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There Are No Stupid Questions

By Andrea Gough

How many times have we heard the above phrase? As a teacher, I know I've spoken some variation of these words so many times that they're almost reflexive. Even the slightest intimation from a student that his or her question is "silly", "stupid", or "never mind" provokes a quick response from me: "There are no stupid questions!" At the same time, however, I frequently blog about the work we do in English and Social Studies discussions learning how to ask questions. If even two year olds can ask questions, then why bother teaching this skill?

A good question can be a powerful teaching tool. But curiously, in everyday speech, when we say, "That's a good question", it usually means we don't know the answer.* Lately, students in the 5th grade have been writing questions about their reading, discussing them, and then evaluating at the end of class which questions produced the most fruitful amounts and types of discussion, and which did not. Students have begun to notice, with little prompting from me, that "prediction" questions – while indicative of students' understanding of events and foreshadowing – cannot be discussed for very long without getting away from the text. Some even commented that these kinds of questions cause the discussion to go around in circles, since a student does not have to find too much common ground with others in the process of asserting his or her own prediction.

Building from these observations, students have been practicing writing what we've dubbed "analytical" and "judgment" questions. Analytical questions ask students to read between the lines to understand the motivations or nuances of a character, event, relationship, or some other plot element. These questions require us to mine and reference the text, and invariably build a richer understanding of the literature than a surface, or literal, reading could ever engender. Judgment questions, meanwhile, take us outside of the book on one level – because we are asking *Could?* and *Should?* and *Would?* questions about specific character or plot elements – and yet they do require students to stay grounded in a common understanding of the text in order to evaluate whether the actions of a character were appropriate under his or her circumstances, for example. From that example, students might go on to entertain whether the same actions would be appropriate under different circumstances. A discussion stemming from a judgment question might lead students to explore a question as general – yet valuable – as *"Is it ever okay to lie?"*, which is an actual example from a 6th grade English class last week. So even though there may be no such thing as a stupid question, there certainly are different types of questions, and the distinctions among them can mean the difference between lively, edifying discourse and static, repetitive oration. The 5th and 6th graders can feel the difference, and they are doing a great job working on questions that will reward them with the former in class.

One of my favorite quotes of all time actually relates to this theme of questioning. Attributed to Pablo Picasso, it reads:

"Computers are useless. They can only give you answers."

While these lines may be a bit exaggerated, they illuminate something that is valued in our classrooms at Ring Mountain. Technological integration is important in our increasingly digital world, but building critical thinking and questioning skills still must lie at the heart of one's pedagogy. As our world becomes more and more complex, students must develop an increasingly sophisticated ability to tackle critical and challenging questions about everything around them – from ethics to academics, civics to media marketing, and more. Having taught in other schools where discussion isn't at the heart of students' learning process, I deeply appreciate the opportunity I have here to provide students with plenty of guidance and space to develop these skills. If students aren't asking these kinds of questions in the instructive, safe environment of the classroom, how will many of them ever learn to masterfully do so? One study, published in *Literacy Today*, observed 54 teacher lessons (both Math and Literacy-based) where 1919 questions were asked by teachers – and only 20 were asked by children! Moreover, those questions that were asked by children were mainly procedural, such as "Can I go to the bathroom?" Of all the teachers' questions, meanwhile, only 36% required students to read between or beyond the lines – the rest all required a predetermined answer.*

Something, even Picasso would agree, a computer can do.

* Myhill, Debra and Frances Dunkin. "What's A Good Question?" *Literacy Today*. Issue 33, December 2002.

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