeting these needs in our classrooms, then how are we any better than a screen on a phone or other device? When we encourage natural social behaviors, we are making ourselves and our learning experiences necessary and ourselves and our teaching difficult to replace with technology or scripts.

What Happens When We Allow Questions Into Our Classrooms

Allowing real curiosity—the kind that fuels philosophers, artists, scientists, historians, explorers, and innovators—is the most fundamental change we can make in our teaching practice. When we step back and allow students to step forward with their own inquiry, it throws a switch in their brains that changes everything. Encouraging students to cocreate their own learning by generating authentic questions grants them an intellectual power and an identity as meaning-makers.

The fastest way to engage anyone's brain is to ask it a question, neuroscience says. Judy Willis, a neurologist and middle school teacher, explains that inquiry is like caffeine for kids' brains. That's because questions kick-start a process inside their heads that works like a kind of prediction machine. Once a question enters this system, the brain begins trying to resolve the uncertainty by formulating answers. The tension that comes from wanting to know if they've guessed correctly is immediately and powerfully engaging:

Students' curiosity, along with their written or verbal predictions, will tune their brains into the perfect zone for attentive focus. They are like adults placing bets on a horse race. Students may not be interested in the subject matter itself, but their brains need to find out if their predictions are correct, just as the race ticket holder needs to know if he holds a winning ticket. (Willis, 2014)

As teachers, we can use this information as a sort of neurological hack. If we carefully scaffold students' questions in a way that points toward the content we need to teach, we can enlist their natural tendency to find answers into deeper learning experiences. These experiences then, in turn, develop their vocabulary; their speaking and listening skills; their writing skills; their reading; and, most importantly, their critical thinking.

This idea was road tested during my year of service as National Teacher of the Year. In a special partnership with the U.S. Department of State, I visited the Middle East as an ambassador of American teaching. Traveling alone caused the kind of stress that kept my brainpower focused on finding my way around airports and adjusting to the realities of heightened security. This meant that I didn't prepare for one of my first presentations like I normally would have. During times of uncertainty, familiar practices are strength, so I leaned on those that are bedrock for me: inviting students to share their questions.

Even though I'd never met them, the senior class at the American Jerusalem High School in Jerusalem was willing to play along. We gathered in an auditorium, and as I looked at the 200 assembled students, I felt a wave of insecurity wash over me. Seeing their interested faces was all the encouragement I needed to open the lesson the same way I did at my high school: sharing a personally meaningful question.

“Before I was a teacher, I was a reporter and I covered some really sad and scary things,” I told them. “And some of them, I don’t think I’ll ever forget—especially when they happen to children. I accept that bad things happen to good people. That’s just the way of the world. What I can’t seem to accept is when *good* things happen to *bad* people. Why do some people ‘get away with it’? Why are some people never made to answer for what they do to others? I don’t know that I’ll ever get a good answer, but it’s a question that haunts me. What about you? What are the questions that stay with you? What haunts you? Or makes you sad? Or makes you angry? Or just confuses you no matter how much you try to think about it?”

By this point, they were silent. I could see that they were considering whether or not to trust this strange woman from the United States.

“I’ve asked your teachers to give everyone a piece of paper. I’d love to know what your questions are,” I said. “What are the things you’ve kept inside you that you’ve been afraid to ask? Would you mind sharing them with me? If you want to, please write them on the paper.”

An engaged quiet settled over the room as they began writing. I exhaled. They were repeating the behavior I’d seen in my own classes.

What I’ve written here is version of my traditional opening for this lesson. Part of the reason the room gets quiet, I think, is because of a willingness to be authentic and vulnerable with my own questions. What I share with them are my own frustrations with the difficult nature of justice, which is also an engaging topic for teenagers.

After a few minutes, I stopped the students and asked who wanted to share. So many hands went up that the administrators were startled.

“Why is there so much intolerance in the world?”

“Is it ever okay to tell a lie?”

“Why do we equate money with success? Are there other ways to be successful?”

Their teachers were as surprised as I was. “We will definitely be talking about these in class today,” one of them told me. As I was leaving the

school, an older teenage girl stopped me and said, “I just want to give you a hug and say thank you for listening to us.”

When we worry that students want more technology or games or for our lessons to be more fun, maybe what they really need is just for us to *listen* to them and trust the intellectual power inside them.

Starting With Your Own Questions

The authenticity of your own questions are all you really need to get started in the process of inviting more authentic inquiry into your classroom. Everything you need is already there inside you. When I ask teachers to share their authentic questions with me—anonously—I see that they have long-standing struggles that could connect to their students’ concerns:

From Montana:

“Why is it so hard to forgive and move on?”

“Why is it so hard to listen to other people?”

“Why do people/corporations treat the planet in such a crappy way?”

From Ohio:

“If I died tomorrow, would I regret how much work has ruled my life?”

“Am I being a good person?”

“I have deeply loved and valued many beautiful places of the world—will they survive?”

“Why do random shootings of innocent people happen? Who is next?”

“Why is there so much intolerance in the world?”

From Texas:

“Why can’t we value people for who they are and not devalue them because of how they look or what they believe?”

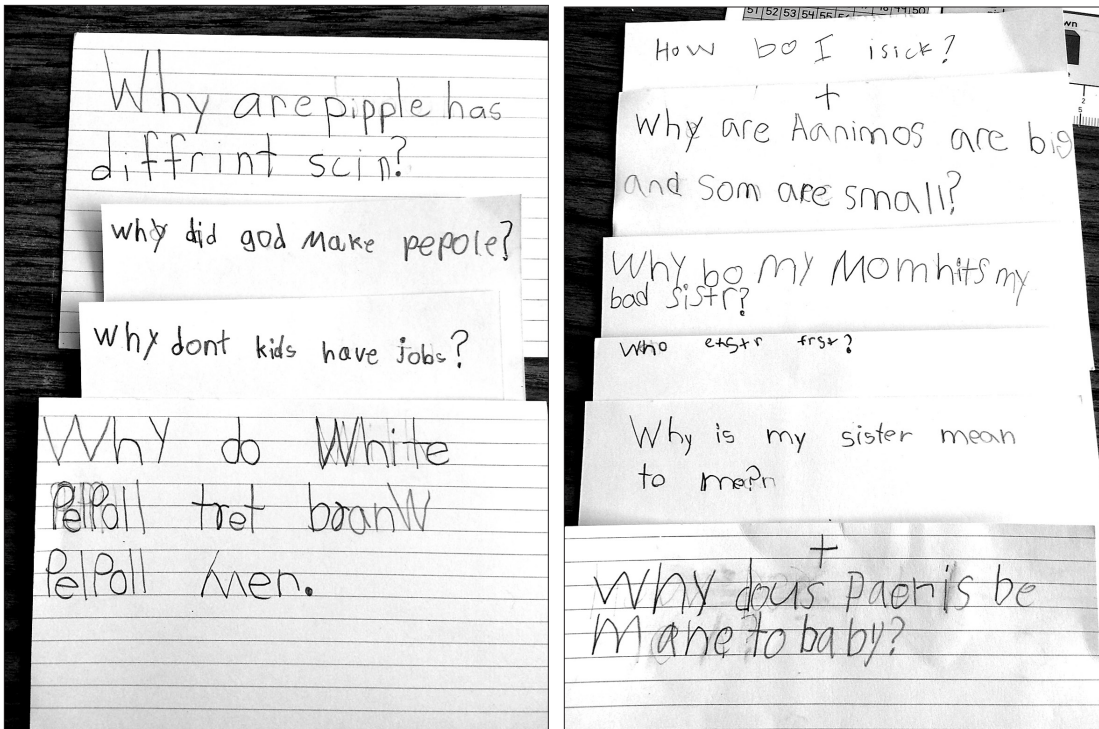
“What will the future be like?”

“How will the present trauma of so many students affect the brains of future generations?”

Reading these, I see the grounds of our common humanity. What’s more amazing than the fact that we share these ideas around the world is that young children wonder the same things. If we step back and make a space for students to speak and really listen to them, they will show us what is in their hearts and minds.

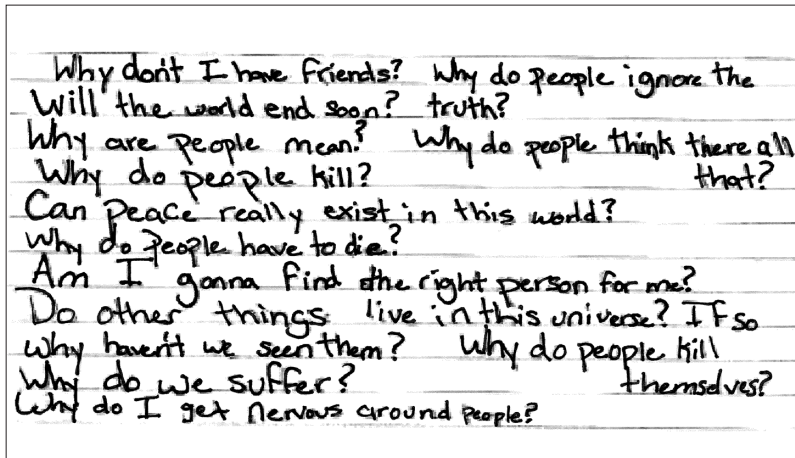
Justin Minkel, a second-grade teacher at a high-poverty school in Fayetteville, Arkansas, gave an opening to his students, during the first weeks of school, to share what they would ask the smartest person in the world (see Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1 Sample Questions From Second Graders

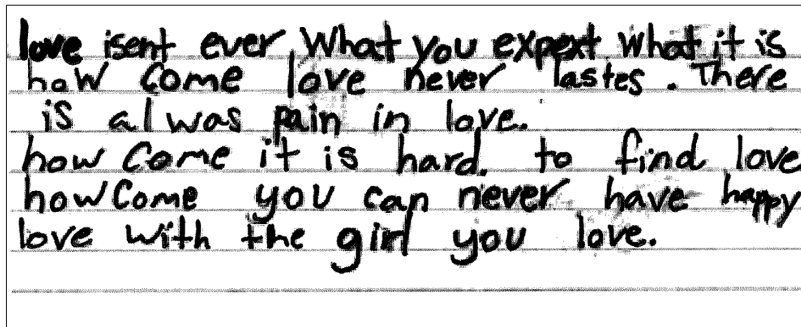


This reminded me of the cards my seventh-grade class turned in that first year (see Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2 Sample Questions From Seventh Graders



Why don't I have friends? Why do people ignore the truth?
Will the world end soon?
Why are people mean? Why do people think there all that?
Why do people kill?
Can peace really exist in this world?
Why do people have to die?
Am I gonna find the right person for me?
Do other things live in this universe? If so why haven't we seen them? Why do people kill themselves?
Why do we suffer?
Why do I get nervous around people?



love isn't ever what you expect what it is how come love never lasts. There is always pain in love.
how come it is hard to find love how come you can never have happy love with the girl you love.

Finally, all of the questions seem connected to this writing from Joseph, a young man I worked with in the night program who was transitioning out of jail where he served time for his involvement in a drive-by shooting. Not sure of how to assess his writing skills, I asked him if he would write down the thoughts and questions that haunt him, sadden him, and nag at him. In one furious burst, he wrote the text in Figure 1.3 on the next page.

Your students are no different than these. If you give them time, space, and respect, they will stun you with their depth.

Figure 1.3 Sample Questions From High School

Joseph

Haunts ob
 what haunts me is not
 knowing if a certain
 person in my class knows
 me. I fought around is
 plotting. What haunts me is
 having to look out of
 my bedroom window at
 all hours of the night to
 make sure all is good. What
 haunts me is the memories
 of a troublesome childhood.
 What haunts me is not
 knowing what tomorrow holds.
 What haunts me is all
 people ~~will~~ will change.
 What haunts me is the same
 thing different day. What haunts me
 is demons from my past, creep in law cars
 ready to blast.
 What haunts me is we are
 born then we die, light seen
 for a second then awaits demise.
 What haunts me is most likely
 what haunts me is mostly No where

to run, all alone, no place to
 call home. Nobody cares and
 this world is cruel, once
 innocent, now unmistakably lost
 in sin, I wish I could
 I can't let him in,
 what saddens me is, my
 life outcome, trying so hard
 only meaning so much, what
 saddens me is what I've done in
 the past, set up the traps
 and now I'll never turn
 back, once turned grey and white
 death never let it go, black, my
 spirit so low but my soul
 so high so I keep gambling
 in this game called life,
 why do I regret and magnificent
 thoughts take my mind. Why do
 I do wrong when I
 understand what's right
 game 24/7 on the top flight,
 where in from, hollow tips in
 strangers spine. What haunts
 me is living this life,

Starting the Process

The conditions you need are the following:

- A sacred space for writing and thinking
- A culture of respect, kindness, and openness to new ideas
- A comfort with discussion and basic facilitation skills
- A willingness to listen down deep to children

PROTOCOL 1.1 Generating Students' Authentic Questions

MATERIALS

- A reading to open the session (your own or my suggestions; see the appendix)
- Some reflective writing from yourself with the questions that haunt you highlighted
- Examples of student questions as idea starters that are provided here
- A timer of some kind
- Quiet
- Index cards (enough so that each student gets one)
- Chart paper (younger, struggling, or language-learning students may share questions verbally as you scribe them.)

TIME

Ten minutes—This time is to allow for a mini-lesson format that will fit into any secondary schedule. You may extend the time, if needed, for double-blocked classes or for younger students. However, keeping time short will produce better quality work.

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INTRODUCTION

There are many problems in our world right now—problems with how we treat each other, problems with how we share the earth, problems with technology, problems with money, problems with families, and many others. These problems, if we think about them, make us ask questions like the following:

- How should we live?
- Who am I?
- Why was I born?
- What can we know?

And so many other questions. People have wondered about these questions for a long time, so if you think about these things, you are not alone. In school, we don't often take the time to think about deep and serious questions, but what if we did? If you could ask the smartest person in the world questions, what would you ask?

PURPOSE

The purpose is to help students think about the questions that really matter to them, to draw out those questions and make them explicit, and then use those questions as a base for the work of your classroom. With this base, you can help students link what they are deeply curious about to what you need to teach. This link makes the work of learning explicit and engaging for students of all ages and across all content areas.

DIRECTIONS

Don't write your name on the cards; these are anonymous, so you can write honestly. Write down the questions that you would like to ask the smartest person in the world. Write as many questions as you can. Don't stop to talk about them, worry about them, or try to answer them. Just write the questions as fast as you can. [For younger students, students who struggle, or who are language learners, you may scribe questions.]

- **One minute**—Read the introduction and directions.
- **Five minutes**—Students write (or scribe questions as appropriate). Encourage them to keep asking questions. Model the process by writing with students and/or providing them with one of your own deep questions. (One of mine is this: I accept that bad things happen to good people—that's life. But what really bugs me is this: Why do *good* things happen to *bad* people?)

- **Three minutes**—Debrief by sharing one of your questions. Ask students to answer questions about the process of writing questions: What was hard? What was easy? What surprised them?
- **One minute**—Ask students to fold cards in half for privacy and then collect them. Tell students you will be working with these questions during another class.

MODIFICATIONS FOR YOUNGER STUDENTS AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

- Allow students to draw as a way of helping them form thoughts, and then ask them about the drawing, listening for a topic that you can help them turn into a question.
- Allow students to share their questions orally as a rehearsal for writing. You might scribe some of the questions on the board or an anchor chart for them to use as they attempt to write questions. ●