

LEADERSHIP

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**ASSESSMENT**

PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

# Going Beyond Ho-Hum Questioning

SAMPLE  
for Your Review

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ASSESSMENT

## Going beyond ho-hum questioning

**M**ost classrooms aren't lacking in questions. In fact, scholars estimate teachers ask between 300 and 400 questions per day and as many as 120 questions might be posed in a single hour. The issue isn't whether enough questions are being asked. The issues are: *Are we asking the right questions?* And equally important: *Why are teachers doing all the asking?*

### Knowledge is heavy, while our questions tend to be light.

There is definitely a time and place for teacher-led questions. However, it's been said that knowledge is heavy while our questions tend to be light. For instance, asking students to remember or retell taps surface memory only: A light challenge. And if every question is posed by us, our students may not push the boundaries of their thinking. Conversely, when we teach students to ask good questions, we can transform them from consumers of information to generators of information: A heavy challenge.

Good questions can produce on-the-spot evidence about what students do and don't understand. Good questions are provocative. They spark discourse and debate. And best of all, good questions invite an array of plausible answers. No matter where a question comes from, it takes practice and discipline to create good ones. Asking questions *for* learning rather than *of* learning is the way to get it right.

Four approaches can move us from ho-hum questioning to evidence-based questioning. First, we should think "big idea." Grant Wiggins, the architect of "big idea" questions, has said that an idea is "big" if it helps students make sense of confusing experiences or seemingly isolated facts. Big idea questions aren't just intriguing—they contain universal meaning across disciplines. A merely intriguing question might be, "Why are triangles so strong?" But a "big idea" question is, "What value does a triangle have for civilization?" This query

delves into the mathematical, architectural, and cultural significance of this shape. As students cite evidence and explain their reasoning, they are led to discover that any surface in the universe can be approximated by fitting together triangles.

### Hinge questions give us the ability to adjust our teaching in real time.

A second approach to move beyond ho-hum questioning is to create a hinge. Hinge questions allow us to check for understanding at a critical juncture in a lesson. Whether we decide to move forward or back up hinges on how well students have grasped the concept. A hinge question may be multiple-choice or open-ended. The key is that it takes no more than a minute to ask and half as long to assess. A good hinge question might be, "Which of these things (A, B, C, or D) tells you a triangle is a special shape?" Response pads, mini-white boards, or four fingers enable us to evaluate whole-class understanding. Hinge questions give us the information we need to adjust our teaching in real time.

A third way to push past ho-hum questioning is to have students craft their own questions. Start with a purpose statement, such as, "Today we're going to examine the lives of pioneers." In groups, ask students to brainstorm as many questions as possible about the topic—without any judging or discussion during brainstorming. After five minutes, tell the teams to categorize their questions as closed or open-ended. Allow two minutes to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of both types of questions. Teams can modify any questions after their discussion. All groups should identify their top three questions and write them on the board. Use priority voting to narrow the list to the class' top five questions they'd like to research and answer. Becoming "master questioners" should feel both instinctual and safe for students.

A fourth approach to move beyond ho-hum questioning is to introduce close-reading routines. Close reading is a technique in which students investigate contextual meaning of a passage by asking themselves text-dependent questions. Text-dependent questions cause readers to analyze key vocabulary, form, tone, imagery, and

word choice as they pore over a passage. Consider three text-dependent questions: *What is the author trying to tell me here?* *Are there any hard or important words I need to know?* *How does the author play with language to add meaning?* As students read more closely, they learn to bridge implicit and explicit meaning. In addition, they begin to understand the subtle nuances of text.

Becoming more aware of the questioning patterns in your classroom can boost curiosity and wonder. If you're unsure where to start, ask this burning question: "Would I want to be a learner in my own classroom?" If the answer is "yes," pose a follow-up: "What makes me so certain?" If the answer is "maybe" or "no," it may be time to go back and examine your approach. Looking at learning from our students' perspective builds teacher empathy and insight. It also sets the tone for creative exploration. Rather than subject students to something we find uninspiring, we must try to replicate the question-based activities we'd be excited to engage in ourselves.

### The Master Teacher recognizes that good questions are the gateway to students' thinking.

The Master Teacher imagines walking into a classroom where students are busily working in groups, experimenting with wires, batteries, cardboard, and other materials. One learner asks, "What would happen if we used thicker wire?" The teacher responds, "Hmm. That's a fantastic question. Why don't you try and find out?" The Master Teacher recognizes that good questions are the gateway to students' thinking. Asking questions with intentionality will lead students where we want them to go.

— THE MASTER TEACHER Pd™ PROGRAM Authors

#### TO LEARN MORE

Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2015). *Text-dependent questions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Wiggins, G., & Wilbur, D. (2015, September). How to make your questions essential. *Educational Leadership*, 73(1), 10-15.

William, D. (2015, September). Designing good hinge questions. *Educational Leadership*, 73(1), 40-44.

## Engagement

With a portal that now allows teachers to filter content, [www.youtube.com/edu](http://www.youtube.com/edu) has opened doors to a slew of free classroom resources. To take advantage of the site's versatility, place students in teams of three and have them count off A, B, C. Assign a corresponding question to each letter. As students watch the video, instruct them to take notes on their question. For example, all the A's will look for X, the B's for Y, and so on. At the end of the video, ask students to discuss their findings with the team. Once collective findings have been shared, see if each group can identify the learning purpose you had in mind. Listen for real-life applications and connections.



Twitter has been described as the best word game since the creation of Scrabble. Half the joy is distilling ideas into 140 characters or less. To give students practice, pass out a piece of paper at the end of a lesson. Ask them to "Tweet Your Take Away." The idea is to craft a tweet that explains the process, concept, or rule students just learned about. When students actually use Twitter (or its approximation) to summarize key ideas, it increases class participation and challenges them to be concise.



Internet Scavenger Hunts are very motivating and easy to put together. At the beginning of a new unit, divide the class into teams. Provide each team a set of questions that encourages them to explore the topic and discover new learning. Create a rubric to help teams assess answers as they go. They should include Internet source citations on their answer sheet. Tell the class that the goal of the activity isn't to hurry or finish first. Rather, the goal is to dig deeper on the Internet by finding credible sources. Award a prize to the team that completes the assignment with the most insightful and scholarly answers.

**1 In Context:**  
Review your next lesson looking for "ho-hum" questions. Rewrite these questions to spark learning—then evaluate students' responses.

**2 With Content:**  
Use the process in this lesson to identify five student-crafted priority questions to use in an upcoming experiment or research project.

**3 With Colleagues:**  
The Teaching Channel ([www.teachingchannel.org](http://www.teachingchannel.org)) has videos filled with ideas on dealing with unexpected questions. Watch a video and discuss how you might revise your teaching hypothesis based on comments and suggestions from students.

*“The problem with the old schooling... [is] they were teaching answers. I believe that questions today are probably more important.”*

—Erno Rubik  
(inventor of the Rubik Cube)

Administrative Preview \_\_\_\_\_

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