

5 Whose Inquiry Is It Anyway? Using Students' Questions in the Teaching of Literature

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One way of describing so-called growing up would be to say that it involves a transition from the imperative to the interrogative; from Food!—through I want—to Can I have? Questions are, among other things, the grammatical form we give to our desire. . . . If questioning is a way of desiring, answering must be akin to satisfying; a meeting of desire. . . . To learn to question, and to learn not to, are the basic building blocks of development. To know just what can be questioned and what must not be—and to learn . . . what constitutes a question—is what education educates us for. . . . What would we be able to do together—what would we be able to say—if interrogation were banned?

Adam Phillips, "An Answer to Questions"

These speculations by Adam Phillips at the start of the new century provide a provocative context for considering that not enough attention has been paid to the use of student-generated questions in class discussions of literary works. Much excellent work has been devoted to the role of teacher questioning in discussions (see Hynds for a fine review), but proportionally little has appeared about students' questions. Though their use in journals (e.g., Biddle and Fulwiler 20), portfolios (e.g., Purves and Quattrini), and letters exchanged between students (e.g., Fishman and McCarthy 107) has been detailed, the critical role of student-generated questions in classroom discussions of literature is a topic that has been largely underplayed (excepting Corcoran and Monseu). This is surprising, given the prominent position discussion now holds as a methodology for teaching literature and given the high value we claim for inquiry approaches and active learning.

The life of a literary work germinates when a reader encounters words on a page. We know that literary reading involves some sort of

aesthetic and creative response on the part of the reader, and constructivists often use the word “transaction” to describe the act of reading, making the dialogic relationship between reader and text preeminent (Rosenblatt; Purves, Rogers, and Soter). In this article I would like to extend that transaction to include the interactions that can happen after a reader has read the last word on the page, and I would also like to extend that dialogue to consider what teachers can do to sustain conversation after reading and transport it to the larger domain of classroom discussion.

Genuine dialogue rarely results when one privileged person gets to ask all of the questions while everyone else simply answers, deprived of the chance to articulate questions of their own. Whose inquiry is that, anyway? Is it even fair to call it inquiry? Don’t we really believe that authentic inquiry starts by determining and exploring one’s own questions? If that’s the case, then it should be easy to see the value of replacing teacher-directed questioning in discussions of literature with student-generated questioning (or at least subordinating the teacher-directed to the student-generated), if the discussions are to be truly inquiry-based.

In this article I will discuss ten ways of involving students in creating questions to be used in the discussion of literature. Such discussion can be either small-group or whole-class. My focus is less on the discussions themselves and more on the process of students’ generating questions in writing before their discussions, setting in motion a teaching-learning scenario whereby each individual routinely brings his or her questions to the discussion, shares them, and has them answered by others participating in the discussion. Such an approach facilitates what the recent research in literary instruction (e.g., Applebee, Burroughs, and Stevens) describes as curricular coherence and continuity, possessing as it does a structure that promotes attention to related ideas over extended periods of time coupled with conventions for students’ participation.

The epistemological assumption underlying the paramount role of student-generated questions in class discussions is that expressed so well by Mayher: “There is no knowledge without a knower. . . . Human beings are active meaning makers who are continually learning—making personal knowledge—when they can act according to their own purposes” (79). *To their own purposes*: each reader of each work of literature, as Langer notes, is “reaching toward a horizon of possibilities,” possibilities of understanding which cohere and develop as “envisionments”—unique sets of ideas, images, and questions about the literary

work (“Rethinking” 37–39). It is out of such envisionments, out of their own purposes, that students are motivated to generate and explore questions, for only from that wellspring of curiosity can questions fully embody the growth and desire Phillips mentions in the opening quotation.

In addition to such cognitive benefits, discussions inspired by student-generated questions also yield good results for classroom dynamics. When a teacher institutionalizes student questioning as a crucial part of classroom discourse, real authority is given to students’ voices, for they are helping to determine what it is legitimate to talk about. In a democratic society, as Pradl argues, the importance of such classroom ecology is anything but trivial, and it can certainly contribute to a classroom’s being galvanized by the “collectivist” energy Hurlbert describes. What is learned, we know, is in part a function of how it is learned; and in my experience, my college students’ anticipation of, participation in, and reflection about creating, sharing, and discussing their own questions after they read a work of literature enrich and deepen the literary experience for them and contribute significantly to their growth as responsive and responsible readers.

The following ten activities focus on a variety of ways in which students can write questions about works of literature in preparation to discuss them. Just as there is no single reading skill suited to every type of text (Beach and Appleman 115), there is no single questioning skill that can be applied with equal success to all literary works. The one thing that all ten activities have in common is that they do not involve students in answering their own questions, for I have discovered that when students are not encumbered by the need to provide answers, their questions grow in importance, interest, and complexity.

Space limitations prohibit including the number and variety of examples of students’ questions that I would have liked, but I would be pleased to share additional illustrative student work with individuals who request it.

1. Creating One Key Question about a Literary Work

Each student generates one question that he or she believes is important and thought-provoking. The advantage of this activity is that it enables students to inquire unselfconsciously and freely into a work of literature from any angle that appeals to them. It sensitizes them to something in which they are authentically interested and in so doing promotes the empowered position of being a “situated reader” (Vine

and Faust 107) whose ownership of the literary work grows out of her or his particular question. There are other advantages to this simple activity: because (unlike as with answers) there is no such thing as a wrong question, students are successful from the start; because it is a single question that is asked, students must often distill their ideas in ways that require the concentration of “thoughtful readers” (Pearson and Tierney 144); and because many students make the effort to pose a question so original that no one else will ask it, creativity is encouraged. When the same question does recur in several responses, however, it provides a teachable moment for investigating something at the heart of the literary work.

2. Creating One Key Question and Explaining Its Importance

This activity ups the ante on the first, adding to it some reflective commentary. By helping students to become more aware of the issues that are embedded in their question by explaining its importance, this activity deepens their understanding of the literary work and their response to it. As with the first activity, students are guaranteed success because there is no way to do this wrong.

3. Creating a List of Important Questions about a Literary Work

Though it takes more time than the first two activities, creating a list of questions may in some ways be easier because students are released from any pressure to write a single “best” question. This activity gives students the freedom to range among the unlimited interests they may have in a work of literature (and its context) without having to articulate why they have them. It also provides students the opportunity to mull over, if only unconsciously, how their various questions might coalesce; that is, what, if any, commonalities inhere in them? This activity generates a certain exuberance in students because of the special kind of energy associated with creating five or six questions (the number I generally ask students to write) entirely of their own choosing.

4. Creating a List of Important Questions and Rank-Ordering Them

This activity builds on the previous one by having students create a list of questions and then reflect on their questions enough so that they can rank-order them from, say, most important to least important, or best

to worst, or most interesting to least interesting (the variable for ranking can change according to the students' desire). An activity that Anderson and Rubano rightfully say "guarantees an aesthetic response" (36), rank-ordering questions taps students' tacit knowledge about literature in a way that does not make them defensive about the appropriateness of their ranking; it is simply done, not explained. (This activity, by the way, has interesting links to research assessing students' achievement in literature conducted in the 1970s by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, in which Purves found both similarities and differences between students from different countries in terms of the questions they preferred and rejected.)

5. Creating a List of Important Questions and Rank-Ordering Them—with an Explanation

Analogous to the progression between activities 1 and 2, the progression between activities 4 and 5 involves preparing reflective commentary—in this case an articulation of the rationale and criteria for rank-ordering questions, which is an activity that generates significant critical thinking. To explain why one question is better than another (or more important, or more interesting, etc.) involves sharpening one's ability to make literary judgments as well as one's ability to argue them.

These five question-generating activities have proven to be powerful modes of inquiry in my literature classes. Using them, students have created hundreds of questions; I have learned a great deal from our discussions of them, and students have learned a great deal from one another and from themselves. Though these activities and the discussions that follow are by no means "anything goes" free-for-alls, they certainly set in motion something that cannot be fully controlled or predicted by the teacher. When I first started employing them, it required some restraint on my part to merely *accept* students' questions (and their commentaries about them, when required) rather than to use them didactically as examples to illustrate my predetermined points. I mention this by way of acknowledging a natural reluctance many teachers may have about letting students inquire so freely, and to suggest that David Bleich's observation related to this matter may be instructive:

If we acquire the courage to eschew our patronizing task of "introducing" students to "our" style of study, and instead ask all our students, younger or older, to introduce their own ways and thoughts for mutual sharing, we will have begun a productive

response to the many voices now seeking to educate for an authentically just society. (21–22)

It is nonetheless undeniable that as literature teachers we know more than our students about which kinds of questions about literary works might bear the best fruit. This expertise is one of our greatest assets, one that should be shared with students. Following Applebee, if our students are relative novices in the field of literary study, then it makes sense that they “learn the knowledge-in-action [i.e., the tacit knowledge] out of which the field is constituted” (11). Providing students with heuristics for posing questions about literature—“knowledge-in-action”—can thus be a strategic way to broaden their knowledge of our field’s traditional disciplinary conventions. The following five question-generating activities, more structured than the first five but still entirely dependent upon students’ making them their own by adapting them to their own purposes, are ones that I have used to do just that. Not inert sets of rules, they are active meaning-making processes that expand students’ repertoires of question-generating skills.

6. Creating Questions Based on Purves and Rippere’s Four Categories of Response

Among the earliest detailed analyses that classified types of student response to literary works was Purves and Rippere’s 1968 NCTE monograph in which they propose four basic response categories:

- engagement-involvement (E-I),
- perception (P),
- interpretation (I), and
- evaluation (E).

Intended to be neither exhaustive nor taxonomical, these four categories can provide students with one model (and the vocabulary associated with it) for examining their own responses to literary works and constructing questions which deliberately sample each area. Engagement-response questions inquire about personal reactions to and re-creations of the literary work; perception questions deal with the analysis of its literary and rhetorical devices and structure; interpretation questions seek to uncover meaning in the work, often through inference and generalization; and evaluation questions ask for judgments about the work. The following questions, generated by students after reading Sandra Cisneros’s collection of short stories *The House on Mango Street*,

originate in Purves and Rippere's system and are typical of those created using this model:

- (E-I) In what ways did reading these stories make you think of your own neighborhood when you were growing up?
- (P) How do similes contribute to the style of these stories?
- (I) How is the narrator's name [Esperanza] related to the theme of *The House on Mango Street*?
- (E) What is the best story in this collection? Why?

7. Creating a Set of Questions Focused on Literary Elements

Depending on the genre under study and the level of development of the students, the literary elements on which discussion focuses will change, as will the degree of emphasis placed on them. In an introductory college literature course devoted primarily to fiction, for instance, I use seven elements of fiction—character, plot, point of view, setting, style, symbolism, and theme—as a springboard for students to construct seven different questions about novels and short stories. Among the chief benefits of anchoring questions in these literary elements is that it makes the elements into tools that each reader can internalize to ask his or her own questions about a work of literature, rather than mere textbook terms whose definitions are mindlessly regurgitated with little relevance to one's own purposes. Students generally enjoy writing questions based on the literary elements because this activity facilitates making both the literary work and the literary elements their own.

8. Creating a Set of Questions Based on the Questioning Circle

Christenbury and Kelly's Questioning Circle (discussed in Simmons and Deluzain 150–51) is based on the idea that there are three basic kinds of questions that spring from reading a work of literature:

- questions about the reader (R),
- questions about the text (T), and
- questions about the world, including other literature (W).

While each type—each “circle”—of question is independent of the others, intersections between one circle and the others do occur, generating three additional types of questions, “shaded” questions:

- questions about the text and the reader (T-R),
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- questions about the text and the world (T-W), and
- questions about the reader and the world (R-W).

Finally, there is an area where all three circles overlap, generating a seventh kind of question, one the authors call a “dense” one:

- questions about the text, the reader, and the world (T-R-W).

As was the case with the Purves and Rippere response categories in activity 6, students can adapt this model for the purpose of generating questions. Given the complicated kinds of thinking it prompts, the Questioning Circle enhances the sophistication of students’ questions as well as their language for describing and understanding those questions.

The following questions about *The House on Mango Street* were generated by students using the Questioning Circle model:

- (R) What does the word “home” mean to you?
- (T) Why did Esperanza’s mother drop out of school?
- (W) What things make up a person’s “roots”?
- (T-R) Which character were you most affected by? Why?
- (T-W) How are the issues facing the female characters in many of these stories, which were published in 1984, relevant to our world today?
- (R-W) How do you think childhood environment influences the kind of person one grows up to be?
- (T-R-W) How would you expect most people to deal with the kinds of problems that Sally faced? Why? Would their way of responding be better or worse than hers? Why?

Since the Questioning Circle model defines “the world” to include other works of literature, it also affords the opportunity for students to create questions that make comparisons between different literary works. Because one of the characteristics of maturation as a reader of literature is an awareness that every text is related to other texts, questions of this synthetic nature are especially important as they engage students in inquiry about the multiple horizons of possibilities that become visible when they explore more than one literary landscape at a time.

Related to the Questioning Circle, but involving a simpler scale, is the model proposed by Schilb, wherein students probe a literary work using the foci of text, reader, author, and history.

9. Creating a Set of Questions Focused on Literal and Inferential Levels of Questions

In *Writing about Literature*, Kahn, Walter, and Johannessen note seven basic types of text-based questions that might be asked of a literary work (5). At the literal level of comprehension, there are questions about

- basic stated information (SI),
- key details (KD), and
- stated relationships (SR).

At the inferential level of comprehension, we find questions about

- simple implied relationships (SIR),
- complex implied relationships (CIR),
- authors' generalizations (AG), and
- structural generalizations (SG).

Again, as this last set of questions about *The House on Mango Street* illustrates, students may be taught this model as a means for generating questions about a literary work:

- (SI) What does the narrator say her name means in Spanish and in English?
- (KD) What is growing in front of the house on Mango Street?
- (SR) Why does the old lady in "The Three Sisters" use the image of the circle when talking to Esperanza?
- (SIR) How do Esperanza's feelings about her father compare with his feelings about his father?
- (CIR) What were Sally's reasons for getting married so young?
- (AG) What is Cisneros saying about the role of literacy in the process of self-actualization?
- (SG) What effect does the order of these stories have on the way we understand the development of Esperanza?

10. Creating Questions Based on Particular Critical Approaches

If one of the teacher's goals is to engage students in literary inquiry from a particular critical perspective, students can be asked to generate questions using that critical approach. Related to this activity is Blake's model of a "'critical' reader response" to literature that involves readers' assuming a certain ideology or stance and examining a literary work's assumptions and perspectives about matters such as gender, race, and class.

While I have emphasized the usefulness of students' generating questions prior to class discussion, questioning is not a linear process, and employing these activities recursively is therefore natural and desirable. Students can learn a great deal when they also create questions after class discussions, especially since discussions seldom result in consensus and therefore can easily propel further questioning and, to return to Langer's term, envisionment-building. Having each student write yet another question is a productive way to spend five minutes at the end of a class discussion, for it provides closure on the current discussion and an entree into the next one. What matters is that the questions be *students' authentic questions*, ones from which they will derive satisfaction in creating and considering in a classroom that celebrates diverse ways of interrogating works of literature.

Knowing how to ask questions inspires lifelong learning. Knowing how to ask questions about literature empowers lifelong reading, the promotion of which, I believe, should be our ultimate goal as literature teachers. "Literature," Langer reminds us, "makes us better thinkers. It moves us to see the multi-sidedness of situations and therefore expands the breadth of our own visions, moving us toward dreams and solutions we might not otherwise have imagined. . . . [I]t moves us to consider our interconnectedness with others and the intrinsic pluralism of meaning; it helps us become more human" (*Envisioning* 145). In the passage quoted at the beginning of this article, Phillips wonders, "What would we be able to do together—what would we be able to say—if interrogation were banned?" I would like to conclude by imagining just the opposite. If interrogation were *required*, if we treated students' questions as a critical part of their literary instruction, if every student from kindergarten through college were required to write original questions to share in classroom discussions of literature, what would we *not* be able to do together, as learners and citizens? Until that day comes, we need to keep asking: Whose inquiry is it anyway?

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