The Power of Questions

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The issue of questions and their uses in teaching brings to mind the deathbed comments of the famous writer Gertrude Stein to her lifelong companion, Alice B. Toklas: “What is the answer?” When no answer was given, she then asked, “What is the question?”

Good questions are treasure troves in life as in teaching because they so effectively open new vistas, provide new perspectives, and challenge our most basic assumptions. Good questions are those that the questioner cannot answer. They are used to initiate a dialogue where answers, even short and partial ones, begin to crystallize and shape themselves, provoking still other questions and answers, like waves rippling onto waves, interminably. In teaching, the questions raised across a course may say more about it than the answers they elicit.

Socrates was perhaps the first teacher to use the question-answer, or heuristic, method. His name has been given to it. The trouble was, as has been pointed out, that he knew, or thought he knew, the answer, and led the questioned person teacher-like to it through brilliantly choreographed maneuvers and a sense of ironclad inevitability. There was no element of surprise and mutual discovery in which interlocutor and interlocutee share in spontaneous and authentic dialogue. Socrates knew the answer, and it was only a question of time before the Athenian being questioned would know it as well.

The Socratic method may be relevant in physics and other sciences. It may even be useful sometimes with literature. What is an iambic pentameter? And what is the structure of the Shakespearean play? There are questions with specific answers. But on a more profound level, authentic questions, à la Stein, can take you on a serendipitous route to an unknown destination.

“What slew whom and dragged his corpse how often around the walls of Troy?” This was the type of question that my high school English teacher liked to ask (in reference to the passage in the Iliad where Achilles drags Hector’s body around the walls of Troy). Of what earthly use can such questions be, at least when doled out on an ongoing basis? At best, they may force students to digest the text—at worst, they may alienate students, creating a distaste for literature it may take years to repair.

What comes to mind is the short story “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” where the participants provide narratives involving examples and definitions of love in an endeavor to clarify its mystery and the myriad shapes it assumes. There are two couples, each as different from the other as can be imagined. Interestingly, when the story ends, the narrators and the reader are no nearer to answers than at the beginning: in fact, they may be even further away as they are now aware of the enormous complexity involved. The story ends with sunset and nightfall, a beautiful symbol that speaks marvelously to the ambiguity in which the concept of love is wrapped, as opposed to the Socratic dialogue, which I am sure begins and ends in daylight, bathed in the super-rationality one equates with the Athenian mind.

Can teachers provide a lesson based on an authentic, open-ended heuristic method by which they and the students actively participate in a discussion that generates insights from which both can benefit? I read an article about an instructor at a college where an Introduction to Western Literary Masterpieces course was an integral part of the core liberal program and where questions formulated to stimulate class discussion were de rigueur. The instructor noted that he spent innumerable hours preparing questions. In fact, this consumed more time than any other aspect of the course, and I don’t find that at all inconceivable.

Good questions are hard to craft: they are a combination of art, inspiration, and effort—and to some degree, chance. And it is impossible to predict which ones will work successfully. There is no algorithm that guarantees that if one follows steps a, b, c, d, e, etc., that these will then result in consequences x and y. One set of questions that worked wonderfully with one set of students in one course may “bomb”...
Revisiting the Purpose of PowerPoint

By Bob Eierman, University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire
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The university teaching/learning center I direct offers to collect midterm student feedback for instructors. We interview the students in a course without the instructor present and create a report describing what students think does and doesn’t help them learn. We also ask them to suggest what might improve instruction in the course. In the majority of these interviews, students comment on the use of PowerPoint slides. And frequently, their opinions are mixed.

Some students want all the information in the course in the PowerPoint slides. Others are content with a less-exhaustive version of the course information. Students almost uniformly agree that they don’t like it when instructors show slides full of content and then proceed to read them to the class. These mixed reviews present an instructor with a conundrum: What is the best way to use this rich and powerful presentation tool? Should the instructor include lots of material on the slides, recognizing that that will likely make for a less effective presentation? Or should the instructor design slides so that they are more visually impressive but contain less content? Based on our interviews, it seems that some students will be dissatisfied regardless of which way the instructor decides to go.

After some thinking about this dilemma, I now believe that, like many things in teaching and learning, the conundrum is created by different sets of expectations that grow out of the purpose the students and teachers see the slides fulfilling. Some students expect that the course PowerPoint slides will serve as a de facto textbook for the course. For them, all the important content must be in there—organized, illustrated, and complete. Other students see the slides as a way the instructor provides structure for the presentation and discussions that occur during class. They expect to fill in the details from the lecture, the discussions, or other course materials. Most instructors use PowerPoint slides as a way to organize their thoughts and presentations. They don’t see them as a repository for course content.

When I talk with instructors about the mixed feedback on their PowerPoint use, I encourage them to decide what purpose (or purposes) the slides are being used to accomplish. If the slides are serving as a de facto textbook, then make them serve that function well. With this as the purpose, students may be attending more to the PowerPoint than to what the instructor is saying—that’s the trade-off. If the slides are designed to add excitement to the oral presentation or to stimulate discussion, they won’t serve well as a content summary—that’s the trade-off here. After clarifying the purpose, instructors need to explicitly communicate it to students. I also recommend that they suggest ways students can use the slides, given that purpose. As long as the students and the instructor agree on the purpose and have the same expectations, the PowerPoint conundrum will be resolved.
Teaching Circles: A Low-Cost, High-Benefit Way to Engage Faculty

By Michelle Freeman, Tusculum College, TN
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For the past three years I have directed a small program that has produced big results at Tusculum College. For as little as $3,000 per year, our college has increased its sense of campus community, helped with current faculty development, more quickly integrated new faculty, and modeled scholarly discussions for students. Officially the program goes by the name “The Teaching and Learning Initiative,” but it has acquired the nickname “teaching circles.”

The initiative is simply structured. As its director, I recruit four to six circle leaders shortly before the academic year begins. Early in the semester, the leaders select a topic and relevant reading materials, which I secure for the groups. Then we announce the topics to the campus community and provide contact information for the leaders. Faculty select which group, if any, they would like to join for the year. We don’t pressure them, but even so, about 50 percent are participating each year.

The leaders meet virtually or in person for the first meeting to decide on a schedule. Most groups meet to discuss the topic and reading material about four times a year. All teaching circle members participate in a concluding banquet during which groups summarize or creatively display the knowledge they have discovered and comment on its potential classroom applications. We make the banquet a social event and use it as a celebration of faculty united in lifelong learning.

The main costs associated with the initiative are the books and materials provided to participants, the banquet, and one nice dinner per group for one of their meetings. In the beginning, leaders were paid a $300 stipend; however, this was eliminated in the current year’s budget. We are proceeding with volunteer leaders who are willing to perform this as part of their service to the college. Although we have yet to face a shortage of volunteers, a small stipend for leaders is probably a necessity when beginning a program like this.

The goal of these circles is enjoyable scholarly exchange among peers. The groups have taken several different approaches. Sometimes the focus is on pedagogy; other times it has a topical focus, simply for knowledge expansion. I strongly encourage the leaders to pick topics about which they are passionate. When they do, conversation in the groups flows seamlessly. Some faculty have chosen to use their groups to find new teaching strategies, such as undergraduate research or active learning techniques. These groups offer participants a safe place to talk about the strategies and their efforts to implement them. Others have chosen academic topics such as Darwinism. In these groups, colleagues deliberate much as students would in a seminar.

The initiative has generated a number of benefits. First, it provides in-house faculty development. Faculty discover new pedagogical knowledge and share teaching experiences with each other. Their discussions and the banquet presentations encourage implementation of the ideas identified during the year.

Second, the initiative serves as a community builder across disciplines. Faculty emerge from their departments and offices to gather in homes or local restaurants to discuss topics of common interest. For example, one of our mathematics professors decided to challenge herself by joining a writing circle. The initiative provided an opportunity she may not otherwise have enjoyed.

Third, the initiative eases new faculty into the college community. It also gives them a chance to meet college veterans whose knowledge and experience can help them adjust to teaching this college’s students. The interaction also introduces them to our college culture.

Fourth, the initiative has assisted other college programs. For example, two of the six teaching circles this year have embraced the current Quality Enhancement Plan topic of reflective judgment. Not only will the participants learn how to apply this concept to their classrooms, but they will also be better able to speak about the topic to other faculty members within their departments.

Finally, the initiative provides peer incentives among professors to continue to improve. As faculty learn together they are challenged to make changes in their classrooms. Faculty participation in these circles offers evidence of ongoing interest in scholarship, and circle leaders can count this as a college service contribution.

Every campus needs faculty who are engaged in the intellectual life of the college. A teaching and learning initiative like this one is a great way to encourage that kind of engagement.

We’d like to know what you think!
Please share your thoughts on this issue in a four-question online survey located at www.surveymonkey.com/s/TTPN.
Making the Most of Fieldwork Learning Experiences

By Glen T. Hvenegaard, University of Alberta, Augustana Campus
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Fieldwork refers to any component of the curriculum that involves leaving the classroom and learning through firsthand experience. It includes activities as diverse as measuring trees for an ecology course, interviewing a leader for a religious studies course, or conducting ethnography for a sociology course. The field experience may extend across an entire semester or be the last 10 minutes of the period. Depending on past experiences, the announcement, “OK, let’s head out to the field,” may generate terror or excitement in students. To accomplish the latter, I recommend a set of simple strategies that enhance learning and improve student experiences in the field.

Most instructors incorporate fieldwork to help students understand theory, develop skills, integrate knowledge, build tacit knowledge, develop meaning in places, and work with peers and instructors in the classroom and learning through first-hand experience. It includes activities as diverse as measuring trees for an ecology course, interviewing a leader for a religious studies course, or conducting ethnography for a sociology course. The field experience may extend across an entire semester or be the last 10 minutes of the period. Depending on past experiences, the announcement, “OK, let’s head out to the field,” may generate terror or excitement in students. To accomplish the latter, I recommend a set of simple strategies that enhance learning and improve student experiences in the field.

Most instructors incorporate fieldwork to help students understand theory, develop skills, integrate knowledge, build tacit knowledge, develop meaning in places, and work with peers and instructors in alternate settings. Despite the benefits, fieldwork has declined lately due to increased costs, class sizes, and safety concerns. Recent budget-cutting activities have reinforced the fragility of institutional commitments to field experiences.

Despite our best intentions, fieldwork experiences can fail miserably for many reasons. For example, an unexpected traffic jam can reduce time at a study site, a sudden rainstorm can send everyone running for cover, or a guest naturalist can fail to show up at the appointed time and place. Conditions in the field are often unpredictable and can affect learning outcomes. Even so, there are practices that do improve fieldwork experiences.

First, fieldwork assignments should have clear and integrated goals. I recommend choosing a few key objectives and sticking to them. Expecting a field experience to accomplish too many objectives can dilute the experience and leave students frustrated. We wrongly assume that students will learn simply by engaging in field experiences; these experiences need to be an integrated part of the larger curriculum. I recently heard this loud and clear from students doing an individualized community-service learning assignment in a large introductory environmental studies course. They decried the lack of time taken in the course to analyze and integrate their field experiences.

Second, successful fieldwork requires preparation by students and instructors alike. Successful fieldwork builds on and extends competencies gained in earlier in-class or field experiences. For that reason, students need to understand and appreciate the underlying theory, past studies, and methods related to their upcoming trip. This context enhances learning, deepens insight, strengthens critical thinking, and increases adaptability. Instructors prepare students to make efficient use of their time during the field exercise by providing clear instructions and expectations for assessment. Instructors also need to prepare their equipment, anticipating all manner of safety and logistical contingencies as well as the range of site conditions that will affect fieldwork. Instructors must also balance the need for structure, comfort, and familiarity (e.g., traditional lab experiences) with the need for excitement and novel experiences (e.g., new environments).

Third, instructors should be flexible so they can take advantage of spontaneous opportunities that may arise. For example, if a flock of swans fly, students may be frustrated if they can’t stop to take a look because they are supposed to measure vegetation characteristics for a biology lab. If an instructor is flexible, unexpected events can contribute directly to, or provide context for, the objectives of the field exercise.

Fourth, students and instructors should reflect on all aspects of their field experiences. Reflection increases learning because it provides an opportunity to examine the meaning and significance of experiences, sightings, data, or encounters. This reflection might take the form of a required journal, a group “debrief,” or a sharing circle at the end of an afternoon trip. Reflection immediately after an experience is most productive and relevant. Both the instructor and the students might want to create a list of “recommendations” that could improve an activity for future students.

Fifth, choosing a location for a field experience is important. On one hand, local choices are relatively inexpensive, are relevant to students, and give them an opportunity to provide a finished product for community use. For example, my biogeography students have conducted regular riparian health assessments of the local stream system, providing a useful indicator of change to the municipality. On the other hand, more distant options can provide a more novel set of experiences. If possible, choose scenic locations for fieldwork. On a three-hour field trip in my geomorphology course, I plan the last stop at a beautiful spot on a high bank overlooking the Battle River of central Alberta. We linger there, eat snacks, and summarize insights from the trip.

Sixth, assessment sends a message about the importance of fieldwork. The frequency and rigor should be appropriate to the time and energy that students are able to apply to the experience. Field assessment can take many forms: journals, group insights, and trip-specific exam questions are among the possibilities to reward students who engage fully in field experiences.

Carefully planned field experiences help students develop skills and insights that are the mark of a well-rounded education. That careful design can be challenging, but as these suggestions show, it is a manageable task, and the work involved is offset by the learning potential inherent in good fieldwork experiences.
Making Exams More about Learning

We give exams to assess mastery of material—are students learning the course content? With so much emphasis on scores and grades, it’s easy to forget that the process of preparing for, taking, and getting feedback about an exam can also be learning experiences. The learning that results from these processes can be tacit, or teachers can design activities associated with exam events that can result in better content learning and heightened student awareness of the learning skills associated with demonstrating knowledge. The good news is that these activities don’t have to be all that creative and innovative, as Thomas Smith discovered.

Smith decided to use five “tactical strategies” (p. 72) in his junior-level financial management class. First he gave students access to previous exams. He put two semesters’ worth of exams on reserve in the library. They were exam copies minus any answers. Having access to the exams relieved a lot of anxiety students had over the format, style, and difficulty of the exam.

Next, Smith conducted a review session prior to each exam. He scheduled the two-hour sessions the evening before the exam. Between 80 and 90 percent of the students attended the session. The decision to schedule the session the night before the exam was based on the assumption that students would have already devoted time to study. Smith provided correct answers to the exam questions during the session. Most of the students had already tried to work the problems, and so they came with questions. “The review session provides a wonderful teaching opportunity in that students are very attentive.” (p. 74) The sessions did not take place in the regular classroom, and Smith found that made for more open dialogue.

Students were allowed to use a cheat sheet during the exam. Specifically, it was a 5x7 hand-written card. Most students filled their cards with definitions, formulas, and instructions for solving particular kinds of problems. Being able to use a cheat sheet got the message across to students: they didn’t need to memorize the material. Smith says that the stress-relieving effects of the cheat sheets were “one of the most gratifying unforeseen consequences.” (p. 76) Coupled with having access to prior exams, this allowed students to come to the exam much more focused on the material. Interestingly, Smith observed many of the students rarely looked at their cheat sheets. The process of preparing the cheat sheet seemed to have helped students organize and remember the material.

Smith’s exam questions require an answer with justification. The exams contained 25 to 30 multiple-choice questions. Students selected the correct answer, but then they had to provide a written justification for their choice, and it was that written justification that was evaluated, not what the students had circled. The practice virtually eliminated guessing because students who had the correct answer marked but provided an erroneous or irrelevant justification could get only partial or no credit for the answer. Likewise, if an incorrect response was supported with a reasonable justification, it could earn partial or full credit.

Smith individually graded each exam with the student present. This took place in a 15-minute appointment scheduled during the week after the exam. The discussion was easy when the answer and justification were correct. The discussion was not as easy if the answer was correct but not the justification. Smith reported that he spent time listening carefully as students re-explained their thought processes. He learned much about students’ thinking processes and could more easily identify the problematic assumptions they had made. Clearly, this was a time-consuming process. Because he didn’t spend any class time talking about the exam, Smith canceled one class session and used the time for individual appointments. He used this technique in classes with 25 students.

Smith thinks the impact of each individual strategy is enhanced when all of them are used. When Smith uses all five strategies, “the first noticeable systematic effect is that students are willing to work harder.” (p. 82) The strategies also help build trust between the instructor and students. It’s a way of using exams that makes students more accountable and lets them experience how much learning an exam can promote.


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The next time they are used. Instead of teacher and students acquiring that glow of satisfaction, all parties may leave class bored, apathetic, or frustrated.

A lot is involved here: the mood of the class, the mood of the teacher who may not see the questions as being as riveting or pertinent as previously, plus a few other imponderable ingredients in the potpourri we call the classroom experience. Yet the classroom is precisely where questions can successfully bond the class in a meaningful discussion and where education achieves its highest aims. The results are transformative, magical academic moments that generate long-lasting influences.

“What is the question?” On the surface, it would seem from Stein’s phraseology that a question is a second-best choice, a runner-up as it were, when the primary choice, the answer, is not forthcoming. Ultimately, the reverse may be true. A question may prove more meaningful than any answer it elicits. Teachers should never underestimate what questions can accomplish in the classroom.
Student Entitlement

It’s a term much bandied about—perhaps the best place to start is with a definition. Authors of the study referenced below define it as “an attitude marked by students’ beliefs that they are owed something in the educational experience apart from what they might earn from their effort.” (p. 343) The student cohort to whom the term is most often applied is the “millennial students,” those born between 1982 and 2002. And there’s lots of evidence that the sense of entitlement has grown. One interesting bit included in the article noted that the combined search terms “sense of entitlement” and “students” yielded 16 references in 1996 in the LexisNexis database; the same terms yielded 102 references in 2006.

In their discussion of the historical perspective of the notion of entitlement and their review of recent research, the authors discuss the commercialization of higher education—specifically, the ranking of educational institutions by U.S. News & World Report and other publications. They believe that practice increases the public perception of education as a product and students as entitled consumers. “Consumers are entitled to certain rights and privileges that come with the purchase of goods—in this case education. Yet where does the responsibility lie in a student as consumer model?” (p. 347) When Consumer Reports recommends some products over others, consumers can expect the product will perform as described. That’s not how it works in education. “When does the student make the connection that they may have behaved as a consumer while ‘shopping’ for the product of education, but once they have purchased the opportunity to access higher education they have to play an active role in the ‘product’ performing as advertised? (pp. 347-8)

In their research, these authors used a qualitative research design to explore the idea of academic entitlement as described by the entitled students themselves. They used focus groups, interviewing a total of 54 first-year college students. The discussions were recorded and then systematically reviewed. “We pointedly asked students overt ‘consumer type’ questions to see what kinds of responses they would give when approached in this way.” (p. 348) For example, they asked, “What do you think you should expect to get for the money you have paid for tuition, fees, books, etc.?” “What do you believe the role of professors should be?” and “As a student, do you think that you are a customer of the university?” The complete list of questions used in the study appears in an appendix to the article.

Analysis of the interview data revealed six themes: product value of education; social promotion; and the roles of professors, teaching assistants, administrators, and shoppers or scholars. The first three are highlighted below.

Product value of education—When asked the main reason they chose to attend the university, 35.3 percent said they wanted to get a good job, 27.5 percent indicated they wanted to achieve a career goal, like become a teacher, and 9.8 percent said they wanted to obtain an education and better themselves. Many student comments equated the cost of education with their goals. They think they are “purchasing an education to get a job, or a tangible product for their effort with that effort being money spent.” (p. 350)

Social promotion—As used in the study, this refers to “a belief that credit should be given for social reasons or reasons outside of academic performance.” (p. 350) During the interviews, students were asked if they thought effort as demonstrated by showing up to class and doing the reading should count. Based on how much they have to pay for education, students said yes. Just showing up is an achievement that merits recognition and reward. They also expressed opinions that grades should be given because they are needed—to keep things like scholarships, to gain entrance to programs, and to graduate. “In the six hours of recordings of the focus groups, there was only one person who responded with a different perspective on marks [grades]; this person said, ‘You don’t pay for marks.’” (p. 351)

Role of professors—“The three things that most colored the responses to this question were time, expertise and a sense of the professor working for the student.” (p. 352) One student commented, “They should devote all day to students. They get summers off.” (p. 352) Students were more likely to talk about how accessible professors were and how much attention they paid to students than about their knowledge, expertise, or teaching effectiveness.

Conclusions that apply to all students (such as the millennials) must always be made with caution. In this case, the student cohort was small and at one institution. With qualitative research, the goal is generation of a rich data pool. Nonetheless, the attitudes expressed by these beginning students will sound familiar to many professors. The researchers note that the well-known research integration, How College Affects Students by Pascarella and Terenzini, establishes that attending college exerts a lifetime impact on students. However, so far there has been little research into how students are affecting higher education. A study like this makes clear “that this street runs both ways. Students are not passive recipients of education; rather they are active participants in the shaping of contemporary higher education.” (p. 355)