

Who Asks the Questions?

*Teaching students how to pose questions is
a critical reading comprehension strategy*

BY SHEENA HERVEY

At the start of the school year the media usually raises the issue about the increasing number of students who are failing to learn to read. The interesting thing is, there is no evidence that standards of achievement in reading are declining. In fact, the evidence shows that there has been a steady increase in fourth grade reading levels since 1988, but “the current difficulties in reading largely originate from rising demands for literacy, not from declining levels of literacy.” (National Research Council 1998)

This has huge implications for us in our teaching. We need to think carefully about how we are going to equip our students with the strategies to deal with the rapidly changing world of print. Our students will need to have strategies to deal with the:

- Volume of print and the need to be able to read selectively to negotiate this
- Range and complexity of print, including electronic sources, and the need to be able to read in many ways
- Availability of information from a wide range of sources and the need to be critical readers

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Focusing on questioning as a comprehension strategy is one way we can help our students become critical and strategic readers.

Questions and making sense of the world.

From a very young age, children actively strive to make sense of their world through constant questioning. The ability to ask questions comes naturally for young children, such as these questions from a group of five-year-olds watching a fly:

“How do flies walk?”

“Why do they have webs on their wings?”

“Do flies have hair?”

“Have they got sisters and brothers?”

“How do they stick to the walls upside-down?”

“How do they know they’re in trouble?”

Why don’t students who are skilled at asking questions in general continue using this curiosity as a strategy for comprehending what they’re reading? Maybe it’s because in many classrooms we ask most of the questions. If we want our students to become strategic and critical readers, we need to encourage them to ask questions instead of having them answer questions. This needs to start from their first exposures to text.

Learning how to question when reading.

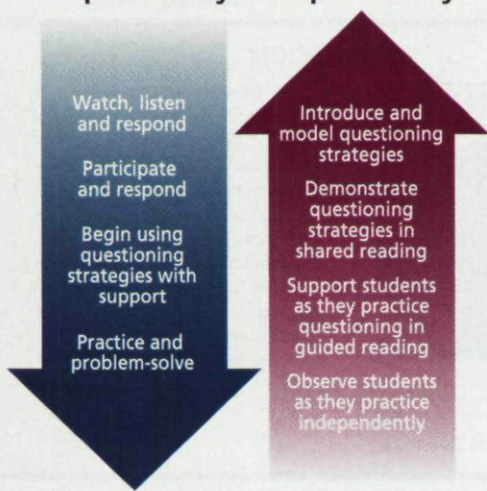
Questioning lies at the heart of comprehension because it is the process of questioning, seeking answers and asking further questions that keeps the reading going. For our students to become critical readers, we need to help them engage with texts through a range of different kinds of questioning. We want them to ask questions that help to:

- Focus their reading
- Delve deeper into the text
- Clarify meaning
- Critically reflect on what they have read

Students need to see demonstrations of how questioning is used to construct meaning from texts. These demonstrations need to be explicit, visible and clear, and it is important that they occur in the context of meaningful reading. The following diagram shows how students take more responsibility for asking and using questions as they move from listening to us model questioning strategies to asking their own questions to deepen their comprehension.

Gradual Release of Responsibility

Student Responsibility Teacher Responsibility



Research shows that students who have been shown how to generate questions as they read outperform those who have not. Our students are more likely to become effective questioners if we:

- Demonstrate genuine questions before, during and after reading
- Are explicit about how and why questioning strategies help with comprehension
- Provide appropriate interesting reading material that is likely to generate a range of questions

- Monitor students' use of questioning and provide additional guidance as required

Teachers as models. In many classrooms, comprehension instruction consists of teachers asking questions that assess students' literal understanding. These literal-recall questions are unlikely to generate lively discussion or provide students with models of the types of questions they need to ask in order to engage with the text. If we want our students to ask searching questions, we need to be thoughtful about the kinds of questions we model.

When teaching questioning, we are faced with two issues. The first is showing students how questions can help with comprehension. The second is making sure the questions we ask our students are the sort that deepen comprehension. We might ask ourselves if we are posing questions that encourage "accountable talk" about texts.

- Are my questions varied and encourage a range of responses?
- Am I asking higher-order questions that require students to think deeply about the text?
- Are the students also generating their own questions?
- Who does the most of the talking?

Questioning text as a lifelong skill. The volume of print and range of text types that today's students will be coming into contact with requires them to be skillful and critical readers. Accurately decoding and a literal understanding, while important, will not be adequate for today's literacy demands. To help our students successfully meet the challenges of their world, we want them to confidently engage with and think critically about the texts they interact with. It is not only the type of questions we ask that is important; we also need to think about where our questions are focusing our students' attention. Questions of texts should encourage students to think about the topic and how it is presented; whose opinions and values are being expressed (and whose values and opinions are left out); the author's purpose for writing; the author's choice of language and genre; and, finally, their own reactions to the text. ↓

Some examples of critical literacy questions:

What does the writer of the text want us to know? How can I check the facts in this text?

Why has the author portrayed the characters in a particular way?

What view of the world is the text presenting?

What kind of person, and with what interests and values, composed the text?

How does the text depict age, gender and/or cultural groups?

Whose views are excluded in the text?

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