

Asking Better Questions

NORAH MORGAN

JULIANA SAXTON

2nd Edition



Pembroke Publishers Limited

To Charles Morgan and
Christopher Saxton
whose being made the
Unanswerable questions
easier to endure

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Foreword by John O'Toole

When preparing to write this foreword, I reached for my well-thumbed copy of the first edition and realized that an opportunistic student had recently “borrowed it” and departed with it for another continent. My closest colleague has had her copy similarly liberated, also quite recently. And the three copies in our library are all out on loan.

A question schooled by that book rose into my mind—Why? The obvious answer immediately both cooled my resentment, and—as good questions do—generated more and deeper questions: Do the thieves perhaps need it more than we do? What is it about that now elderly book which makes it so sought after by contemporary teachers? Has *Asking Better Questions* changed other people’s practices as much as it has mine? How many school principals have read it and encouraged their colleagues to use it? What might happen if a Minister for Education read it and acted on its implications? And of course: Why isn’t it compulsory reading for all teachers?

The educational and democratic vision of this brilliant re-write of that truly seminal teaching text goes even higher. In the introduction, the authors spell out clearly that effective questioning is the key to responsible, active, resourceful, democratic citizenship. Moreover, it is also the crucial link between our agency as those responsible citizens and how we and our children are schooled in classrooms, where often the opposite still holds sway—dependency and oppression: “You’re not here to ask questions, you’re here to listen to me and learn” (verbatim as I overheard not so long ago from a colleague leading a teacher education class). Of course, any good teacher knows that an effective classroom is a place of dialogue, not monologue, and that the teacher’s job is to maximize the possibilities of that dialogue. This means, first of all, the ability to ask the right questions: those that generate, sustain, and deepen dialogue; equally important, it means the skill to help the students ask the right questions, too, and go on asking them. As the authors wisely point out, knowing what the right question is at any time and having the humility to trust the respondent to answer it productively rather than necessarily “correctly” are real skills, or actually a broad range of skills, that demand practice, training, and experience ... and this book.

The authors show vividly how these skills are not just cognitive, but deeply affective. To be an effective questioner, the teacher cannot just transport the brain and a set of procedures into the classroom like a data stick and leave the senses and sensibilities at the door. Empathy, not just sympathy, is one of the vital ingredients of that sensibility, helping students to step into others’ shoes and questioning how those others feel and why they act that way, discovering multiple perspectives and viewpoints that raise further questions, and helping us to see the complexity of our lives as humans.

For me, it has been a great privilege for over twenty years to have known and occasionally worked with the late Norah Morgan and the very live Juliana Saxton, surely the most productive double act in the

fields of both drama education and transformative, reflective pedagogy. Not easy, though: they have always known fearlessly how to interrogate, to ask the disconcerting question that rocks the smug confidence of certainty ... but invites us to take up the challenge, to find the model that works, the idea that gels, the question that will impel us forward. The authors are uncompromisingly practical and equally scholarly. That's partly what makes this book so engaging: their praxis is absolutely rooted in real classrooms and real students, and the book is a cornucopia of vivid and useable examples, seen through the eyes of both the teachers and the students with great sympathy and tough love. The book is equally well rooted in tough, critical reflection and research, examining and, yes, questioning all the examples and the practice.

I hope the readers will enjoy as much as I do the ingenious device of using a sidebar to provide two quite contrasting components—helpful logistical details about managing the classroom practice being described, juxtaposed with quotations from a wide range of wise voices, challenging, inspiring, and sometimes startling. This sidebar conversation disrupts, but does not distract from the main text. Cunningly, it keeps alive the sense that this book (which is a basically monological form) is itself a dialogue ... and keeps us asking questions.

I hope, too, that the publishers manage to get this book to an audience as big as it deserves—namely, all teachers. Morgan and Saxton have long ago achieved legendary status among the small, growing, and robust band of educators exploring the liberatory, transformative opportunities of experiential dramatic pedagogy. Though not among the band's most vociferous advocates for radical pedagogy, their work has quietly and unerringly mapped it for our twenty-first century, from maths to literacy, from history to ... to what?...

Well, what? And how have they done it? How does it work? And can I do it?

Reader, enquire within.

John O'Toole
Foundation Chair of Arts Education
The University of Melbourne

September 2006

Introduction Questioning as a Democratic Skill

Nothing is more terrifying to . . . people than someone who thinks in public—that is, someone who questions himself openly. The public itself has been soothed to such an extent by scripted debates imbued with theoretically “right” answers, that it no longer seems to respond positively to arguments which create doubt. Real doubt creates real fear.

—John Ralston Saul (1993, p. 534)

. . . perhaps political leaders everywhere would prefer that the majority of our young people not engage in critical thinking and remain ignorant of these matters. This preference is one that seems to have endured for centuries.

—Nel Noddings (2004, p. 494)

In any nation that works under a democratic system, it is understood that the power rests with its citizens. Elected representation and government are the responsibility of every member of society and each individual is responsible for monitoring the operation of government and for changing that representation when it no longer meets the needs of that society.

In a democracy, the voices of minorities have as much right as the voice of the majority. For both, that right carries with it responsibilities: to see the issues clearly; to cut away the rhetoric and seductions of short-term advantages and to understand the implications; to give expression to concern through constructive action; and to be able to mediate individual concerns within the collective vision.

These responsibilities depend upon the skill of every member of society to ask questions: What is this really about? Whose values are being addressed? Who or what will benefit? Who or what will be diminished? What actions are possible? What am I prepared to give up? The ability and the courage to ask such questions lie at the core of the democratic process.

In *The Unconscious Civilization*, John Ralston Saul (1995) writes that a “citizen-based democracy is built upon participation” (p. 195), and participation, he points out, is “the very expression of permanent discomfort.” He is not talking about a physical discomfort but a mental attitude that recognizes and accepts the “tension of uncertainty,” that will not allow us to be lulled into passivity and acceptance, into the attitude of mind “What can I do about it? I’m only one person. I have no power to change anything.” Saul’s “unease” is the kind of “unease that wards off complacency and compliance, that . . . awaken[s] people enough to move them to act” (Greene, 2006, p. 596). For Saul, “the acceptance of psychic discomfort is the acceptance of consciousness.” To be conscious is to be alive; alive to oneself, to others and to what is going on in the world; prepared to do something whenever “what is going on” is seen as counter to the good of the whole—not one’s *own* good, but the good of the whole.

To be alive to ourselves can be painful! It requires us to have a clear understanding of who we are and what are our wishes, needs, and dreams and the personal history and ethics that created them. To be aware of what is going on and to question that is destabilizing. Doubt can be frightening, as Saul suggests, but learning to question and consider answers helps us tolerate the ambiguities of this infinitely complex world that we inhabit. It is only when we understand our own narratives, writes Jerome Bruner (1996, p. 42), that we can truly begin to develop a responsible sense of self. Being alive to others demands the

A democratic society requires that citizens recognize their common interests and that they fully and openly discuss issues related to common priorities.

—Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh (2006, p. 601)

Habits of Mind

- The ability to imagine new possibilities
- The ability to develop theories that predict the consequences of actions
- The ability to explore relationships from multiple perspectives
- The ability to explore ideas, meaning and emotion through multiple forms
- The ability to reflect upon, assess and adjust behaviour
- The ability to sustain coherent collaborative action
- A generosity of spirit; to be forgiving of mistakes through recognizing that the process is long-term rather than immediate
- The ability to elaborate detail with infinite patience

Personal Dispositions

- Persistence and resilience
- Risk-taking
- Focus and discipline
- Respect for authentic achievement; a reluctance to accept “junk”
- A great sense of joy in the challenges; a delicious sense of achievement in the effective completion of the task

—Richard Deasy (2001)

exercise, not just of sympathy but of that much more difficult quality—difficult because it is active rather than passive—the act of empathy. We need to be able to place ourselves in others’ shoes and know from our own experience what another could be feeling and thinking. It is an essential characteristic of the human condition, demanding a generosity of imagination. It is also often very painful because it means mediating personal needs for the good of others.

A responsible sense of self, allied to a sense of the larger society and commitment to the common good, is not all that is required. Taking action—the participatory, observable part of citizenship—requires the exercise of what Saul describes as “the rights of the citizen”: to criticize and to reject conformity, passivity, and inevitability. These rights demand the ability to think and opportunities to express that thinking in the social context; to acquire habits of thought that go beyond thinking *about* to thinking *why* and thinking *what if*; to see democracy as an “open possibility” (Greene, 2006). We need to be able to construct in the mind edifices of thought that enable us to see the history and possibility of things. Only then is it possible to discover the questions and create the solutions, to have the courage (and the language) to express that thinking, to risk going against the grain of popular opinion or the authority of the power structure; to stand up for ideas when others are busy blending in. Only with practice in thinking can we come to the understanding that what some may see as the inevitable is as much a human construct as anything else that humans do and is, therefore, equally open to question. The practice of citizenship within a democratic society has *always* to be negotiated.

Negotiation involves citizens in compromise. Compromise requires flexibility and, because there are many right answers, there are always ambiguities and complexities that we have to live with, as well as doubts that the choices we make may, in the end, turn out to be wrong. But think of the exercise of democracy in the civil rights movement; the resistance to the Vietnam War; the ongoing resistance in Canada to the clear cutting of forests and the selling off of water resources. Citizenship, writes Saul, is not about minding your own business. It is not an “easy style of life, but it is perhaps the citizen’s primary weapon in the exercise of his or her legitimacy” (1995, p. 169). Becoming a citizen is not easy, and acting as one requires a great deal of practice.

The words Saul uses to describe what is involved in being a good citizen are words that we recognize as components of the *hidden* curriculum—the courage to risk, to question, to think deeply—the habits of mind and personal dispositions in which skills and knowledge, in a wholistic education, are embedded.

We must be aware of this hidden curriculum. We are in danger of producing a generation of young people who have lost the art of conversation, who have lost self-motivation, who see their lives valuable only in response to an external reward system that they did not set up, and who have discovered that taking time to think about, to question, to fail, to move around an issue and see it from different points of view is not valued. If we allow ourselves to bend to political expediencies and directives that have little or nothing to do with what we know to be education, then our culture will be changed and our ideas of democracy will shift significantly (Miller and Saxton, 2004a, p. 41).

The classroom has been described as the cradle of democracy and the teacher as one of the most influential nurturers of the democratic process. We know that questioning is the means by which teachers help students to construct meaning. We also know that the collective construction of action that gives voice to that meaning is dependent upon students' skills in *asking* productive questions. This book is offered in the hope that, by examining how to question, we may arrive at answers that will generate richer classroom interactions and provide our students with opportunities to develop and practise that essential democratic skill.

About this book

This book is intended to help teachers understand why questions are so important to teaching and learning in the 21st century. It examines why many teachers are insecure as questioners and why students are so often shut out of the questioning process. It suggests an uncomplicated way to classify the questions that teachers need to ask in order to acquire information, build understanding, and generate reflection. Finally, it offers models, techniques, activities, and examples that promote better questioning by teachers and students.

The first section of the book examines the two structures that form the matrix of all educational processes: (1) the structure for thinking and (2) the structure for feeling. Until almost the end of the last century, these two operations were seen as separate. Rationality and objectivity have been and still are regarded as characteristics of higher intelligence even though neither is completely possible simply because we are human beings. Feeling is indispensable to effective thinking. Understanding how these structures work will enable you to use them as guides both to evaluate what *has* happened in your classroom and to plan what you *would like to* happen. Most important, they help you understand what is happening *as it is happening*. This, of course, has particular implications for questioning. Although you can and should plan one or two questions, part of effective questioning techniques is to ask the *appropriate* question at the right moment *inside* the give-and-take of classroom talk and activity.

The middle section looks at a simple three-part classification of general functions for questions: questions that tap into what is already known and that elicit a sense of responsibility towards the conduct of and approach to the work; questions that build a context for shared understanding; and questions that challenge students to think critically and creatively. Within this classification, there are many kinds of questions that we present as a glossary so that you may see the wide potential of questions for generating thought and feeling.

In the final section of the book, we concentrate on building questioning skills for teacher and students, suggesting techniques for posing questions and dealing with answers. We offer a variety of teaching stances for questions and for answers that will elevate language and encourage divergent thinking. We suggest roles and situations that will engage students as questioners and as answerers, and we provide practical exercises for developing these skills.

Each of the three sections is illustrated with an example lesson, drawn from our own experience or those of our colleagues and students.

The ability to question inside the "action" is part of the technique of teacher response that Philip Taylor calls "Reflection-in-action" and is essential to becoming an effective teacher.

—Betty Jane Wagner (1998, pp. 215–216)

This is not a linear text that builds its arguments sequentially. You may, of course, begin at the beginning and work your way through to the end, but you might prefer to leaf through and start where something catches your eye. Whatever focuses your attention can provide an entry point from which you may move back and forth through the text as your interests and needs dictate. Wherever possible, we have talked about teachers and students, but there are times when we talk about *a* teacher and *a* student. We follow the principle that the teacher will be referred to as "she" and the student as "he," unless a specific example dictates the gender.

Although some things have been synthesized for clarity and brevity, everything described throughout the text has been test-driven in the real world of the classroom.

Beyond the three main parts of the book, this new edition features activities to help you clarify what you are reading or provide opportunities for practice. Many things that are *not* good for us are habit forming, but effective questioning happens only with practice and it is *very* good for us!

Assessing and recording questions

Since *Asking Better Questions* was first published, we have used the text for our own reference and also as a source for workshops that we were invited to present. Rereading the text, we discovered that much of what we had to say was still relevant and quotations that still apply we have kept. For this edition, we used the latest scholarship as a gloss on the earlier research, enabling readers to consider the history of questioning as strategy and technique and, in particular, the pedagogical rationale for questioning as a means of educating citizens. *Tout ça change; tous c'est la même chose*. Changing the way we educate is like turning the *Queen Mary II* around in the St. Lawrence River—it takes a long time—but that doesn't mean we shouldn't keep on turning!

We all know how to ask questions—after all, we have been doing it almost since we could talk—but as you likely realize, becoming an *effective* questioner is hard. It takes time and it takes diligence. Think how long it took you to learn to type or to know what seasoning would make that recipe taste better. Give yourself time and permission to try things out and keep on working away at it. Let your students in on your quest—they can help you and themselves. One day, you will notice that it is beginning to happen without as much effort. You will realize that you have asked spontaneously a question that really shook up your students and made them think—and made *you* think, too.

Apart from the questions that you will discover through the activity sheets in this resource, you might like to keep a file of questions that proved effective in your lessons, whether you had planned them or they arrived spontaneously as part of the classroom conversation. Remember to record the questions students ask as they are also useful to consider when you are re-planning. Note any questions you come across in your reading that make you think. That is how we found many of the questions you see in the sidebars. It's a useful exercise that somehow doesn't interfere with enjoyment. Remember, wonderful questions may be found in all sorts of writing and when you apprentice yourself to them, they become your models for learning.

Keep Eric Booth's advice in mind as you start your travels through this book.

The key question is not whether schools can support the development of democratic citizens, but whether they choose to make this goal more than a rhetorical priority.

—Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne (2003, p. 12)

Posing questions is the central act of reading the world: it must become a habit. I wish I could give you a handy kitbag of reliable questions to try, but there can be no prescribable set of sure-fire questions. The whole game is one giant improvisation . . . the questions themselves are far less important than the habit of questioning.

—Eric Booth (1999, p. 210)