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## **The role of questioning: Beyond comprehension's front door**

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### ABSTRACT

Activities involving questions are a time-honored practice in literacy instruction. Since the beginnings of American education, historical accounts of classroom procedures have included various descriptions of the ways in which questions were made a part of almost every literacy lesson. Whether requiring answers involving rote memory or the activation of higher level critical thinking processes, the role of questions in literacy instruction has always been strong. This article presents a six-step strategy for questioning followed by a field-tested group of fifth graders' responses to each step.

The development of students' comprehension of text relies heavily upon the types of questions asked by the teacher (Savage, 1998). This is true for both reading as well as listening comprehension. Traver (1998) suggested that the power of well-thought-out questioning techniques, especially the use of guiding questions, can provide intellectual focus and coherence for an entire curriculum.

Recent advancements in our understanding of the teaching-learning relationship, as well as literacy acquisition, have given rise to a number of notable efforts to develop specific strategies to promote comprehension of text (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton & Kucan, 1997; Brand-Gruwel, 1998; Harris & Katima, 1997; Loranger, 1997; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1996; McMahan, Raphael, Goatley & Pardo, 1997; Ogle, 1986, 1992;

Raphael, 1982, 1986; Salembier, 1999; Walpole, 1999). These types of strategies, almost without exception, contain provisions for questioning on the part of the teacher, student, or both. Although the literature is replete with suggestions for improving students' comprehension, there is a glaring shortcoming in many of the strategies. Oftentimes, the recommended procedure does not go far enough in getting the most out of the questions at hand (Gambo, 1997). For example, an activity may be given to a group of students, calling for them to provide written answers for a set of questions and then to share and discuss these answers. Such an activity, in and of itself, is instructionally sound. What it does not reflect however, is the plethora of possibilities to promote reading comprehension beyond the initial written answers and discussions.

Ciardiello (1998) and Pugh (1999) suggested that student-developed questions can enhance comprehension by fostering a synthesis of concepts through practical application, increased motivation, and focusing on main ideas. This thought represents a good starting point, with one possibility being for a small group of students to generate and add questions to the teacher's list, then to provide initial and alternative responses to each item. To further the line of thought, a discussion would be conducted to determine which of the answers to each question is the most likely response. Such a discussion would, of course, necessitate returning to the text to find evidence for the different options which would emerge inevitably. A summative discussion would follow as part of the group presenting its results to the rest of the class.

The remainder of this article presents a step-by-step procedure which incorporates all of the elements in the previous paragraph. This strategy was field-tested over one school year on different groups of students who were members of a 5<sup>th</sup> grade class of twenty-six students. Each step will have two sections, an explanation to the teacher of how to carry out the step, and a report on how that step worked with the first group of students to whom it was presented.

### **Step 1: Choose an appropriate unit of text**

The reading material may be narrative or expository, depending upon your objectives. Possible choices for narrative text include a short novel being read by the whole class or a small group of students, a short

story or trade book, or a novel that you have been reading aloud to the class. If the entire novel, or unit of text, is to be read or listened to eventually, then the activity can be done several times as the students progress through the material. Another option would be to choose only a short section of text from a book which the students will not be reading or listening to in its entirety. Possible choices for expository text include sections from textbooks used in the content area courses, or related books, materials, or periodicals which are informational in nature.

In our 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom, the teacher and this author had already established contact a week before school began. After a long conversation, during which the teacher agreed to assist with the project during the course of the school year, she indicated that she would much prefer the option of reading an entire novel to the class and employing the strategy at periodic junctures, thereby promoting students' listening comprehension competencies. She was familiar with the well-known report Becoming a nation of readers: The report of the commission on reading (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott & Wilkinson, 1985), and was a strong believer in the pronouncements concerning oral reading to the students by the teacher. Specifically, the teacher felt that contemporary students' listening skills are seriously underdeveloped, thus her preference for a listening comprehension activity to begin the field-testing. When discussing possibilities for the novel to be read, this author mentioned that Summer of the Monkeys by Wilson Rawls (Dell, 1976) seemed to be a hit no matter where or how it is used. The teacher said immediately that she would love to try it.

**Step 2: Give a small group of students a set of “jump start” questions and have them generate some more of their own**

Create a small group of students (4-5) in any manner that is deemed appropriate for the desired outcome of the lesson. To begin the activity, you will prepare a set of “jump start” questions based upon the particular material the students in the group have been reading or listening to. After the students have each received a copy of the questions, the teacher will ask them to look over the items without attempting answers. The students will then be asked to add questions to the list which represent other important parts of the material read.

In our 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom, the teacher created a heterogeneous group of three girls and two boys, with two being high achievers, two being low achievers, and one being a medium range achiever. The teacher had read aloud the first three chapters of *Summer of the Monkeys* before we tried to implement the strategy during the first week of October. Before giving out the “jump start” questions, the teacher provided each group member with a paperback copy of the book for referencing and double-checking facts. The starter sheet the teacher prepared was as follows:

- 1) What was the name of the main character in the book?
- 2) What do you think the “money situation” was like in the family? Why did you get that impression?
- 3) What kinds of things did the children do for fun, or to entertain themselves?
- 4) Why was what he found in the woods so unusual?
- 5) Who was going to help him out with his plan?

At first, the group was a little confused about adding questions to the list. The teacher clarified matters by saying, “If you were the teacher, what are some other questions you would have put down?” This resonated much better than the original request, and after pondering other important things which had taken place in the first three chapters, the students added these items.

- 6) What did Grandpa’s plan turn out to be?
- 7) Who was the Old Man of the Mountains and why was Jay Berry afraid of him?

### **Step 3: Have the group answer the questions and report the results**

The group will appoint a recorder/spokesperson. The members of the group will then work with each other to provide answers for each of the questions. Tell them that the group must reach consensus on one answer only for each item. When this has been done, the recorder/spokesperson will convey the results to you (with assistance from other group members, as needed). Discuss the results briefly with the students, offering feedback where appropriate.

In our 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom, this step had an inauspicious beginning, as the students began arguing about who was going to be the recorder/spokesperson. The teacher's first inclination was to intercede in the conflict, but she decided to wait a little longer. After about 2 or 3 minutes the students resolved the issue amicably, as a young lady named Rosa was appointed to the position. The group proceeded to address the questions, but ran out of time. The next day, the activity was resumed and completed within about twenty minutes. The teacher sat down with the group in a partitioned area of the classroom and a discussion began regarding the answers to the questions, which were as follows:

- 1) "Jay Berry Lee."
- 2) "Not very good. Because they lived in a poor place and everything seemed to be real hard for them."
- 3) "Daisy went to her playhouse and Jay Berry went running in the woods."
- 4) "Because monkeys did not usually live anywhere around where Jay Berry lived."
- 5) "His old 'boy loving' Grandpa."
- 6) "He wanted Jay Berry to try to trap the monkeys with hunting traps."
- 7) "He was the guy who took care of all of the little animals in the mountains and was also like an angel or spirit. Jay Berry liked to trap and catch animals so he thought the Old Man of the Mountains was going to be mad at him."

**Step 4: Have the group provide alternative responses and report/discuss the results**

Ask the group to think of a different answer to each question. To help the students along, encouragement should be provided to look at each item from a variety of perspectives. Explain to the students that even an unlikely or far-fetched answer will be better than not giving an alternative response, and that some of the suggestions which were not chosen as the first choice answers in step 3, could serve well as alternative responses. When the group is finished, sit down and discuss the results, having the members offer opinions about why these are possible

responses (collective rationale). Initiate a discussion to reach consensus on whether answer one or two is the most reasonable, and why that is the case.

In our 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom, the students were hesitant initially. The teacher suspected that they may not have been clear about the task. On the spur of the moment, the teacher gave an example which emanated from another part of the first three chapters and which neither she nor the group had included on the starter sheet or group-generated items. Due to the ad-lib talents of the teacher, the group grasped what needed to be done and set about the task of giving alternative responses.

The results, including the collective rationale for the answer as well as the consensus, regarding which would be the most reasonable, were as follows:

1) “Jimbo.”

**Collective rationale:**

“Because the whole story happened when Jimbo led his monkey friends to where Jay Berry lived. It was Jimbo’s cleverness that made a lot of the story so funny.”

**Consensus:**

“Jay Berry is really the best answer for this one, even though Jimbo was very important to the story. Plus, Jay Berry was the one telling the story, and everything said was the way he felt, not really Jimbo’s feelings.”

2) “They didn’t have any money.”

**Collective rationale**

“It’s not really that they were poor, but they didn’t need any money like we do today. They lived on a farm and they grew all of their own food. When they had to go to the store in town, they just traded some chickens

or something if they needed anything. Anyway, Grandpa owned the store so he probably just gave them most of what they needed.”

**Consensus:**

“The first answer is probably really the best one, because the way Jay Berry described things, it seemed like they were having a hard time. He even came out and said that money was something they didn’t have, even for the special operation that Daisy needed.”

3) “Daisy liked to tease Jay Berry and give him a hard time and Jay Berry liked to chase and trap animals around the farm and in the woods.”

**Collective rationale**

“It seemed that Daisy really loved her brother but would like to throw him off by teasing him. That would be kind of like fun and entertainment. Jay Berry liked to catch animals and that would be like entertainment, too.”

**Consensus:**

“The first answer was really the best because she probably liked to play in her playhouse more than tease Jay Berry. The first answer would be better for Jay Berry too because catching things can be just a little of all the things you do when you run in the woods.”

4) “Because it seemed like they would have run when they heard him coming.”

**Collective rationale:**

“This could be an answer because of the word ‘unusual’ in the question. Even though it was unusual to find monkeys around where Jay Berry lived, it was also unusual to be able to get close enough to see them even if there were monkeys there. Wild animals usually get scared and run when they smell and hear something strange coming close to them.”



**Consensus:**

“The first one is the best answer again, because just about everybody would think about the monkeys being in the Oklahoma woods in the first place.”

5) “Rowdy was going to help him out with his plan.”

**Collective rationale:**

“Of course, everybody knows that dogs are the most loyal ones to you, so you know that Rowdy was going to automatically be there helping when Jay Berry was going to try to catch the monkeys.”

**Consensus:**

“The first answer again was probably the one that most people would think of because Grandpa was really the one who talked to him about it and mainly thought up the plan.”

6) “Grandpa wanted Jay Berry to trap the monkeys, but he knew that the monkeys would be smart and it wouldn’t work. He figured it was better for it to be hard for him to catch the monkeys so that when he finally did he would appreciate it more.”

**Collective rationale:**

“This could have been an answer even though it is far out. Grandpa loved Jay Berry very much and he wanted him to grow up knowing that you had to work hard for things and that nothing is really easy.”

**Consensus:**

“Even though Grandpa probably did want Jay Berry to grow up right, he also probably wanted Jay Berry to catch those monkeys as bad as Jay Berry wanted to catch them. The first answer with the traps is the best one.”

7) “He was just someone in Daisy’s imagination, but Jay Berry was scared anyway. He had always been afraid of ghosts, and this guy sounded like a ghost. This is why Jay Berry was afraid that he might be real, so he wasn’t taking any chances.”

**Collective rationale:**

“This is a possible answer because hardly anybody believes in stuff like ghosts. The answer to the question all depends on whether you want to talk about who he was in the story or who he probably really was, even though the book is all just a big story anyway.”

**Consensus:**

“We think that this answer is a better answer than the first one, because nobody in our group believes in ghosts. We can make ourselves believe it for the story though, because it makes it more fun.”

**Step 5: Share the results of the activity with the rest of the class**

Make room in the schedule for the group to present the results of the activity to the rest of the class. If this is the first group with which you have tried this strategy, have them start out by addressing what they were asked to do and how they went about it. Encourage the group members to point out the junctures in the activity where they were confused, as well as how the confusion was resolved. The critical part of this step should be for the group to report on the questions posed on the starter sheet, the student-generated items which were added, the primary answers to these questions, the alternative responses followed by a rationale for each, and an explanation as to which of the two responses is most feasible. When the group is finished with the presentation, invite the rest of the class to ask questions to any group member and/or to the group as a whole.

In our 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom, the group eased into the presentation very well, explaining to the rest of the class what they had been asked to do. Comments about points of confusion and how these had been resolved included, “I didn’t know what to do when she asked us to add questions

to the list because no one had ever asked me to help make my own questions before. But when I realized what it meant, I couldn't wait to do something that usually only the teacher gets to do." Another student who added, "I was really mixed up when we were asked to give another answer to each question because usually one is enough. It made me think a little more than I usually do, especially for those questions that seemed like there was no way there could be another answer." The rest of the class was very attentive when the results of the activity were reported, asking a variety of questions when the presentation was completed.

The most poignant issue during the question and answer period involved question number 7, "Who was the Old Man of the Mountains and why was Jay Berry afraid of him?" A number of students in the class objected to the group choosing the alternative answer as the best one for the reason which was given. One member of the class expressed the sentiments of several others by saying, "Just because nobody in your group believes in ghosts and spirits doesn't mean that other people don't. I think that things like the Old Man of the Mountains can exist and that the first answer was really the best one." After the period ended, the teacher assured the students that the discussion would be continued. The discussion did continue the next day, with a truce being forged between the two factions disputing the possible answers to the Old Man of the Mountains question.

### **Step 6: Give each student a chance to participate in a group**

As the school year progresses, rotate all of the students in and out of groups which utilize this strategy. Ideally, each student will have the opportunity to participate in such a group at least two or three times, using a variety of materials (narrative and expository) which have been approached in a variety of ways (listening and reading).

In our 5<sup>th</sup> grade class, the teacher continued to use the strategy throughout the year, not only for material students had listened to, but for narrative text which they had read. With a few modifications, the teacher was also able to utilize the strategy across the subject areas. Each student participated in the group strategy five times: once for the activity reported in this article; an additional listening activity for *Summer of the*

*Monkeys*; a listening activity for another book the teacher read aloud during the second semester; one social studies lesson which the students read themselves; and one science lesson which the students read themselves.

## **Discussion**

As a result of extensive conversations with the teacher during the course of the school year, it was agreed that the strategy was indeed a worthwhile undertaking. The teacher reported the students looking forward to being selected for the group work, which frequently involved persistent requests from several students wanting to be placed in the next group. The teacher also observed that during step 5, the members of the class appeared to be more attentive to and tended to ask more questions of the group than when a single person was presenting something to the class separate and apart from this strategy. She added jokingly that most of the time, it seemed as though they paid closer attention to their peers in the group than they did to her under similar instructional circumstances.

Another observation made by the teacher is that the strategy was more effective when it was not overused. After the initial field-testing in the fall, she implemented it again only two weeks later. In her estimation, the enthusiasm was at a lower level than the first trial. This was addressed by shelving the strategy for about a month and then systematically spacing it out for the rest of the school year. This resulted in each child participating in the group work five times, at approximately equal intervals of time between each engagement.

As part of the five rotations, the teacher applied the strategy to the content areas for each student, once in science, and once in social studies. She indicated that the activity was more involved in these two content areas, namely because it was more difficult to formulate jump start questions which lent themselves to more than one answer. Also, the students tended to generate questions requiring discrete, factual answers which were the only feasible responses. To address this, the teacher reminded the students that even far-fetched alternative responses were better than none (the same thing they had been told when applying the

strategy to narrative material). This actually added a humorous twist to the activity, with some alternative responses bringing laughter to the group during step 5. One example had to do with a student-generated question in conjunction with a science lesson. The question was "What does H<sub>2</sub>O stand for?" The primary answer was, of course, "water." When the time came for providing an alternative response, the group was stumped because no one could think of anything else that H<sub>2</sub>O could really be. Finally, one student said "Why not just say what it is directly? Say 'two molecules of hydrogen and one molecule of oxygen.' So there, the first answer will be 'water' and the second one will be 'two molecules of hydrogen and one molecule of oxygen.'" A smile came to the faces of the students, teacher and the two observers when realizing that the obvious had been overlooked. The teacher pointed out how amazing language can be, for example, that two things which are exactly the same can sound so different.

A final observation of the teacher was that several students carried the strategy over to their work in other literacy assignments as well as the various content areas. She recorded numerous instances when a student would declare that there were other ways to answer a question or address an issue. The teacher could not recall any point in her thirteen years of teaching when students had been self-motivated to look at responses to questions from so many different angles. There were even instances, for questions requiring higher level critical thinking, when a myriad of answers was proposed. One particular activity toward the end of the spring semester yielded a range of 2-5 responses per question. At the end of the school year, the teacher related that she had asked students why they frequently gave multiple responses to questions, even though it was not required in most activities. Many of them said that they enjoyed it very much when they had a chance to use the "special" strategy which required more than one answer, so they did it on their own during other lessons.

As this project demonstrates, questioning practices need not be relegated to one-step exercises that simply entail a quick response. Encouraging students to examine questions (the teacher's and their own), seek initial answers followed by alternative answers, and have discussions in small group as well as whole class scenarios, expand the network of cog-

nitive connections needed for understanding text. By the use of procedures which take the questions further into students' thinking abilities, higher level comprehension processes are activated resulting in a multi-dimensional understanding of whatever material is read, including different lines of thought, a variety of responses, and diverse points of view.

Although the procedure was field-tested in a very informal manner, the comments of the participants as well as the teacher indicate that it was not only enjoyable, but effective in developing comprehension of whatever was being read by them or to them. The teacher added that she planned on using the strategy during the next school year, with the advantage of including it in her summer planning. This indicates that when teachers judge a strategy to be successful, informal versus formal research paradigms do not seem to affect their decisions to incorporate it into future plans. The area of questioning, and the augmentation of questioning procedures in order to develop students' comprehension of text, doubtlessly play a significant role in the more encompassing pursuit of helping students to understand the use of language in the world around them. Hopefully, this strategy represents a modest contribution to a growing corpus of research dedicated to forging links between what is and what is not possible with the role of questioning in taking students beyond comprehension's front door.

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