CANADIAN SOCIAL STUDIES
VOLUME 39 NUMBER 2, WINTER 2005
www.quasar.ualberta.ca/css
Special Issue: New Approaches to Teaching History

# To what questions are schools answers? And what of our courses? Animating throughline questions to promote students' questabilities.

**Kent den Heyer**

**Kent State University**

Return to Articles

**Abstract**

Schools are too often places in which answers are conveyed to questions students are rarely, if ever, asked. This article offers, therefore, some examples of content - animating and throughline questions - and assessment practices that centralize questions rather than answers. While animating questions return teachers to the mysteries that excite us as intellectuals (excitement that is crucial to share with students), they also spark throughline questions - provocative questions that give the content of our courses apparent purpose. Using a notion of dangerous teaching, I argue that such practices serve to disrupt the ahistorical stance of much of social studies and history teaching that offers students little opportunity to connect what they learn in schools to political charged debates over what and how they should be taught.

Rather than a seemingly ubiquitous appeal to best practices, S.G Grant (2003) describes and calls for "ambitious teaching." Grant argues that ambitious teaching and learning occurs when "smart teachers, curious students, and powerful ideas come together" (p. 187). Ambitious teachers display several characteristics. First, they know their subject and they believe in the capacities of students who they spend time getting to know. Ambitious teachers create space for themselves and for their students to explore important questions, issues, or problems in a schooling context that rarely validates the vitality of such work Finally, ambitious teachers also know when to support, praise, and prod students and push them to realize "that learning consists of struggle as much triumph" (p. 211). In ambitious teaching, Grant offers a worthwhile goal and description. But is it ambitious enough?

Like Grant, I wish here to signal parameters of possible middle and high school practices as much as prescriptions. Perhaps, rather than teaching described as ambitious, in what ways might we as teachers engage in dangerous teaching? I use the term dangerous teaching to

describe teaching that helps students connect what they learn in schools to politically charged debates over what is worth knowing. Such inquiry is dangerous because it is for teachers personally challenging, professionally frowned upon, and systemically discouraged. Yet, it is necessary. Such teaching supports disadvantaged students and those less so by questioning whether their school success or failures should rest on their shoulders alone. It does so by helping students to identify the class, gender, cultural, and political biases that are manifest in the content and practices of schooling. In this regard, dangerous teaching constitutes a critical pedagogy:

> Critical pedagogy constitutes a set of practices that uncovers the ways in which the process of schooling represses the contingency of its own selection of values and the means through which educational goals are subtended by macrostructures of power and privilege (McLaren, 1995, p. 50; For a critical theory more directly related to history and social studies, also see Segall, 1999).

Despite the challenges, such teaching is necessary for the health of schools as sites of critical thought. It is disingenuous that students have no opportunity to think deeply about the struggles over what history and whose perspectives we offer them to make sense of their personal identities and social commitments (e.g., disagreements about whether to offer sex education, books depicting homosexuality positively, debates over the insufficient attention to women in history textbooks). Yet, that seems to be the case. There are no examples from Grant's synoptic review of the history and social studies literature of schooling-as-such and just one of the content learned therein being submitted to students' critical review. It is therefore necessary to ask, "What quality of inquiry do teachers hope to inspire with students in planned settings that are rarely themselves called into question or submitted to teacher and student analyses? In the absence of such opportunities, is history and social studies teaching also profoundly ahistorical?"

As a high school history teacher, I taught in an ahistorical manner. One morning, with little encouragement to continue from a class of grade 10 World History students, I stopped my lesson, pulled my chair to the middle of the classroom and asked, "What are we doing here, why are you in this class, this morning, with me, with each other, studying history when you clearly have no interest in either being here or doing so?" Following each response with a "why?" my privileged students agreed that they were here for the following reason(s): "Because our parents make us get up in the morning to come here…because we need to graduate from high school…because we need to go to university…because we need to get a job…because if we don't get a job, we can't eat!"

My students correctly identified contextual realities producing their education as a commercial transaction. They offered very real, daunting, and fascinating connections between schools, economic access, and material well-being. Yet, none of these students could offer any opinion as to how this state of affairs might have come to be let alone consider how it might be otherwise. The possibility that enforced and differential experiences of schooling and economic servitude might reflect and reconstitute social inequalities was a question they found odd. So too was my follow-up question: "O.K, given we have little choice but to be schooled, why do we study in schools the particular subjects we do, in the way that we do, and test them as we do?"

My students taught me another lesson that morning. I learned that my course's historical

analysis was inappropriately directed too far away, in that it was not, itself, historically situated. My "world history" course was, in fact, ahistorical. It became an odd feeling to think I had taught units on colonialism - about the military, economic, and educational imposition of particular practices and ways of thinking about the world - with students forced by law to attend school but with no opportunity to consider their education a questionable and historically curious practice (or "good" or "worthwhile"). I was missing an educationally powerful question ideally suited for historical study: Where do present schooling practices come from? Or, to what questions are schools answers? In what ways have different societies educated their young (and do and might we)?

I do not think my experience is unique. I do believe that much of schooling involves conveying answers to questions students are rarely, if ever, asked. It appears that only with graduate or undergraduate studies, if lucky, are students introduced to the questions, controversies, and the mysteries that constitute each discipline and that make them worthwhile humanizing activities in which to engage. It is as if teachers feel compelled to protect students from the very questions and controversies that make their disciplines both exciting and worthwhile (See for example, Levstik's study (2000) of the questionable reasoning of social studies teachers for avoiding controversial topics in their teaching). How many social studies students even know that national and international controversies regularly break out regarding what content and skills they should be taught (See for example, Anna Clark's (2004) review of international controversies regarding history teaching)? What might they learn about social power, struggle, continuity, and change by such a consideration? Again, what insights might these questions spark for those students struggling in their lives and in schools to succeed?

These are some of my concerns and questions: Do we as social studies teachers teach about the past in a profoundly ahistorical manner? In what ways do schools reconstitute a colonial space in which those it assumes to serve are permitted little opportunity to analyze the conditions that shape a good portion of their adolescent lives? And in what ways might we clarify the questions or concerns to which our courses are but one response? These are animating questions for me. In the space remaining, I will connect my notion of animating questions to "throughline" themes developed by Harvard's Project Zero. I will then provide an example of students beginning to think critically and historically about their present schooling experiences.

Animating questions are those concerns, issues, or themes put in question form that first attracted us to the subjects we choose to study in university (in my case, history, philosophy, education). These questions inspire and teach. These questions inspire because they are without definitive answers. They recharge our capacities for wonder when we reconnect to mysteries that led and lead us to intellectual pursuit. They also teach intellectual humility, as different possible answers to our animating questions spring forth depending on the analytical framework employed (e.g., feminist, critical theory, Marxism). It is instructive, for example, to watch my education students struggle to articulate what attracts them to study humanities and social sciences: What mysteries beckon them forth? Who would have thought that such a straight-forward question could cause such mental turmoil? Yet, in all their years of education, they had never before been asked!

While animating questions return us to the mysteries that excite us as intellectuals (excitement that is crucial to share with students), they also spark throughline questions - deep questions that give the content of our courses apparent purpose. I adopt the idea of throughline questions from the people at Harvard Project Zero. That project was organized

around Constantin Stannislavsky's argument that everything in a play should connect to five or six themes. Likewise, scholars at Project Zero make a strong case for the benefits of teachers identifying major themes around which their social studies courses revolve. Of course, teachers organize social studies in many ways. Amongst others, we organize units or courses around themes (e.g., the changing meaning and enactment of freedom), issues (e.g., racism), narrative-chronologies (as in the chapter organizations of most textbooks), and episodes (e.g., the weighing of evidence to offer an educated opinion as to "Who killed William Robinson?" http://web.uvic.ca/history-robinson/indexmsn.html). But what questions do the skills and content learned help students address? Let me offer a few worthy examples.

My first example of throughline questions comes from Dwight Gibb, a retired high school teacher from Washington State. Here are 2 of 10 from his course syllabus:

> What is history? a) What should be included in history we learn at schools? b) What is the relationship between facts and interpretation? c) How do I relate to history?
>
> What is diversity? a) What are the sources of prejudice? b) What is the relationship between prejudice and genocide? c) When is toleration possible?

Gibb supplements the larger questions with sub-questions (a, b, c). They help students think through the larger questions and identify key terms necessary to do so. Gibb writes these questions on posters and affixes them to his classroom walls for the year. Throughline questions provide students with points of reference throughout the year to which content, however organized, can help answer. Throughline questions are not unlike the critical challenges discussed by Case and Wright (1999) in that they "are rich invitations to think critically" (p. 184). Case and Wright argue that four questions can be asked by teachers to judge a good critical challenge. I argue that the same questions can be asked to determine the effectiveness of throughline questions:

> Does the question or task require judgment? Will the challenge be meaningful to students? Is the challenge embedded in the core of the curriculum? Is the challenge focused [and connected to] requisite skills? (Case & Wright, 1999, p. 184)

Let me offer a few more examples, some from a unit on world religions from my Grade 10 world history course and others from my social studies methods course (in the interests of space I will skip the a, b, c's):

> In what ways do cultures (food practices, governance, social rituals, sports, etc.) and religions influence each other?
>
> What do religions offer those who subscribe to their tenants? (2 of 7 Grade 10 oral evaluation throughline questions.)
>
> What should be the place of economics, geography, and political science in social studies? Can history be taught independently of these forms of analyses or vice versa?
>
> In what ways can teachers cultivate individual expression,

> inclusion, and cultural diversity in a 'system of learning'?
>
> In what ways can teachers reconcile the time required in learning to ask worthwhile questions with the demands of course coverage and evaluation?
>
> In what ways does our understanding of the past influence what we believe is possible in the future? (Examples from my recent social studies methods syllabus.)

Student understanding and teachers' evaluation of that understanding are potentially enhanced through the use of throughline questions. Rather than hide-and-seek or peek-a-boo forms of evaluation, in which students try to anticipate questions and take a scatter shot (and usually last minute) approach to study, throughline questions front load the process. They are announced at the beginning of a unit or course. In my experience, they also are often further clarified, changed, or replaced as we discover more meaningful questions. I summarize daily lessons and check student understanding by asking, "So, what throughline questions can we think more about with what we did today?"

With the questions the content helps address clarified, evaluation becomes more flexible. For one evaluation I might assign a throughline question as an essay, another for presentation, or leave it more open for students to decide. For example, students have produced startling art pieces accompanied with an artist's statement to explore a throughline question. Sometimes, I choose the questions students have to address and sometimes students pick. Each student can choose depending on interest and the connections they make between the content and a throughline question. Questions can also be modified to meet the needs of students with learning challenges.

I also employ oral evaluations where students know the questions, but not necessarily which one they will be asked. Taking three students at a time for 20 minutes, I give each one a question. Once assigned and with a moment to gather their thoughts, each student, in turn, addresses the throughline question assigned using class notes, textbooks, and outside sources. A criterion is that they back up assertions with evidence or citation (students usually work together to produce answers and evidence for each question). When a student gets stuck, the other two students can offer insights to the question, helping that student to get the ball rolling. After initial responses are made, and from notes taken as students speak, I either ask for clarification regarding a point raised or ask a follow up question, and then move onto the next student. Precious moments emerge when each student in turn has addressed their initial question and the four of us suddenly find ourselves engaged in unscripted intellectual debate. Often, these conversations lead to more relevant questions than I have posed. These in turn help clarify what I am on about in my units and course for next year's students.

When finished, I hand a rubric to each student and have them assign themselves grades. Overwhelmingly, I give the students more credit for their work/responses than they judge for themselves. One powerful effect of throughline questions is the intellectual humility they encourage, and I am continually impressed to witness this in students. Another effect of the oral evaluation of throughline questions is that of students seeing their teacher equally bewildered by significant questions. For many students it might be a rare sight to see an adult engaged in open-ended intellectual conversation with them about clearly articulated questions. Where this is the case, students are, I submit, learning crucial lessons that extend beyond the formal curriculum.

The sight of an intellectually excited teacher is not rare, however, in Mary's classes (a pseudonym). Mary offers students opportunities to engage in deep thinking about their education, and thus, opens the doors to a historically informed social studies classroom.

Mary has taught in suburban West coast Canadian junior and high schools for 34 years. A colleague described Mary as a "masterful teacher" with a glowing reputation throughout the school and community for the quality of her teaching. In her classroom, Mary provided an emotional grounding for her students while at the same time challenging them intellectually. Her teaching was shaped around the goal of developing students' deliberative capacities:

> I just want the students to look, stop, and look at themselves.
> What do you believe, why do you believe?

Impressed with her rapport with students, I asked Mary how she developed those relationships. She recounted an activity she has her students do the first month of school. This activity ruptures the normality of schools and opens them up as historically curious practices:

> Mary: I start the Grade 9 year off with a thing called "Animal school" and it's a little passage about these animals who start a school because they want to change the world and it is a fabulous parody.
>
> KdH: Is this the one where the duck learns to do something that the fish does better and they all end up losing their special gifts and become mediocre?
>
> Mary: Yes, that one. So then what I have them do is design what they think is the ideal person for their community. What would a great human being look like- a father, a mother, a lover, a neighbor, what do you want? What are those qualities? They come up with a person and then they design a school that would turn out the person. So, we talked a lot about scheduling and time and what kinds of things it would take to contribute to the qualities they want in people. Then what would be the physical plan that would make you gain these attitudes and what sorts of activities would go on in a school like that. So we spend a month at the beginning of Grade 9 doing nothing but that exercise, we don't even start the curriculum yet. They design the courses, staff, and everything in the building.

Mary uses this activity to get her students to consider the big picture before narrowing in on the specific content of school curriculum. She wants them to have a chance to think about schooling as a social practice. Her distinction between what she is doing with this exercise and not having started the curriculum "yet" is noteworthy, for the distinction is not so neat. Mary is conveying important lessons with this month-long activity: "Now I am teaching learning style in there and I am teaching cooperative learning in there and I am teaching a lot of the skills I am going to depend on."

Mary's activity constitutes one example of what I have named as dangerous teaching. To recall, dangerous teaching refers to teaching that engages students in the often-unasked

questions about the 'what and how' students learn in schools, connecting schools to broader debates over what is worth knowing. Again, such teaching can be directed towards the institution of schooling and its practices or about specific subject content taught. In Mary's case, this exercise provokes a different type of engagement, leading students to consider the ways that schools contribute to student success and failure:

> Mary: The activity is all about building community and saying "it sucks" you know. If you have not done well it is probably not your fault and all things are not the best they can be. So, now we talking about the inside of our world [the school] and how can we make that the best it can be.
>
> KdH: So it sounds like you leaning present practices against what they could or ought to be?
>
> Mary: Totally. This is me standing up at the front of the room going "this is like an assembly line, right?" You go into your English classes and open your head and they go dumping stuff in and fill you up with crap and then you go down the hall and someone else does it again. Then finally, you get to the end of three weeks and your open your head and regurgitate on a test and then you start all over again." So that is nuts! It doesn't make any sense.

Providing students with activities that allow them to lean present practices against preferable practices produces the special relationship Mary has with her students:

> KdH: So this gives the kids a chance to sort of take that deliberative stance…
>
> Mary: Well, I think they know that I am on their side now. They know that I am not going to ask them to do stuff that doesn't make sense. I am never going to say "because it is on the test…" or "because I said so" We are going to do things because they make sense in terms of becoming better people.

As described by Grant, Mary is engaged in ambitious teaching. Her relationship with her students is built on mutual respect and the respectful tasks she sets for them. But there is something more. Part of that respect emerges from the opportunity Mary provides her students to question school practices and her engagement of their deliberative and imaginative capacities for how it might be otherwise. Of course, this activity is a beginning. While it has students question their education, it can also lead to powerful throughline questions: What qualities would a great human being possess? In what ways have different societies educated their young (and do and might we)? Or, where do present schooling practices come from? What do national and international controversies over school history content tells us about social power and struggle? To what questions are schools answers? Students require the opportunity to consider the big, vital, and animating questions about their social life in schools as we hope they will ask in and about the public sphere as citizens:

> Citizenship education is (or ought to be) about preparing citizens to constructively engage in an ongoing moral argument about

> how to live together, in other words, how to participate in various public spheres characterized by diverse perspectives and understandings (Farr Darling, 2002, p.299)

Rather than the time wasted cajoling reluctant students from one unit to another without apparent purpose, throughline questions clarify purpose and provide examples for adolescents of what critical questions can look like. Doing so, however, shifts many of our familiar terms of engagement. This should not be taken lightly as a concern. Many teachers equate their success with content coverage. We should not, however, accept schools as a colonial space reproduced daily when we convey answers to questions students are rarely, if ever, asked in places and through practices they have little opportunity to critique. For students are smart and they take the obvious lessons from such teachings. As a former education student once described her approach to being a successful high school and university honors student, "I just wanted to know what I had to know, I didn't want to think about it!" In response to my question whether she thought she might one day be a dangerous teacher, she replied, "I don't know. If we have students think all day when will we get anything done?" Indeed.

**References**

Case, R., and Wright, I. (1999). Taking seriously the teaching of critical thinking. In *The Canadian Anthology of Social Studies*, edited by R. Case and P. Clark, 179-193. Vancouver: Pacific Educational Press.

Clark, A. (2004). History teaching, historiography, and the politics of pedagogy in Australia. *Theory and Research in Social Education* 32 (3): 379-396.

Farr Darling, L. (2002). The Essential Moral Dimensions of Citizenship Education: What should we teach? *Journal of Educational Thought* 36 (3): 229-247.

Grant, S. G. (2003). *History lessons: Teaching, learning, and testing in U.S. high school classrooms*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Harvard Project Zero: http://learnweb.harvard.edu/alps/tfu/info3b.cfm (Last accessed, October 1, 2004).

Levstik, L. S. (2000). Articulating the silences: teachers' and adolescents' conceptions of historical significance. In *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*., edited by P. Stearns, P. Seixas, & S. S. Wineburg, 284-305. New York: New York University Press.

McLaren, P. (1995). *Critical pedagogy and predatory culture: Oppositional politics in a post modern age*. London: Routledge.

Segall, A. (1999). Critical history: Implications for history / social studies education. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 27(3):, 358-374.

---

[1]Content that could be used to address these questions range from age-appropriate philosophical writings, education practices from around the world, colonialism, the Nazification of Germany in the 1930's, residential schools in Canada, industrial modernization, and present debates over increasing Canadian university tuitions.

Kent den Heyer is an Assistant Professor in the Department of teaching, leadership, and curriculum studies at Kent State University. He can be reached by email at Kdenhey1@kent.edu.

Return to Articles