Essential QUESTIONS

The secret to teaching may be as simple as **asking students good questions**—and then giving them the **opportunity to find the answers.** BY JEFFREY D. WILHELM

How do you engage students deeply in the content of the curriculum? How do you make them hungry for knowledge? How do you keep them coming back for more? By asking essential questions.

In my 31st year of teaching, I can honestly say that all of my classes are turbocharged with energy. It wasn't always this way. When I started out, like many teachers, I struggled to engage my students.

The difference is, I now use essential questions that set the class off on an inquiry. Rather than consuming information that I distribute and then repeating it on a test, students carry out their own investigations and construct their own understandings—through traditional kinds of writing as well as through other forms that express what they've learned and want to communicate. They make plays, public service announcements, movies, museum exhibits, and much more.

In the field of cognitive science, inquiry is defined as "the rigorous apprenticeship into disciplinary ways of knowing," and that's just what it should look like in the classroom. Launching students on an inquiry that matters apprentices them in a way that promotes deep understanding and animated learning.

WHAT IS AN ESSENTIAL QUESTION?

An essential question frames a unit of study as a problem to be solved. It should connect students' lived experiences and interests (their only resources for learning something new) to disciplinary problems in the world. And it should connect what they learn back to the real world, where they can put their new understandings to work.

Essential questions can be geared toward uncovering a topic. When my daughter Jasmine was in first grade, she engaged in a habitat unit framed by the essential question *What makes a good home?*

And when elementary students are learning about characterization, for example, as required by the Common Core State Standards, you can create a context for an inquiry with an essential question as straightforward as *What makes a good friend?* (or student, teacher, leader, hero, etc.). Or you could focus on traits with a question like *What is courage?* (or loyalty, maturity, or any other trait).

As students go deep into inquiries such as these, they'll learn the content and processes they need along the way. (My colleague Michael Smith and I give a more comprehensive treatment on using inquiry to teach reading and writing strategies in our book *Fresh Takes on Teaching Literary Elements*.)

Likewise, you can proceed from the kind of composing you want students to do. For example, if you want your class to write descriptions, use an essential question like *What is a good school?* To foster thinking

WHAT MAKES A GREAT ESSENTIAL QUESTION?

Essential questions should…

- interest students and matter to them now and in the future.
- help to create enduring understandings of the disciplinary topic under study.
- require students to produce meanings and projects and reward them for doing so.
- require students to make judgments.
- get to the heart of the matter (for the topic, text, discipline, etc.).
- possess emotive force, intellectual bite, or edginess.
- be open-ended and arguable.
- be linked to data (that is, students will learn content and strategies in pursuit of the inquiry).
- be concise and clearly stated.

TIPS FOR REVISING QUESTIONS

TOPIC: Relationships
QUESTION: *Where do our ideas about marriage come from?*
PROBLEM: Simple information retrieval
REVISION: *What makes a good relationship?*

TOPIC: Civil rights
QUESTION: *How did we win the fight for civil rights?*
PROBLEM: Begs the question
REVISION: *What are basic human rights and how can they be protected?*

TOPIC: Survival
QUESTION: *Why is it bad that animals are going extinct?*
PROBLEM: Leading question
REVISION: *Who survives?*

TOPIC: Identity
QUESTION: *Who am I?*
PROBLEM: Too broad and generic
REVISION: *Where do I belong? What makes me* me*? What shapes my view of the world?*

MODEL ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Social Problems/Health
- Who is hungry and what are the effects of hunger?
- What does it mean to be healthy?

Language Arts
- What is courage?
- What is a good relationship?

Science
- Why do organisms die?
- How are we like bacteria?

History/Cultural Values
- Who was/is a great person? A great leader?
- Who gets power and why?

Math
- What is measurable?
- To what degree are numbers real?

about processes, the question could be rephrased as *How can we make the best possible school?* For comparing and contrasting: *What is the difference between a good and a not-so-good school?* The phrasing of the essential question organically informs the kinds of learning activities and culminating projects students will undertake to answer it.

WHAT DOES AN INQUIRY UNIT LOOK LIKE?

Let's return to the essential question framing a unit on habitat, *What makes a good home?* My daughter Jasmine's first-grade class started by thinking about homes for human beings. They brought in photos of a model home and then they wrote descriptions of features in the home that most people would find attractive. Soon, they expanded their scope, reading both narrative and informational picture books about homes for lobsters, black bears, clams, and other flora and fauna of Maine. They learned to write interview questions and interviewed classroom visitors, including a wildlife biologist and a science professor.

As culminating projects, the students composed alphabet books describing the features of good homes and created habitat exhibits of the creatures they had studied—lobsters, black bears, and other life-forms—for a living history museum. The exhibits included labels of essential features, the kinds of food sources required by the animals, and anything else the students thought important. On parents' night, students inhabited their habitats, role-playing the various creatures. They interacted with visitors in character, answering questions about what made a good home for them.

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HOW DOES INQUIRY GET TO THE HEART OF THE COMMON CORE STANDARDS?

Think of where their inquiry into habitat took that first-grade class: They read a variety of informational and narrative texts and learned about the features of these texts; they compared what they had learned about good homes in general and in specific cases. They created multimodal exhibits of habitats with labels of important features. And through their role-play, they even viewed the habitats from the perspectives of their life-forms. These are all strategies that are emphasized by the Common Core State Standards, from elementary through secondary school.

Essential questions organically inspire the kinds of narrative, informational, and persuasive writing required by the Common Core. Jasmine's class wrote stories about various animals that focused on the setting of their habitats, and wrote informational texts using summary, description, and comparison.

The Common Core focuses on strategies, the knowledge of *how*. So does inquiry. Required strategies can be taught organically as students need them in their disciplinary work. So my daughter's class would learn how to compose comparisons when they needed to compare different habitats, and how to write a narrative when they needed to write a story to describe the habitat a lobster, for example, requires to survive and thrive.

In the service of achieving usable understandings that can be shared with other people, students learn how to read and write, speak and listen, as Jasmine's class did in their investigations of what makes a good home.

WHAT MAKES AN ESSENTIAL QUESTION EFFECTIVE?

Researchers have identified many criteria for composing a good essential question, but I have found that meeting just three suffices: (1) The question should be interesting and

TIPS FOR GENERATING QUESTIONS

- **Identify "big ideas"** of unit, concept, or discipline, and turn these into questions. A unit on habitats becomes a study of *What makes a good home?*
- **Reframe a required text,** topic, or standard so it matters to students: *Romeo and Juliet* becomes a study of *What makes and breaks relationships?*
- **Consider the heart of the matter:** What is the true importance of this curricular topic? Why do you love teaching it? Why is it in the curriculum in the first place? A unit on narrative becomes *Why do people tell stories?*
- **Look around the community** for issues that intersect with the topic. All inquiry connects the present with the past and future, or to put it another way, it connects what we already know to our current reality to possible applications in the future. In my community in Maine, a unit on fish becomes *What can we do personally and globally to protect fish and lobsters?*
- **Ask ethical/moral questions.** What should we pursue? What should we do with the knowledge we have? A unit on social issues becomes *What is our responsibility to others?*

compelling to your students right now! (2) It should invite them into the ongoing disciplinary debates and conversations that create knowledge in the first place. (3) It should require students to learn—and to use—the same understandings and strategies as the real experts in the field. □

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