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“Keep a Question in

Instant answers rob students of the gift of pondering.

Miriam Hirsch

My lip trembled. I didn't know the answer the teacher wanted. It felt like everyone's eyes were boring into my head. I dropped my gaze and considered the ink on my notebook paper, wondering why the teacher couldn't just move on and call on someone else. The silence was thick with my escalating anxiety. What was he waiting for? Why was he humiliating me by stretching out my shame?

The teacher who precipitated this agonizing moment wasn't a bad man

or an inexperienced teacher. How could he know that years later this would remain a painful memory? At times, all teachers unwittingly wound their students in ways that leave scars. Some wounding is inevitable, but if our manner in questioning becomes as pressured and fixated on getting “the right answer” as I experienced in this searing memory, we may end up hurting our students more than inspiring them.

Pressure to perform has infected school life with increased levels of stress and anxiety, and I am concerned about the long-term effects on all members of the school community.

The demand that we link questions and answers with immediacy, accuracy, and linearity may deny students the opportunity to wonder and ruminate. In this atmosphere, we must ask ourselves, Do we allow ample time to think? Do we help students deeply engage with ideas over time and from multiple vantage points?

Learning to Answer Slowly

The impetus for this article comes from my work with student teachers as a teacher educator at Yeshiva University in New York City. The students I work with often present a startling resistance and discomfort when I ask them to

consider questions without precise answers. They retort, What does that mean? What is the purpose of this? How is that question relevant to my plan to be an elementary school teacher? I fear these future teachers may be unprepared to guide students in learning and life. After all, most of the gut-wrenching quandaries one faces in life are characterized by ambiguity, uncertainty, and unpredictability. Most questions we confront do not have clear-cut answers.

Our overemphasis on testing, accountability, and assessment may be perpetuating the assumption that all questions have concrete, specific, and direct answers. Although I support the goal of high achievement, I argue against denying students the time to imagine and consider by pressuring them too hard for an immediate answer.

Some questions take a lifetime to answer, even for the smartest minds in our universe.

Include Leftovers

Not everyone operates at the same speed. Let's remember that when students do not have an answer on the tip of their tongues, we can say, "Take some time to think about it and get back to me when you can."

Instruction today is tightly sequenced. Often the desired answer may be necessary to continue the lesson. Allowing leftover questions to hang may not always be possible or preferable. But certainly teachers can work this approach in somewhere. We might say to students, "In what ways is the challenge that the spider Charlotte

anxiety generated when teachers force students to answer on a dime often constricts thinking and hinders community building. And in many areas of life, responding with careful deliberation is praiseworthy.

Promote Grappling

Scientists, philosophers, and teachers grapple with difficult questions, interactions, and situations. A poster showing Einstein's face reads, "Do not worry about your difficulties in mathematics; I can assure you mine are still greater." Of course, some questions cannot simply be put on hold and finished the next day. But some questions take a lifetime to answer, even for the smartest minds in our universe.

Thinking is difficult labor. My doctoral advisor told me of a principal she knew who wore a yellow construction helmet to school every day to symbolize that learning is work. Although this idea may be unsettling, it is crucial to knowledge generation. We need to teach our students that not all learning comes by following simple steps. Implying that answers are instantly available, like candy at the checkout counter, deprives learners of the capacity to work hard at something that matters.

Moreover, many of our students are already wrestling with serious questions under our radar. I know a girl whose parents are going through a messy divorce, a teen whose father is in jail, and several families with parents out of work. As Ted and Nancy Sizer (1999) observed, "We are selling our students short when we believe that grappling is beyond them" (p. 24). Young people need to know that grappling is what

1 Your Kup”

And I argue against dismissing students who may not yet, for whatever reason—hunger, low self-esteem, sleep deprivation, or distress—have the voice to respond with a coherent answer.

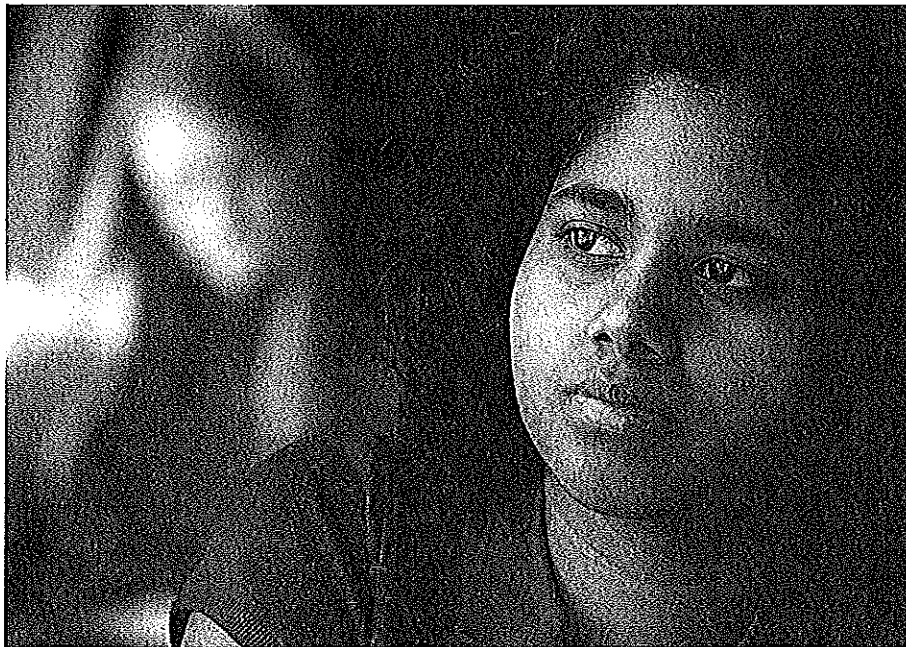
A Less Rigid Approach

How can we give students opportunities to ponder—and work against any tendencies to dismiss tentative voices—in a climate in which policymakers demand high performance, quickly and with high stakes? How can we meet students where they are as thinkers, rather than inadvertently freezing their thinking? I encourage classroom teachers and teacher educators to try three approaches: Include “leftovers,” promote grappling, and live with questions.

faces similar to challenges humans face? Take the question home with you, and we'll talk about it tomorrow.”

The title of Beatrice Schenk de Regnier's poem “Keep a Poem in Your Pocket,” has inspired me to remind students to “keep a question in your *hup*” (the Yiddish word for *head* or *mind*). In so doing, we teach students that they have mental power, an awesome ability to engage with a question and revisit it in their minds. We do students a disservice if we are always so tidy with our lessons there is nothing left to chew on afterward.

Waiting for answers also reduces pressure that can inhibit or wound sensitive children. Allow students to answer when they are able—tomorrow, next week, or in 10 minutes. The



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people *do*, like making decisions, communicating feelings, and helping neighbors.

Live with Questions

As part of a professional development collaborative for teachers offered by New York's Lincoln Center Institute (www.lcinstitute.org), our education department studies a new work of art each semester. Through these experiences, I have come to appreciate the joy of questioning. Why did the photographer take this picture at sunset? How would you title this piece of music? What is curious about that image? But often, my student teachers distrust questions for which answers are not immediately revealed—or Google-able. Some resent engaging in what they call “fluffy” questioning without the safe landing pad that correct answers

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart.”

provide. And they repeatedly ask me, “What is the point of questioning without ultimately providing an acceptable range of answers?”

My students' resistance spurred me to promote the following proposal: We all need to be able to live with our questions. We must not discard them because the answer is not readily apparent or because the teacher doesn't know either. The human condition requires suspension of total understanding. We should model this attitude for students (“I guess I may never really

know why Andrew Wyeth titled his piece ‘Standing on the Edge,’ and that's OK”). As the poet Rainer Maria Rilke reminds us,

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and books written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, that cannot now be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer. (1934/1993, p. 35)

Not all teacher questioning needs to follow this expansive approach. Not all questions are created equal. Some questions *do* have right answers and wrong answers. Some questions are open-ended and some are closed. Some questions birth better questions. Some sit quietly with us throughout our lives, whereas others rage within our minds. There are many ways to categorize questions and practice teacher questioning. But educators need an additional approach to questioning that decouples questions from answers.

We have no idea what challenges our students will face in their lifetimes. But we know they will have questions. Are we, who care deeply about providing educational opportunities for the next generation, preparing our students and their teachers to deal well with life? **EL**

References

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For another perspective on using questions to enhance students' learning, see the online-only article “Effective Classroom Discussions” by Selma Wasserman at www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/feb10/vol67/num05/Effective_Classroom_Discussions.aspx