



Introduction



The things that I think about are like what wakes us up, or what if there is life on other planets, is there aliens in the planets. I think that that makes us very weird persons or actually very strange thinkers.

—AMY, AGE 9

During my second year of teaching, I came to believe that my middle school assigned the meanest twelve-year-olds to my class. They hated me, each other, the school, and seemingly life itself. Though I didn't see how it was possible at the time, this group of children would become my master class in learning how to use questions to spark their desire to learn, to engage with their own futures, and to just become better people.

I wanted them to see the commonalities they had with each other beyond the poverty that blighted their neighborhoods. This was a tall order because of the racial differences within the class and the generational mistrust they had of each other. In the cafeteria, they separated themselves by race and neighborhood, preferring to stay with the people they knew. When I tried to group them in class, it was disastrous: crying, threatening to fight, and hurling insults.

As I struggled to figure out what to do, I began writing, trying to remember what it had been like for me to be in middle school. Sandra Cisneros (1992), in her brilliant short story "Eleven," makes the case that we are all the ages we've ever been "like the rings inside a tree trunk," and when I counted back in my own rings, it helped me see that being twelve is hard.

You're too big to be little and too little to be big. To be twelve, I remembered, is to stand across the gap between childhood and adolescence. Middle school is steeped in insecurities and worries. For many kids, it's the first time they experience love, rejection, or exclusion. This might be what they were feeling, I thought, and it might explain the meanness in my classes.

Perhaps, too, they were feeling that school had become little more than a test preparation factory, and they were the "products" being moved along in a system that didn't seem to value them beyond their scale scores. And when you can't succeed inside such narrow parameters, it's logical to think that school is not for you and even suspect that it might be rigged against you. This is easy to believe if you have physical challenges, untreated health issues, malnutrition, and a home life churning around the relationships that form and fracture among your caregivers.

Several students left my classroom before Christmas, never to return. They had looked at their circumstances, weighed their chances of ever passing tests, and decided to find other avenues to create a sense of accomplishment.

What, I wondered, would happen if I set up an anonymous system for them to share what was going on inside them? If they could just see how much everyone was struggling, I thought, maybe they would develop a bit of empathy for each other. This tiny seed of an idea grew into fourteen years of work in helping children—and adults—voice the questions they carry inside them but rarely ever talk about or discuss. This book owes its creation to those students and is my debt of gratitude to them and that year that began so badly only to become one of the best years of my professional life.

I'm not a philosophy teacher, nor was I ever trained to be one, but I wondered if I could incorporate questions inspired by it—questions, to paraphrase Douglas Adams, about life, the universe, and everything. What philosophy does best is invite inquiry, normalize the uneasy feelings of not knowing something, and encourage thinking and discussion—exactly what I needed my students to practice.

The next day, I handed out index cards to my classes and modeled some of my own deepest, unvoiced questions, thinking aloud about why good things happen to bad people and why people suffer. Then, I invited my students to share their own questions by writing them—anonously—as fast as they could think of them onto the index cards. I asked them to fold the cards

in half so no one could look over them, then hand them in. After school cleared out for the day, I bent over the stack of cards and read:

Why do people ignore the truth? Can peace really exist in this world?

Why do people kill? Why do people have to die?

What happens when we die?

Will animals have rights like us?

How come love never lasts? How come there is always pain in love?

What am I supposed to feel? What am I supposed to do? How am I supposed to act?

As I read these questions, I felt my heart squeeze inside me, cracking the protective shell I'd kept around it. I wanted to find the authors and tell them, "Me too! I wonder these same things." I wanted them to know that they were asking questions that lie at the heart of what it means to be human. How would it change them to know that they were asking the questions that people have been asking since we could talk?

A Book for Curious, Committed, and Caring Teachers

This book is for teachers who want something better for their students and who believe in each child's capacity for deep and creative thinking. It is designed to be a resource for K–12 teachers across all disciplines as well as for those who coach and lead teachers. Those of us who are committed to equity, especially for our students who are in most need of help, will discover support for our work that is practical and concrete as well as deepens our personal understanding of what's possible when we cocreate learning with students.

Our students need to ask questions now more than ever. To shield them from thinking and questioning in a mistaken fear of "pulling them off task" is at best wasted effort and at worst an isolation from what truly makes us human. In a world increasingly uncomfortable with the changes wrought by technology, we seek out authoritarian figures to tell us what to do and how to think. Questioning, therefore is good citizenship. It is the antityranny vaccine.

More than mere strategy or technique, my aim is to make questioning the basis of a classroom culture—where we value learning and listening more than knowing and telling. In work with my own students, we find that we have our most fruitful classes when we sit with questions, continuing to ask them with more and more depth.

In this book, you will find the following:

- Practical strategies for creating a classroom that runs on dialogue, curiosity, inquiry, and respect for the intellectual power of children’s minds
- An enhancement to your existing curriculum, regardless of content area or grade level, with examples and advice from award-winning teachers
- Questions of increasing depth paired with sample texts to increase student engagement with your content, from early elementary learners to core content and electives for high school students
- Step-by-step lessons for generating and using children’s questions as a way of assessing their thinking and helping them guide that thinking into new learning aligned to national standards in each content area, including fine arts and career and technical education (CTE)
- Lesson extensions for English language learners (ELLs), special education students, and gifted and talented (GT) students
- Writing suggestions, in-class debate questions, and scoring rubrics for each content area
- Recommended multimedia texts (music, video, books) grouped by big questions such as the following:

What can we know?

How do we know what is real?

Why do we suffer?

Who deserves mercy?

How should we use natural resources?

How should we treat each other?

What does it mean to be a man?

What does it mean to be a woman?

Who owns culture?

Who am I?

What is my purpose?

How do we know what to do?

How do we know what and who to trust?

- Detailed protocols for using inquiry with adults as a base for professional learning communities, for guiding staff meetings, and for creating inquiry groups around common areas of practice

Allowing students to use their own questions to form connections to specific content disrupts teaching and learning but not in a way that traumatizes the humans doing the work. It points to a way for students to have a tangible effect on their communities through project-based and problem-based learning without the need for shiny new technology or expensive infrastructure.

Why Students Need Meaning and Purpose Right Now

As it turned out for my first group of middle schoolers, allowing their questions to live at the heart of our classroom changed them in ways I wouldn't have expected. Just opening this small space to think validated them not only as thinkers but as humans with a soul. We accept that the drive for personal meaning and purpose is a fundamental drive for adults, but we don't often extend that to children. And because we don't invite them into the discussion, we create a deep sense of loneliness.

We compound that loneliness by creating meaningless school experiences for many students. There is little to no time given for the time-honored practices of reflection, meaning-making, and understanding ourselves and our place in the world. William Damon, Stanford School of Education professor and psychologist, believes the “biggest problem growing up today is not actually stress; it's meaninglessness” (Lobdell, 2011).

An inability to find personal meaning can feed the alarming numbers of mental health disorders in children. Research estimates that up to one out of every five children from ages three to seventeen suffer from some form of mental illness described as “serious changes in the ways children typically learn, behave, or handle their emotions” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). This data translates into millions of children who experience anxiety, fear, distrust in themselves and others, and depression. It shows up in our classrooms as chronic absences, disengagement with schoolwork, disruptive behavior, and—as I saw for several children I taught—dropping out of school.

Rather than feel overwhelmed by this evidence, I believe we should use it as a catalyst to transform how we teach. That transformation comes, in part, through welcoming all parts of our students' inner lives into the classroom. By inner life, I mean all of those parts of us that make us uniquely human: our emotions, our intellect, our social abilities but also our spiritual lives. This last part of us is the one least welcome in schools and one that I believe our students are most desperate to integrate into their lives.

I've arrived at this conviction after working with children as young as seven and in places as diverse as the Amari refugee camp in Ramallah, Palestine, to a class of middle schoolers in Shanghai, China. Closer to home, I've worked with refugee students from Myanmar and East Africa, students in advanced placement (AP) English classes, and remedial students, as well as teenagers transitioning out of jail or from having a baby who work toward a diploma in night classes.

From these experiences, I've come to believe in my bones that children—especially children in poverty—are desperate for an education to help them discover a sense of meaning and purpose. Yet we have decided to narrow our focus to academic achievement, which creates an unhealthy fixation on grades as a sole indicator of self-worth. We have decided that school is not the place for developing what we would traditionally consider philosophical matters, yet it is the very discipline that allows us to synthesize academics, service learning, and social and emotional principles in support of the whole child. Viewed with a nonjudgmental and nonsectarian lens, students' deepest wonderings can point toward learning experiences that allow them to practice the work of citizenship grounded in empathy.

The Curse of “Teachersplaining”

Edgar H. Schein (2013), in his book *Humble Inquiry*, describes not only teaching but so many other American enterprises as a “telling culture.” He argues that in “an increasingly complex, interdependent, and culturally diverse world, we cannot hope to understand and work with people from different occupational, professional, and national cultures if we do not know how to ask questions and build relationships that are based on mutual respect and the recognition that others know things that we may need to know in order to get a job done.” He defines humble inquiry as “the fine art of drawing someone out, of asking questions to which you do not already

know the answer, of building a relationship based on curiosity and interest in the other person” (Schein, 2013).

We “teachersplain” our kids into distraction. And I’m just as guilty of it as the next person. Fortunately, I had a group of ornery seventh graders to help me break out of this habit. Resisting pressures and temptations to be “teachers as tellers” frees us to see the children in front of us for who they are. When we make a space for students to ask their own questions, we validate them as meaning-makers and honor the hardwired capacity for inquiry that is in each of us.

For those who have grown up in homes filled with violence, poverty, and addiction, being respected by being listened to—truly listened to about their deepest thoughts and feelings—can change how they see themselves and how they view school. When you grow up in a home where dysfunction renders you invisible and silent, it can foster deep rage to come to school where this dysfunction is perpetuated by adult after adult who demands that you sit down, be quiet, and listen to what we have to say.

Eight-year-old Alex, when invited to write about his questions, spoke for so many children when he wrote: “Doe adults hate kids? Because some adults say the love ther kids but I don’t know if the do or not. Is evrey body hiding something? Becaus some people see staf but they don’t tell anybody.”

Think Like Socrates

Socrates, one of history’s greatest teachers, believed in the power of questions rather than the efficiency of lecturing his students. Long before Latin developed the word we know as *education* from two roots, *educare* (to train) and *educere* (to lead out), Socrates intuitively understood the synthesis of the two ideas (Bass & Good, 2004). He believed that inviting people to question what they think they knew, rather than telling them, would result in deeper understanding.

[He] pursued this task single-mindedly, questioning people about what matters most, e.g., courage, love, reverence, moderation, and the state of their souls generally. . . . He asked questions of his fellow Athenians in a dialectic method (the Socratic Method) which compelled his audience to think through a problem to a logical conclusion. (Nails, 2014)

Socrates left a lasting imprint on education; his name is formed into an adjective to describe Socratic dialogue and the Socratic seminar, both terms meaning a way to use questions to help students draw from the well of what they know, match it against what they have learned, interrogate it, and build deeper understanding.

If we revere Socrates as one of the greatest teachers, how did we get so far away from his method of inquiry? When did we decide that the answers were all we needed and that questions were almost shameful?

And so, I have continued the practice that I learned with my first group of middle schoolers: asking students and adults to think about and anonymously write down their deepest questions, then reading several aloud. Adults and students alike then use these questions as authentic prompts for writing, reflection, and research. Honoring their questions is a way of honoring not only the cultures of whomever you are working with but also their own sense of humanity.

How This Book Is Organized

Chapter 1 explains the process of generating children's authentic questions.

Chapter 2 presents concrete strategies for using questions to plan academic discussions.

Chapter 3 focuses on building a classroom climate to support inquiry through writing.

Chapter 4 addresses practical processes of helping children become better thinkers through listening.

Chapter 5 shows how to create and sustain trust for deeper learning.

Chapter 6 provides a framework for creating cognitively leveled questions at all levels.

Chapters 7 through 12 use advice from master teachers in core content areas, fine arts, career and technical education (CTE), and those working with special education, English language learners (ELLs), and gifted and talented (GT) students to build and use specific leveled questions around recommended text and resources.

Chapter 13 guides how to use student questions to create powerful project-based and personalized learning.

Chapter 14 shows how teachers can collaborate using their own questions to create professional development around personal problems of practice.

An appendix contains the following:

- A suggested learning schedule
- Blackline masters for handouts
- Recommended books, films, music, and other work to support and extend critical thinking and academic work
- Rubrics for assessment

I believe that we can create vibrant and thoughtful learning spaces where students as young as kindergarten grapple with our deepest and most enduring questions. We can design our teaching for wonder rather than performance, for curiosity rather than testing, and for innovation rather than compliance. All of it starts with welcoming and valuing the inquisitiveness already inside our students.