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Borrowing Avid Inquiry: Getting to the Essential Question in the English Classroom

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BORROWING AVID INQUIRY:
GETTING TO THE ESSENTIAL QUESTION IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

by

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AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Kaidi Stroud grew up Mattapoisett, Massachusetts and graduated valedictorian of the class of 1999 from Old Rochester Regional High School. She attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where she received a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature and a minor in Creative Writing in 2003. While there, she also studied abroad at the University of Wollongong in Australia.

Kaidi comes from a family of educators and worked in a variety of educational settings before she decided to attend Boise State University in order to obtain a Masters in English, Education as well as a teaching certificate for English at the secondary level. After teaching grade levels from preschool to college, she is still uncertain which level of teaching she will pursue after graduation, but she knows teaching and learning will continue to humble her.

ABSTRACT

There is a danger as new teachers struggle with how to implement their educational theories in the classroom to fall back into teaching how they have been taught, regardless of whether or not that method is appropriate to their beliefs or considered best-practice. In order to combat that tendency, this teacher-research project was designed to problem-solve the often-times conflicting relationship between curriculum and theory that all too often results in fall-back teaching. But also, this project aimed to collect and analyze student work in order to better inform instruction in a way that was both reflective and active.

Specifically, the context of this project was a student-internship in a ninth grade English classroom in Boise, Idaho where intern, Kaidi Stroud, and mentor, Sarah Veigel explored the instructional benefits of teaching students how to *question* texts, rather than simply respond to texts. This specific instructional intervention evolved from an exploration of a new district-wide program, AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination), and utilized Costa's levels of questioning and Bloom's hierarchy of cognitive skills (AVID Center, 2008). The findings indicate that providing direct and explicit instruction on this questioning framework promotes critical literacy, debate, responsibility, and higher-level thinking in students.

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INTRODUCTION

Have patience with everything that remains unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books written in a foreign language. Do not now look for the answers. They cannot now be given to you because you could not live them. It is a question of experiencing everything. At present you need to live the question. Perhaps you will gradually, without even noticing it, find yourself experiencing the answer, some distant day.

-Rainer Maria Rilke

Living the Questions

The following is the research of a teacher-who-will-forever-be-in-training, because she believes, above all, in the risk of living the questions.

An Occasion for Questions

In a composition class I taught at Boise State University, I asked students to research various aspects of “higher education.” My hope was that their research would illuminate their college experience to make it more satisfying and meaningful. To get them thinking about their motivation for attending college, they freewrote a response to: “Why are you here? What are your goals?” Most students wrote that they wanted to pass, or that they hoped they’d be able to begin a new, more successful career path once they

graduated. Some students had no idea why they were here. Others, and this always killed me, said they chose to attend BSU because of the football team.

I was consistently surprised that only a few students ever mentioned that they came to college *to learn*. The majority of responses reflected little awareness of the fact that college was a choice; and even less awareness that a careful deliberation about that choice might have been useful. It was disheartening to observe such a lack of consciousness about such an important (not to mention expensive) life choice. In fact, it was disheartening to see college-aged students who viewed school mostly as a hurdle to get through, rather than an opportunity for personal and intellectual growth.

But it gave me an occasion to reflect with purpose on my own teaching, on students' experience of school, and of a possible disparity that exists between the habits of mind that I think mark an expert learner and the habits of mind that school creates. As I prepared for my final semester of student-teaching, ready to apply two years of graduate level education courses, I asked myself: *What can I do to promote the kind of learning that probes and questions its way into new learning? And how can I make sure my actions match my words?*

All too many times, I have heard the stories of student teachers, ruddy-faced and eager for classroom experience, who retreat back into survival mode once the tires hit the pavement (Wilhelm, 2009). I wanted the opportunity to stay true to my beliefs about teaching and learning, to test assignments, and to reinvigorate the curriculum in a way

that I could justify. I wanted to teach genuinely.

I was blessed to be paired with a seasoned, willing, and expert teacher, Sarah Veigel, with whom I pondered and worked through these questions in a ninth grade English classroom. Though I had no grounding to suspect that these students “did school” in the way I had observed in my composition course, I did know that End of Year Exams (EOCs) and Idaho State Achievement Tests (ISATS) forced certain content knowledge, which had the potential to bend instruction toward the basic skills of memorization, recall, and identification. My experience told me that students would need more than those skills, if they were to successfully navigate choices later in life.

Under the supervision of Jeff Wilhelm, Bruce Robbins, and Jim Fredricksen at Boise State University, we were also encouraged to pursue these questions (albeit narrowed down) in a formal teacher-research project in order to develop the ability to learn from our students how to best teach them.

The rest of this document narrates the process of how we examined those questions within the context of my professional year teaching experience, how those questions evolved, and how the power of a question can truly fuel the unexpected. We began our wonderings with AVID, because it was a new program in the school district that had piqued our curiosity; but by the end of the year, we were pleasantly surprised to find that we, the teachers, weren't the only ones with curiosities piqued.

The Purpose of School...What is it Again?

Every forty-seven minutes, a new group of bodies fill the room. The temperature ebbs and flows as one assemblage is replaced by the next. I, standing before this motley crew of students, don't have access to individual memories, fears, or pulse-lines of the bodies that sit before me. I have forty-seven minutes to do something. And it starts now.

The daily grind of a public high school teacher includes many questions about how to engage, motivate, hold accountable, train, teach, and test students. Underneath these day-to-day wonderings, lie the deeper questions of how and why we put ourselves in this position in the first place -- and what we intend on doing while we are there. It is only when we can answer for ourselves:

What is learning?

Why does it matter?

What is my role in it?

that we can begin to query further into the ways to best achieve a successful classroom learning experience. Before I could begin a formal teacher-research project, let alone step foot inside the classroom, I spent some time visiting these questions.

A Personal Pedagogy

Learning is...

As a graduate student in a Masters in English, Education program, I've had the

opportunity to wear many hats and reflect on a wide range of educational experiences. I designed and implemented assignments and instruction for a composition course at Boise State University's First-Year Writing Program; I co-taught in a professional year teaching experience in a ninth grade English classroom; I assisted in a K-3 classroom for students with special needs; assisted in a preschool Montessori classroom; observed various Boise high schools implementing a district-wide program; personally attended public high school in Massachusetts, a state university in North Carolina, study abroad in Australia, and graduate school in Idaho. In synthesizing my own experience as a learner in my teaching journal, I attempted a rudimentary definition of what I suspect *real* learning is: *A struggle followed by change*, I wrote.

But I can now also rely on the help of my formal training in order to dissect this definition into more meaningful parts. Cognitive psychologist, Piaget theorizes in my educational psychology textbook about disequilibrium, a cognitive conflict in which one's way of thinking is not confirmed by experience, thus leaving an individual open to new experience (O'Donnell, 2007). This struggle, then, may feel like a gap in knowledge, a disparity in understanding, confusion, or a problem (like wondering why very few students see the purpose of school as learning...).

John Dewey (1910), in *How We Think*, offers a similar perspective on what I call the "struggle." He reasons that thought arises from "a state of perplexity, hesitation, [or] doubt," and then he outlines the process of a reflective operation (p. 9). First, a learner

must recognize a problem. Then, the learner must pursue an active investigation for evidence to form a belief about how to resolve the problem. Last, the learner must perform a final act of judgment to determine the next course of action, refine a belief, or make a decision. This process may or may not result in the kind of “change” I am thinking about when I think about learning, but it will certainly produce students capable of making informed decisions, which, as Dewey puts it, is better than producing citizens with vast stores of knowledge.

On the perspective of change, Jerome Bruner (1962) reminds me that the cultivation of intellect is both personal and internal. He argues that discovery lies in the individual “going it on his own,” and in the “scientist cultivating the growing edge of his field“ (p. 82-3). I believe that it is here, on the outskirts of perception, understanding, and knowledge, that discovery fuels the most exciting and rewarding kind of learning: *change*. And as Bruner writes, it is the teacher who operates in a hypothesis mode of “what ifs” and alternatives who is most likely to encourage in the student a creativity and curiosity capable of rearranging the evidence to formulate new ways of understanding.

What I take from Piaget, Dewey, and Bruner is not only professional perspective on the cognitive process of learning, but a sense that students need the space and encouragement to pause and explore the fringes of their understanding. If questions and curiosity drive the learning process, then the question, itself, is a critical mass that holds a very peculiar key. Peculiar only in the sense that either an astute and expert teacher or an

engaged and armed learner can know just the right question to ask at just the right time to fire the synapses. The impetus for learning, then, hinges on a question.

So What? Why Does Learning Matter?

Since learning doesn't happen in a vacuum, it is also important to consider why instruction matters beyond the doors of the classroom. For now, I ground my philosophical beliefs in the work of Paulo Freire (2000) who is renowned for fighting alongside dispossessed farm workers in Brazil to obtain social and political justice. He envisioned a liberatory pedagogy of humanization in which teaching and learning together formed a praxis of reflection and action. Liberation was obtained through dialogue and problem-posing that would reveal unequal power structures, or as he phrased it, the relationship between the "oppressors" and the "oppressed." The benefit of this kind of self-and socially reflective learning is that it propels students and teachers toward democratic ideals. At its best, an education, by Freire's definition, helps the educated feel like agents of change rather than passive receptors of information. But first, the educated must learn how to become active members of a community.

In an American classroom, that community is democratic. Nussbaum (1997), as quoted in McCann et al (2006), argues that:

In order to foster a democracy that is reflective and deliberative, rather than simply a marketplace of competing interest groups, a democracy that genuinely takes thought for the common good, we must produce citizens

who have the Socratic capacity to reason about their beliefs...To unmask prejudice and to secure justice, we need argument, an essential tool of civic freedom.

This statement heaves the weight of teaching into a very real and important trajectory. An education centered around debate and problem-solving not only empowers students to make sound, personal decisions, but it is also an incredibly influential system that can help ensure social justice.

One of the most powerful resources English teachers have not only for debate, but also for intellectual and human enrichment, is literature, which in the 21st century comes in variety of forms other than the standard book. Jeff Wilhelm (2007), a strong voice for inquiry learning, suggests that *guiding* questions can help “create a clearly focused problem orientation for our studies that connects kids to socially significant material and learning” (p. 8). With a guiding question, students are encouraged to bring to the discussion the rich experiences of their lives, other texts, and current events in order to explore the multitude of facets that bring that question to life.

In light of Freire’s liberatory pedagogy, taking on an investigative stance when reading literature is key, because it provides a scaffolded experience for later participation in an actual democracy. It teaches students how to analyze the ways in which a text is vying for a certain way of thinking. This is an important step in critical literacy, in life, to unearth the values and attitudes about gender, race, ethnicity and class that are

communicated through language. If I truly believe that an education can empower students to enact change, then the questioning and discerning mindset of a critical reader is paramount.

What is a Teacher's Role in Learning?

In the kind of sociocultural framework for teaching and learning that I envision, the teacher's role -- first -- is to help students become members of a learning community by introducing the discourse language of a discipline. Rather than thinking of the teacher as a dictator of knowledge in the classroom, a sociocultural theorist is a co-creator of knowledge and a more experienced and expert thinker.

Part of being a more experienced and expert thinker is knowing how and when to administer direct instruction. Under this model, direct instruction is carefully constructed in order to serve students' future independence rather than function as the *end* product of learning. Explicit guidance in obtaining strategic knowledge, according to Wilhelm (2001), "is the most powerful thing we can teach" because it provides students with a heuristic for learning that can later be applied to alternative, individualized, and student-chosen circumstances. A teacher may explicitly instruct students in how to question a text, but until students move beyond mimicry, they have not fully engaged in the transformative power of learning.

It is important to remember, however, in reference to Nussbaum's call for debate

and Freire's vision of teaching and learning as interchangeable, that when teachers ask students to confront their own assumptions and preconceived notions, to revise their thinking in the face of complicating evidence, that they do the same. As a co-creator of knowledge, teachers must be willing to partake in that *struggle followed by change*.

Teachers, above all else, are models of learning -- and sometimes this means developing the flexibility of knowing when to prescribe and when to open the door on the light of another angle.

Consequently, as a teacher-forever-in-training, it can be overwhelming to consider the intellectual and social weight of this position of teaching. It is both exhausting and exhilarating to think about the years of evolution and progress I have ahead of me. But as someone who considers myself a polite rebel, I think that keeping an ear for the margins and an eye for the future is a habit of mind that comes rather naturally. Questions I am comfortable asking myself on a personal and professional basis are, "Which perspectives am I forgetting to consider? What kind of blinders are blocking my critical vision? How are these inhibiting my intellectual or professional growth?" It is the question mark at the end of a statement that signals everything I have yet to fully open my consciousness to, the quest that pushes me toward an ever-flickering light of change. The hope. The challenge. The struggle that ultimately satisfies.

That is what I hope to teach.

FOLLOWING THE QUESTIONS: AN INTRODUCTION TO AVID

As I began my professional year teaching at North Junior High in Boise, Idaho, AVID was starting to catch a current through the district. During a content literacy course at Boise State in the Fall of 2008, an AVID instructor had introduced me to its purpose: Advancement Via Individual Determination. As the founding principle for a school-wide reform program, the concept struck me as beautifully simple. If students are provided encouragement and support to take more rigorous classes, they will. Dr. Stacie Curry, Boise School District Director of Professional Development, admitted to me during an interview, “It isn’t rocket science.” But my curiosity was piqued. It is *something*.

My spring semester teaching internship began at North JHS during January, 2009. My mentor teacher, Sarah Veigel, was fresh from an AVID awareness meeting and we were fired up to know more, especially since the staff at North was in the process of determining whether or not it would incorporate AVID. Cynical, as teachers tend to be, we wanted to know if this program held up under a microscope. Why did it work? What were its downfalls? Better yet, what could we borrow for use in the ninth-grade English classroom? And so -- our teacher-research project sprouted from one-part curiosity, one-part need, and one-part greed. I was on a mission to find out more.

As an instructional concept, AVID was developed by Mary Catherine Swanson in 1980, the year that a federal court mandated integration of the predominantly white

Clairemont High School in California where she taught English. As a result, 500 economically and culturally diverse students were bussed to the school. In an interview with Michael Shaughnessy (2005), Swanson pointed out that these students were remedial according to curricular standards, but in her own estimation, “as intelligent as the students who were leaving our school...[but clearly lacking] the same educational and cultural advantages which would make them successful in school.” Many of Swanson’s new students did not have parents who had graduated from college, spoke English, or had access to the cultural privileges that her former students enjoyed.

Consequently, a high percentage of these new students achieved only marginal success in school -- “Bs“, “Cs,” and even “Ds.” Social research by Patthey-Chavez (1993) helps explain why. Schools, she claimed, are traditionally viewed as edifices of assimilation, but when proper support systems are not in place for minority cultures, students tend to develop an oppositional identity and view the school culture as antagonistic. Swanson’s counter: expose more students to the secret language of school. In Swanson’s experience, successful students take notes, work hard, write, edit, polish, think critically, collaborate, organize, and understand the correlation between school success and future opportunity.

Thus, AVID’s curriculum, which operates in an elective class, instructs students on these study-skill strategies while simultaneously exposing them to the ins and outs of applying to college, thinking about careers, and seeing oneself as a competent member of

the school community. I think of AVID as a surrogate pushy parent who reminds students to finish their homework, high-fives them for a paper well-done, or complains to the principal when there aren't any seats in that AP class for their child. Most teachers agree that every child or adolescent in school needs an advocate. AVID tries to fill that role in an explicit and positive way.

In summary, AVID seems to encompass three goals: teaching students school procedures, school thinking, and school culture. Specifically, these goals are approached through AVID's instructional design, which is distilled in AVID Awareness Participant Materials (2008) with the acronym WICR. This stands for writing, inquiry, collaboration, and reading. I have outlined the purpose and intent of each below.

Writing

Students in the AVID classroom use writing in a variety of ways to extend and generate thinking, analyze and organize their own thought-processes, and revise and review current understandings. Thus note-taking, learning logs, and discourse writing play a prominent role in student learning.

Inquiry

Inquiry is based on the concept that students learn best by engaging with their own thinking process, and that this kind of engagement develops in students a sense of

ownership over their learning. This, of course, steps away from a more didactic model of instruction, in which teacher holds the lead position as transmitter of knowledge. Overall, the AVID student is treated as an equal participant in a Socratic seminar of tutorship that engages him/her in asking critical questions, pursuing understanding as a democratic process, and potentially revising his/her own thinking upon complicating evidence.

In order to differentiate among kinds of learning, students use Costa's (2001) model of intellectual functioning that levels learning from gather and recall to application and evaluation.

Collaboration

In alignment with the inquiry process, students are expected to come to tutor groups with their own questions and ideas for discussion. The theory behind collaboration is that it actively engages each student in the process of learning, because it relies on the multitude of opinions and evidence each student brings to the discussion. According to the AVID materials, collaborative learning helps students learn more and learn faster.

Reading

Because effective readers read strategically, AVID classrooms provide instruction on ways of reading. A few of these strategies instruct students on how to use context

clues to determine the meaning of unknown words, predicting, visualizing, and monitoring for comprehension. Other instructional interventions encourage teachers to find ways to tap into students' prior knowledge before reading a text and providing the text structure.

In addition, teachers and researchers meet approximately every eighteen months at the San Diego AVID center to revise content curriculums. Dr. Curry informed me that in the short transition time between her role as a local principal to the District Director of Professional Development, the "tutorology" curriculum, as she referred to it, underwent substantial national revision. During these Center meetings, teachers from around the nation, researchers, and administrators collaborate to compile current scientific data about teacher practices. Essentially, this is a systematic reflective turn to ask: Which practices are working and what data do we have to support it? Which practices are not working and what data do we have to support it? In short, AVID is constantly asking its teachers, "How can we improve our own job performance?"

Boise's Installment of AVID: A Program in Practice

My initial question after reading about AVID's progress in California was how relevant such a program would be in Boise, a school district that hasn't typically had high percentages of English Language Learners, immigrants, or extreme poverty. Dr. Curry reminded me that the problem of low-income and minority access to AP

curriculum is systematic across the nation -- so much so that even the College Board is revising its philosophy to let more students into college. Curry believes in AVID because it finds the kids who are lost in the margins, for whatever reason, and instructs them according to research-based best practice (Personal Interview, February 23, 2009). She sees AVID as an opportunity for school-wide reform and rigor, as a chance for all instructors to reconsider and revamp their practices. That, she asserted, was just good teaching.

Ms. P, an AVID elective and math instructor at a district high school, also sees the benefit of adding new tricks to her instructional tool bag and jumped at the opportunity to undergo AVID training. She claims that her ambition to become AVID-trained was personal. In her own math classroom, she now requires students to write about their thinking process on exams, as she is excited about the potential of using this kind of reflection in a class that doesn't typically rely on writing. Though collaboration and tutorials are a new concept for her, she believes in their instructional importance. (Personal Interview, February 5, 2009).

It is easy to imagine how teacher-access to research-based best practices can push the atmosphere of the school toward thinking in a reflective way. In Mrs. P's own words, "I see why I should ask more questions instead of [saying] here's what you do...[the students are] figuring out why [a problem is solved a certain way] and they probably learn more this way."

She isn't sure, however, that the rest of the school is on board yet. Probably because the other instructors don't know much about the program or are stubborn, she claims. Dr. Curry echoes her concern. The Boise School District tends to be relatively self-contained and many teachers have gone through the district as students to return later as teachers. I guess there's something to the adage, "Can't teach an old dog new tricks," that keeps many instructors nervous about a complete overhaul of their instructional strategies. And really -- AVID asks entire schools to abolish the mindset of "sort and send," and extend belief that students can achieve at higher levels, when given support.

"AVID pays attention to the qualitative story behind the quantitative data," was how I made sense of AVID's mission during my interview with Curry. ISAT scores and GPAs can only tell us so much about a student, and unfortunately, much weight has been put on these numbers, alone, to determine which students accelerate and which decelerate. Cultural and economic diversity, however, has been a hidden hindrance to student success in AVID's eyes.

"My belief for a democracy is that we have to educate all to prosper....[AVID is] so simple when you think about it," Curry said. "Someone just put together a system and accountability for schools and districts to prove that it works." AVID schools, Dr. Curry says, are responsible for extensive data collection that proves that they are meeting certain AVID marks.

Student Voices

In order to capture the student perspective, I interviewed three adolescents who were all in their third year of AVID. They mutually agreed that the program taught them to be organized and pushed them to work harder than they had before. “I feel proud of myself,” one student said, “and I’ve made my parents proud, too, because I’m on the right path now.” They also agreed that Cornell notes are the most useful skill they’ve acquired through AVID but also -- the most dreaded. (For the record, Ms. P was shocked her students said they liked Cornell notes. According to her, it has been an epic battle to get them to buy into the method. This may explain why it was on the students’ minds...). Students’ binders undergo extensive checks, as they are required to keep a certain number of notes per week. Students admit this can be tedious, but in the long run, the notes serve as a useful study tool that helps them think through their learning, review, and check for their own understanding.

One student said she found the tutorial sessions the *least* helpful aspect of AVID. In tutorial, students bring questions to a study group lead by a college tutor, and then everyone, in theory, collaborates to figure out a solution. I can see how the tutorial sessions could potentially flop. A few of the students I observed already knew how to solve the questions they brought, or just didn’t seem to care. At one point I wrote in my notes, “The boredom of the tutors and students is deadly!” As one student went to the board to write his question, everyone else was quiet as the tutor and student worked

through that particular problem. I asked the girl sitting next to me what she was supposed to do while her classmate and tutor talked and she said, “take notes.” Then she added, “I’m not in algebra, so I don’t get this anyway.” It showed. She stared off into space until something was written on the board. Then she copied it into her notes.

Ms. G, AVID instructor, admitted that consistently getting enough tutors to the school was a challenge. The day I observed, the class divided into three groups, which is not ideal because then too many different subject matters are on the table at one time, as was the case with the girl taking notes on algebra. It did her no benefit to sit through question after question beyond her zone of proximal development. The idea of the tutorials sounds promising, but without the right number of tutors, trained properly in inquiry methods, the sessions can easily lose all zest and turn into rote note-taking.

“I just don’t always have a question,” a student told me. “But I have to ask one anyway.”

Everyone I spoke to in the Boise School District admitted that there were still a few kinks to work out with the program -- from how they hire and train the tutors, to how students are invited to and retained within the program. Still, students and teachers alike seemed positive, excited, and hopeful for AVID’s future.

I am, too, which is the main reason why Sarah and I were curious to see what would happen if we borrowed a page from AVID’s instructional play-book.

The Theory Behind AVID

The AVID Awareness Participant Materials that I was most interested in draw heavily and explicitly from the work of Benjamin Bloom (1956) and Arthur Costa (2001). As per its goal to define the categories of the cognitive domain, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals...* as drafted by Bloom, et al (1956), has provided teachers with a framework for thinking about student learning for the past fifty years. In Bloom's own estimation, such a framework had the potential to provide a common language for educators and students to communicate effectively across curriculums.

Costa (2001) echoes the importance of being able to name and label knowledge. He borrowed a useful analogy from Condon (1968) by comparing an individual looking up at the sky and seeing only stars to an astronomy student looking up at the sky and seeing super novae, white dwarfs, and galaxies. The difference language makes is clear. When students have the words to describe, express, name, and explain -- their worlds of knowledge open up deeper recesses and understanding in the mind. They, in fact, develop the ability to *see* more.

When I asked Dr. Curry of the Boise School District what other theorists informed the AVID materials, she directed me to read Robert Marzano's work. Marzano and Kendall (2008) have most prominently taken up the helm of Bloom's work designing and assessing educational objectives. Their work provides teachers with a common system for

understanding the kind of knowledge they expect students to possess. Knowledge, they define in Bloom's terms, is evidence that a student remembers, recalls, or recognizes an idea from the classroom experience. Marzano and Kendall further discern the ways in which a student might express that knowledge with six levels: retrieval, comprehension, analysis, knowledge utilization (application), metacognition, and self-system thinking. They also make the distinction between the three domains of knowledge: declarative, procedural, and psychomotor.

The influence of Bloom, Costa, and Marzano's work is explicit in AVID materials. AVID students are explicitly taught a mix of Bloom and Costa's hierarchy of cognitive skills and encouraged to ask leveled questions to reinterpret their comprehension of a lecture or text. Costa (2001) claims that the, "self-generation of questions facilitates comprehension. It encourages students to pause frequently and perform a 'self-check' for understanding, to determine whether or not comprehension has occurred" (p. 410). The AVID materials also support that all learning begins with questions and that students should partake in all levels of thinking -- from factual recall to critical thinking.

But what is also interesting about the AVID materials, and more implicit, is a seeming discordance between two schools of thought regarding student learning: the constructivism of Leo Vygotsky and the behaviorism of B.F. Skinner. According to Wink and Putney's (2002) review of Vygotsky's theories, learning is both holistic and dialectic.

It is dependent on reflective assessment and intrinsic motivation. This is best understood in contrast to Skinner's influence on the behaviorist/traditional model of learning, which is based in the theory that students learn best by adopting certain behaviors.

Vygotsky's influence on AVID is best exemplified in the set-up for the "inquiry method" tutorial sessions which assume:

1. No one knows everything.
2. Teachers expect analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of subject matter, which is "the stuff" of collaborative groups.
3. Students will move farther faster and remember more.
4. Learning with other people is more fun than studying alone! (Section 6: AVID Curriculum 7)

These assumptions reflect a Vygotskian theory of sociocultural learning as well as an awareness of how students move through zones of proximal development (ZPD).

Vygotsky's theory of ZPD is founded on the principle that with guiding questions from a more advanced scholar or expert, students can solve problems beyond their own developmental abilities. The Socratic framework of the tutorial reflects this.

On the other hand, the extensive Cornell notes that AVID students are required to keep for each of their content areas is one example of the AVID curriculum that reflects a behaviorist's theory of learning. As discussed in O'Donnell et al (2007), this shadows Skinner's theories of learning that isolate and manipulate certain environmental elements in order to produce desired behaviors. According to AVID, then, an obvious desired behavior of a student is extensive note taking in the form of Cornell notes.

For apt reason, Skinner's theory of learning is often referred to as the "black box" theory because it cannot describe what happens within the individual when she receives information from her environment. Rather, it can only note a correlation between environment and behavior. Like the student who "had" to ask questions every tutorial session, the behavior of asking questions could reflect active and authentic curiosity, but it could also reflect rote and otherwise empty behavior.

In practice, these theories are at odds because one expects students to draw from their own experience and expertise to form their own, guided, yet individualized understanding, while the other prescribes strict guidelines that dictate behavior. This may explain why the tutorial sessions that I observed were neither lively nor heated. Students seemed to be "going through the motions" of learning but with minimal personal investment. One of the student comments that comes to mind regarding AVID's effect on her learning is, "I've made my parents proud...because I'm on the right path now."

In my estimation, this student clearly does not feel empowered by her experience with AVID. Apparently the stronger of the two theories coming through is the one that suggests students "act the part." Somewhere, I think, there is a marriage between constructivism and behaviorism that only the context of the classroom can determine. Though it may be the implementation and not the theory behind it that could be a problem in the cases that I observed in this school district, it may also be a possibility that mixing these two theories sends mixed signals to the kids that muddles the real purpose of the

instruction.

Doubt

After two months of AVID research, I was intrigued to discover that the program's curricular design slants in the direction of democratic and inquiry-based learning that appeals to my personal teaching sensibility (AVID Center, 2008). But at the same time, I was discomforted by the fact that an obvious, and somewhat ironic tension exists in the AVID program: though the students are taught to formulate their own questions, to collaborate, and to use inquiry-methods, there is no transformative power behind the development of these skills. In other words, students aren't necessarily taught how to tap into their voice, as Paulo Friere might encourage, but taught, instead, to adopt the voice of a white, middle-class culture. In every AVID classroom, activities look the same, routines are conducted in the same manner, and students are given the tools they need to become a part of the status quo...not to doubt it.

On the one hand, this program makes sense. If certain behaviors, habits of mind, and cultural expectations lead to success in school, then why wouldn't we teach them to students? In my own Masters program of English, Education, I had to learn the language, ways of thinking, dressing, and behaving of an educator, so I could give myself a better chance of joining that group professionally. It is a matter of fact that in order to be heard, respected, and taken seriously in any group, there are certain conformities to abide by.

On the other hand, I wonder what grooming students to become members of middle-class Anglo-American society will do to the rich tapestry of those students' diverse cultural backgrounds. I wonder if such an enculturation is in some ways doing a *disservice*. An instructional mindset of ethnocentricity misses an opportunity to consciously navigate what Mary Louise Pratt calls "contact zones." As quoted in Bizell (1994), Pratt defines this concept as, "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermath as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (p. 166). I believe that Friere would call this ignorance the kind of prescriptive act which dehumanizes by robbing others of their words. In my own words, there is a chance for real "struggle" here.

In the AVID reading materials, only one culture, which happens to be the dominant culture, is defined and honored. If we expect all of those who are "other" to become more like "us," then we are doing little to criticize and bring to the surface a residual and deeply-rooted power structure that continues to marginalize those who don't fit the mold. Although becoming more like "me" (white, middle-class) may result in change and learning for some students, and may ultimately lead to success in college or beyond, it is a touchy process that would need to be handled by a culturally sensitive teacher who understands what she is truly asking of students.

On yet another hand (yes, a teacher must sometimes count on three hands), is the

marriage of behaviorism and constructivism via a curriculum that dares use the tools of academia and apply them beyond the classroom curriculum. It seems to me that what AVID is missing is an authentic application of knowledge-generating heuristics on the system of school which contains it. To me there is a greater, more meaningful connection between school and life beyond the obvious “good grades equal access to AP classes,” which seemed to be the goal of AVID in Boise. Though I don’t disagree that striving to teach more students at a higher level isn’t admirable, I do disagree in making AP classes the goal of my instruction. The goal of my instruction is always better instruction for the students.

If I believe that real learning is a *struggle followed by change*, then I have to be wary of any curriculum that doesn’t encourage and openly dialogue with students about how to change itself.

AVID, Inquiry, and English: Questions for Teacher-Research

Turning that criticism away from AVID and toward our own ninth grade English classroom, Sarah and I asked ourselves again, “What are *we* doing that does (or doesn’t) promote learning? How well do *our* actions match our words?”

For us, one of the problems of utilizing inquiry-based theories in public schools arises at this conundrum: even though teaching whole-class classics is a contested question for English educators, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a classic taught in the Boise

School District during ninth grade English. This certainly undercuts the spirit of student choice and empowerment I wish to encourage. Because of the difficult Southern dialect and cultural concepts, the majority of the novel is read during class-time throughout the nine weeks of the third quarter. Sarah and I agree that this is a laborious way to experience literature. If teachers want students to comprehend the novel, class-time must include intensive instruction, scaffolding, modeling, and a plethora of activities that engage students with the text, and that is just to get *through* it.

Usually, it is teachers who are doing the work to make their questions, projects, or discussions of the literature more engaging, but after reading the AVID materials, we wondered if AVID might be able to provide a strategy or two for turning ownership of this process over to the students. Recognizing that leveled questioning schemes are an important part of AVID instruction made the overlap of AVID, inquiry and the English classroom clear.

Our research questions were born, then, from wondering what would happen if we turned the responsibility of question-posing over to the students.

1. What would happen for student engagement, comprehension, interest, and quality of writing if we used student-generated questions for journal responses and discussion instead of the usual teacher picks?
2. How could we give students a chance to apply their critical questioning skills beyond the walls of the classroom?

PLANS AND PROCEDURES

The AVID element we wanted to add to our reading of the *TKAM* was direct instruction about Costa's levels of questioning and Bloom's hierarchy of cognitive skills (AVID Center, 2008). Unlike more formal quantitative research, however, we did not set out with a predetermined way to collect and analyze data. We began, instead, with the goal of using information we gleaned from students' work and classroom observations to better inform our instruction. My report of this research is an attempt to tell the qualitative story that best represents our research questions and findings as they relate to the questioning strategies we borrowed from AVID.

Before we began reading *TKAM*, Sarah and I decided that students would work collaboratively in literature circles (Daniels, 2002). In addition to taking notes that tracked the characters, the plot, the author's craft, and a personal connection, part of group work would be writing three questions for each chapter -- one each for level I, II, and III, which are defined below.

A level I question is defined by its reliance on recall of factual knowledge. Question starters for a level I question might be "define," "describe," or "identify." The thinking required to answer a question of this variety is usually a quick reminder or glance back to a specific spot in the text. Answers are either "right" or "wrong," as in the question of "Where is the setting of *To Kill a Mockingbird*?" These types of questions

provide students with literal, on-the-line groundings in the text.

Level II questions require students to search between the lines of a text and infer information from what is implicitly stated. “Synthesizing,” “analyzing,” or “comparing and contrasting” are examples of question starters at level II thinking. In our classroom, we referred to this type of thinking as reading between-the-lines. Although responses may vary, their validity requires textual support, such as with the question, “How is Atticus different from his neighbors?”

Level III questions often begin with an “evaluation,” “judgment,” or “application.” Responses to these types of questions will vary depending on the students’ prior knowledge and experiences (yet, again, should develop from textual support). Level III questions require wide-scope thinking about how themes recur from one situation to the next. These types of questions tend to mine for the significance of a text by inviting a connection to students’ lives. For example, a question that cropped up at this level was, “Why do we continue to deal with racism as an issue?”

As we introduced and modeled how students were to complete their literature circle note sheets, we defined and provided question starters and examples for each level of questioning. Students then engaged in low-stakes practice with their own question-writing. Because we collected these notes after every four chapters, Sarah and I were able to track students’ progress and provide specific feedback not only on the accuracy of

questions according to Costa's framework, but also in the functionality of questions as potential prompts for journal responses.

When we paid attention to students' initial attempts, we began to categorize the different types of issues they had with crafting questions. We defined these categories as scope, contextualization, variety, and essentiality. The chart in the appendix lists examples of questions that fell into each category (See Appendix A for Problems with Initial Question Attempts). An extended definition of these categories is explored in the section labeled "Results." Our methods for instructional intervention are also detailed further in the "Results" section, as it is easier to discuss what the students produced and how we responded in tandem.

But it is important to note, here, that our data collection eventually included student work samples (literature circle notes, journal responses, and group-generated questions), our own classroom observations and conversations, and a survey. This base of data served to triangulate any information and interpretations we made for any one, singular set of data. It gave us insights into student understanding, an occasion for reflecting on instruction, and a wide scope for analyzing the variety of ways in which students were interpreting a class text.

Our hope for using student-generated questions was that the vocabulary for drafting and responding to different levels of questions would give students the power to

pursue their own meaning of the text at *all* levels. But also, we hoped it would do the kind of work that Wilhelm (2007) suggests essential questions can do for students: link texts to real-world applications, reveal patterns of ideas, address multiple perspectives, and ultimately move students beyond their current thinking. If expert inquirers look for themes and repeated motifs throughout their studies of a particular data set, then teaching students to take on the role of inquirer will also force them to seek out these bigger, transferable themes.

Again, this goes back to Costa's continuum of questions that moves from literal (on-the-line) knowledge to interpretive, critical and applicable (beyond-the-line) knowledge. As Wilhelm (2007) suggests, the point of inquiry doesn't stop with understanding, but with informed action. If a student can ask, "Why do the people of Maycomb treat Boo Radley unfairly?" then he or she can also ask, "Why did I treat that new student unfairly?" Better yet, "How can I stop treating that student unfairly?"

This the kind of change in personal action is ultimately what seems most important about education, particularly in reading literature, because it represents that academic learning is transferable to real life. In reference, again, to my own definition of learning, if questioning is the first step in that *struggle followed by change*, then it is worth teaching in an explicit and focused way.

In addition to our own instructional curiosities for how to deliver our required

curriculum in a way that better matched our teaching pedagogy, this research also provided us with an opportunity to examine the factors that mire a well-intentioned program into the kind of lock-step prescription that might actually undermine learning. Regardless of any teacher's pedagogical approach, I think we could all agree that we would like to avoid the drudgery of lifeless student responses to our instruction that tell us, "I just don't always have a question. But I have to ask one anyway." We would, at least.

RESULTS I -- QUESTION WRITING

Question Writing -- Initial Attempts: Defining a New Problem

As mentioned in the previous section, the first round of questions that crossed our desk resulted in some short-comings that made journaling difficult. Although students were generally successful in writing questions that could be categorized as level I, II, and III, certain problems arose when we tried to use their questions to instigate dialogue in a journal response. I define each of those problems below in order to highlight why we considered each a problem and provide the thinking behind how we approached each problem, instructionally (See Appendix A for Problems with Initial Question Attempts).

Scope

Scope, as an issue, was important to address because a question that is too open may not present a clearly defined data set for students to explore, while a question that is too closed may restrict that data set too rigidly. In writing level III questions, students tended to draft inquiries that became vague, confusing, or virtually impossible to answer because of their broadly defined scope. The first example in the chart queries, “What does this say about the world minding their own business?” This student was clearly attempting to make a text-to-world connection regarding Aunt Alexandra’s role in Scout’s life, but he may have interpreted the phrase “text-to-world” too literally. In doing

so, his question lost meaning and applicability because the world at large is simply too nebulous of an entity to consider as a whole.

Perhaps a more successful text-to-world connection would have asked, “How does Aunt Alexandra’s rigid parenting style compare to others you know? Is it effective?” or “Why does Aunt Alexandra think Scout needs a feminine influence? Do you think it is important for girls and boys to have role models of the same gender?” These questions would first allow students to formulate an opinion on the relationship between Aunt Alexandra and Scout as it is portrayed in the novel, but also invites examples from students’ lives that might support or complicate their opinions.

On the opposite end of the scope spectrum were question-prompts that were *too* narrowly defined. While the question, “Have you ever misunderstood someone like Scout did to Boo?” has issues beyond scope (such as grammatical clarity), it clearly suffers because it is not open-ended enough. The first part of the question simply requires a “yes” or “no” response, and the tacked on directions to “explain” don’t necessarily direct the responder how to bridge information from the text to personal experience.

Because this prompt limits the data set to personal experience, it could be revised to read, “What is Scout’s understanding of Boo? Would you call it prejudiced? Why? Why not?” or, “How do rumors distort Scout’s understanding of Boo? How do you process rumors?” These questions build the bridge for students to move back and forth

between a consideration of textual and personal detail by connecting them to a common theme.

Clearly, in order to promote questions within a more effective scope, students would need some assistance in understanding the phrase, “text-to-world connection,” but also in identifying themes.

Contextualization

Contextualization provides necessary background information in order to place a question in a certain time/place. A question such as, “When you were growing up, did you ever act like Jem?” is difficult to contextualize, because Jem’s character changes throughout the novel. This question makes it unclear as to whether or not a particular incident is in question -- such as when Jem stood up to his father outside of Tom Robinson’s prison cell; or whether or not it is referring to how Jem acts in relation to others -- such as his often-times patronizing behavior toward Scout; or even if it is asking the reader to consider Jem as a whole -- which then makes the question viable for an extended response. Contextualization is a problem when more than one data set could be used to explore a question, and it is unclear which data set the question begs.

Also, sometimes a close examination of one or two key textual details can help remove a question from the danger of too much assumption. “Have you ever prejudiced

someone badly enough that ended up being kind and compassionate like what has happened to Boo Radley so far?" (beyond its syntactical troubles), is quite leading. The student author of this question obviously attended to a detail in the book that changed *her* opinion of Boo. However, without that detail, her opinion overshadows the heart of this question, which I believe is a question of what Harper Lee wanted us to consider about Boo and prejudice.

Refocusing on that key event, the question might read, "How did your opinion of Boo change when you discovered that he was the one who put the blanket on Scout during Miss Maudie's fire?" This not only shifts the question from leading to open-ended, but also reflects an ability to zoom in and out of key details and the big picture. This is the mark of an expert reader who is thinking about why an author may have constructed the text the way she did.

While contextualization can save a question from confusion or coming across as too leading, attending closely to key events, phrases, and characters in the text also requires students to consider the author's purpose, craft, and choices. These are important steps in a critical reading of a text.

Variety

A lack of variety, like scope, was also a common problem when students were

drafting level III questions. Students had a difficult time finding a way to personally relate to the text other than asking, “Have you ever had a similar experience?” Sarah and I foresaw that questions such as this one might invite pat or trite journal responses, because they reflect an “easy“ and perfunctory attempt at relating to the text.

We thought that variety was important because Block, as cited in Costa (2001), argues that the more thinking strategies a student learns, the more likely those thinking strategies will stick. According to Block, engaging students in a variety of “learning experiences, discussions, and emotions...during reading can expand the density of dendrites and cognitive structures in the brain” (p. 379). In this way, the benefit of an array of question types is that it requires an expansion of thinking strategies that will aid in the development of higher-level literacy. This development of new concept schemas reinforces and challenges a students’ prior understanding, which is ultimately the goal of learning.

In other words, if a student could ask a question such as, “How does your understanding of Boo Radley change your perception of the kids you’ve labeled as ‘outcasts‘ at this school?” would not only reflect a critical reading of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but also apply those same critical thinking strategies to life. This strengthens and connects schemas.

Essentiality

For many young readers, “theme“ is an abstract concept that is difficult to grasp. For this reason, it is no surprise that essentiality -- or the quality of timeless, universal importance -- of students’ questions surfaced as a third issue. In so many words, non-essential questions seemed tangential or irrelevant to any sort of central theme of the text. As in this question, “Have you ever felt excluded like Dill from his parents?” there is a certain amount of “bite” that is missing. We were wary that such a question might not be useful to explore in a journal response, because it hovers on the surface-level of the plot-details rather than digging into the universal experience represented by those plot-details. This question, perhaps, has the potential to be essential, but the student did not yet know how to direct the question toward the themes of “acceptance” or “belonging” that Dill’s situation represented.

Asking students to generate thematic questions forces them to accept, as Beach et. al (2006) suggest, to infer symbolic meaning and understand that, “language, signs, images, gestures, dress, behaviors, actions, and so forth, represent larger meanings” (p. 13). Thematic trends in the discipline of English literature relate to human nature, social structures, and the individual’s experience with self and world.

For ninth graders, who have relatively few “worldly” experiences to draw from,

we determined that scaffolded thematic instruction would be necessary to help students better identify theme, and thus draft better essential questions. In turn, we hoped this lesson would help students realize the importance of literature in their own lives.

Question Writing -- Instructional Intervention

It was clear after the students' first journal responses that they needed a template that would define a "good" journal question beyond the parameters of AVID's leveled question system. Therefore, we gave completion credit points to students' first journal attempts, recognizing that a response could only be as good as its question. On the day we passed back writing, we spent a class-period conducting a genre analysis on the qualities that created a "good" journal question.

Using students' own writing and questions as a reference to guide their thinking, they worked in groups to create a T-chart of qualities of a "good" journal question and qualities of a "bad" journal question. On Marzano and Kendall's (2008) levels of thinking, this type of activity would qualify as "metacognitive" and "self-system thinking" because we asked students to identify question features that would help them become more competent at question-writing.

Our mentor-teaching supervisor, Jeff Wilhelm, happened to be observing on this day and provided us observation notes of features the class generated on the board.

According to our eighth hour class, good questions are:

- Applicable to life
- Connect details
- Provide the writer with something he/she can relate to
- Includes multiple parts, or evokes multiple possible answers
- Is arguable
- Gets after something that matters
- Grabs your attention
- Helps the writer learn something important from his/her explanation.

In simple terms, a good journal question gets at the “So what?” and “Why?” of a textual feature, whereas a bad journal question only gets at the “Who, when, where, and what?” features.

Consequently, the class defined a bad journal question as one that only calls for a specific, recall type of answer, or singular, preordained response. Boring and dull questions, according to eighth hour, do not require much thinking.

In so many words, students defined for *us* the components that would help them generate a solid literary response. We devised this template: “textual detail + thematic connection + opinion = a good journal question.”

While we were testing our new template with students’ previous questions, we

were able to address the need to contextualize questions with enough background information (or enough textual detail) for the responder to understand the question. In order to do this, we wrote a student-generated question with an unclear focus up on the board -- “Have you ever behaved like Jem?” -- and had students analyze it. Did it have the components of a good question? The students determined that it lacked all three critical components (textual detail, thematic connection, and opinion), so we asked them to rewrite the question to reflect those features of a good journal question.

They revised the problematic question to read, “Jem often acts out of pride, such as when he ran to touch the Radley house at Dill’s teasing. Does his pride always serve him well?”

We identified for students that textual detail of Jem running to touch the Radley house provided the context for the question, that pride was the theme under examination, and that whether or not pride was useful opened the question to opinion and subjectivity.

We also explained to students that a text-to-world connection was sometimes only subtly linked to their lives, that it didn’t always require students to “have a similar experience“ to a character in the book to be able to relate to his/her feelings. For instance, asking if Jem’s pride always serves him well requires students to formulate their own definitions of pride and assess their personal values in order to measure pride’s worth. This might require them to reflect on what they have learned from their parents, teachers,

and friends, or consider some of their own experiences with pride. Consequently, before they could formulate a judgment of Jem's choices and experiences with pride, students would have to pull from their own experiences to inform their evaluation.

Of course, scope, contextualization, and essentiality are closely woven together in this new template. Later in that same week, we provided students with a list of different question-starters and examples to show students their options of language for question-writing. We produced a reference hand-out with a reminder of the various verbs available to prompt all three levels of thinking (See Appendix B for Level I, II, III Questions).

Getting Students to the Essential Question

Helping students get to the essential questions involved further instruction, as it required a scaffolded lesson on theme. We decided to do this by stepping away from the novel to read and present a "think-aloud" (Wilhelm, 2001) on a short, well-known fable, "The Tortoise and the Hare." We reminded students about some of the "rules of notice" for a fable (a genre they had studied earlier in the year), particularly looking at the title, the illustrations, characters, plot, and the explicitly stated moral. We commented on the dialogue of the two characters and then made a compare/contrast chart that highlighted the character's different personality traits.

Beyond the moral, "Slow and steady wins the race," we asked students if the fable

seemed to teach any other lessons. They noticed that the hare was brazen and prideful, while the tortoise was modest and humble. We then decided that words like “winning,” “losing,” “pride,” or “modesty” could be potential themes present in “The Tortoise and the Hare.” Themes, we said, get at universal human experiences (just as some of them had already noticed that “discrimination“ was a theme that applied to *To Kill a Mockingbird* as well as the social norms at school). We also forewarned that there are usually many different themes reflected in any given text, depending on who is doing the reading and which textual details that reader is inclined to notice.

To tie the think-aloud back to *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we challenged students to consider the genre features of a novel when attempting to unearth the novel’s themes: this meant that we wanted students to examine such textual features as the title, characters (especially relationships, differences, and similarities among characters), dialogue, plot, symbolism, setting, and language (metaphor, dialect and colloquialisms, imagery, etc.). We reminded students that this is why their literature circle note sheets focused on “characters,” “plot,” “author’s craft” “personal connections,” and “questions.” Noticing these textual details, we told them, would help a reader look for patterns and connections that could help them, as readers, discover the author’s themes.

Question Writing -- Follow-up Attempts

As we finished *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we asked students -- in groups of four -- to draft two questions for an assigned chapter. We told them that these questions would make up a short-answer quiz that covered the second half of the book. The “Improved Questions” chart in the appendix represents the students’ improved efforts in scope, contextualization, variety, and essentiality, which I will discuss below. They also presented us with some closely-related yet commendable qualities of close-reading, connections, and sincerity (See Appendix C for Improved Questions).

Close Reading

In Carol Jago’s English teaching guide, With Rigor for All (2000), she quoted Robertson Davies as writing, “The great sin is to assume that something that has been read once has been read forever...We must not gobble their [an artist’s] work, like chocolates or olives, or anchovies, and think we know it forever” (p. 35). She quoted him to bring up the point that most of us, when reading something for the first time, are taking in so much information that we cannot possibly detect all of the artistry and craftsmanship that exists within a piece of literature.

In that same vein, good readers tend to build tentative interpretations of troubling, confusing, or unclear portions of a text in order to keep their momentum. According to

Margaret Mackay (1997), as quoted in Jago, “they [good readers] simply take note that something is important and keep on reading without pausing to fret over its complete significance” (p. 33). Without reason to re-read, then, many gaps and unexamined interpretations may leave even a good reader with only partial or misguided understanding of a text.

What Sarah and I appreciated about the last round of students’ questions was that many of them signaled the students’ close reading. I sense that the student who wrote the question about Hitler had a hunch that the classroom interchange between teacher and students was a critical moment. It may have even been a moment in which this student formulated a tentative interpretation about why the author included it.

However, unlike the earlier drafts of questions which lacked contextualization, these questions clearly related to specific textual details that the students picked up as important enough to warrant revisiting. This makes me think that it is possible that question-writing provided the student with an opportunity to re-read that passage to further investigate Harper Lee’s purpose and meaning. In any event, the questions hinge on the skill of close reading.

Connections

Making connections are all about tracing themes throughout a text as well as

outside a text. As Carol Jago wrote, reading literature is about finding the “big ideas” (p. 42). What can this book teach us about ourselves? What does it reflect about our own world? When we forget the characters’ names, the setting, or even the author, what essence of human truth will we still remember?

The question about Jem becoming more like his father hints at “big idea” thinking. It indicates that this student has detected a change in Jem’s character and makes an interpretation as to why that change has occurred. This question reflects the student’s developing understanding of a father-son relationship, a boy’s maturation into a man, and also how individuals are and aren’t shaped by the authority figures around them. Not only is this student tracing a character’s development throughout the text, but wondering what factors may have influenced that change.

As opposed to the topical, on-the-lines questions that prompted minimal recall, or simply a “similar experience” earlier in the semester, this is the kind of question that metes out the “big ideas.”

The two questions about the mockingbirds are also compelling because of their sophisticated awareness of symbolism. The question, “Would you consider yourself a mockingbird?” represents the student’s understanding that the mockingbird is a symbol for something innocent/misunderstood.

Quite possibly, these “connective” and essential questions are easier to ask after

students have perspective on the book and enough textual details to reveal a pattern. Regardless, the practice and feedback on writing questions in earlier chapters presented a useful opportunity for Sarah and I to see what kind of instruction students needed to become better readers and question-writers.

Sincerity

These last questions struck me as genuine, because they weren't part of the classroom discussion. These were notices the students made on their own: societal status, sexism, empathy. It came as no surprise when student questions harped on discrimination and prejudice, but these other questions suggested that at least some of the students were beginning to read for their own individual purposes. They were formulating theories of their own about the novel's importance, theories that went beyond how Sarah and I encouraged them to read and interpret the text.

Student Voices -- A Follow-Up Survey

As students finished their independent work on a Friday afternoon as we were wrapping up our final projects for *TKAM*, I captured seven students from 7th (accelerated) and 8th (regular) period to fill out a survey that I hoped would enhance my perspective of what they learned about questioning. The survey itself asked students to rank how

strongly they agreed or disagreed with statements about question writing. It also included two open-ended questions that asked students to reflect on their experience (See Appendix D for Question-Writing Survey Results).

Disappointingly, the results of the ranking were relatively insignificant for a couple of reasons. First of all, I was only able to capture responses from ten percent of the students actively involved in this research, so my data is limited. Second of all, the responses were largely inconsistent. For instance, some students disagreed with the statement that question-writing helped improve their comprehension, but then agreed that question writing made them re-read for clarity and fact-check (which I assumed would help improve comprehension). Likewise, since students agreed that they were fact-checking during their question-generating, I didn't understand why they disagreed that question writing helped them prepare for journal responses. In this way, the majority of responses were fairly scattered.

On the other hand, the one statement that did receive a unanimous response of "strongly agree" was, "I understand that writing and responding to level I, II, and III questions requires different kinds of thinking." This is a promising find, considering that one of our goals in teaching questioning strategies was to show students that there are layers to understanding a text -- not only what is literally on-the-lines, but what a reader must *infer* and *interpret* beyond-the-lines as well. Though students may not have

internalized the process for how to think at those different levels (re-reading, fact-checking, visualizing, etc.), they were at least aware that different kinds of questions will require different kinds of mental work.

Also, the narrative responses did provide interesting insight into what students thought about question-writing (See Appendix E Open-Ended Survey Results). I appreciated that students recognized the “responsibility” involved in interrogating texts, which hits another one of our teaching goals. It was also refreshing to see that students thought questioning a text in this way forced them to look for “deeper” or more “valuable” meanings while pursuing a “broader range of thinking.” One student also noted that it was “better when you answer questions from your own intelligence level,” because “teachers are too smart.”

One comment really surprised me, however, because it reflects a subconscious concern I have always had regarding how to teach literature in a way that upholds a liberatory pedagogy. This student wrote that it would have been “pointless” just to receive the questions. This comment satisfies me because it crystallizes the importance of teaching students to question literature on their own terms. If all students ever do is “answer” questions, they lose the most engaging part of the learning process: that itchy, impetus of a question. Likewise, if teachers are always the ones asking the questions, then students are pushed to read a text in a way that is slanted toward that teacher’s

interpretation of the text.

Even in talking to Sarah about our next class text, *Romeo and Juliet*, we discovered that we read the play quite differently. She read the young lovers as innocent and passionate, while I read them as naïve and impulsive. When students are empowered with that template for how to ask a “good” question, then they become freer to read a novel through their particular set of lenses.

But of course, not all interpretations are created equal, which is why the second part of our research focused on developing students’ analytic and critical thinking skills in their journal responses.

Question Writing -- A Note

As per our observations and student survey responses, we decided that practice writing the three leveled AVID questions by the time we began reading *Romeo and Juliet* was no longer necessary. Students could successfully recognize and write the difference between level I, II, and II questions. However, we still wanted students to write questions about the text, because we appreciated its benefits. We began asking students to write “the essential question.” In many ways, this question required students to do some backwards problem-solving, because students first had to find the author’s main point and then reframe it as a question. Without much further explanation or scaffolding, we

practiced this kind of question-writing with Shakespearean sonnets and students came up with questions such as:

Is true love at first sight possible?

Does love have limits?

Should you love through your heart or your mind?

Is love thicker than blood?

The essential question differs from the AVID leveled questions and the journal questions mainly in function. Because students weren't writing journal responses from these questions, it didn't matter as much that they were open-ended, or even representative of a level three question (even though a thematic question does require level III thinking). The function was to get students to focus on the author's stance, main point, or theme. We wanted students to consider that "itch" that made the author write.

This is an important step in developing critical reading skills; if students can unearth the essential question, then all of a sudden the door is open to invite many other perspectives to interact with the author, rather than solely taking that author's stance at face-value. That essential question is ready to be applied to other situations, other texts, real-life scenarios, etc. In another important way, asking students to write an essential question for a text reminds them of the author's purpose for writing and that writing usually starts from an inquiry.

Unlike our reading of *TKAM* where students worked in groups to take literature circle notes on each chapter, students individually drew a cartoon sketch of the plot from each act and wrote an essential question that addressed its significance.

RESULTS II -- JOURNAL WRITING

Journal Writing -- Initial Attempts: Defining a New Problem

According to Costa (2001), critical thinkers make three key moves when they are writing. They use specific terminology, refrain from overgeneralization, and support their assumptions with valid data. In a journal response, then, critical thinking would require close reading through drawing on and discussing quotes, textual details, and maintaining a scope appropriate to a focused, claim-based purpose.

As mentioned earlier, students' first attempts at journal writing during our reading of *TKAM* suffered, in part, due to problematic questions. Most notably, we observed that writing either veered off into uninformed predictions, demonstrated a reliance on very little textual evidence, or lacked a clear purpose -- all three of which seem to be closely dependant on the others. Though we weren't necessarily looking for a five-paragraph literary analysis, we did hope that students would be able to formulate a conclusion or main point to their responses that spoke to some larger significance of the text or a textual feature.

Dornan, et. al (2003), in their teaching guide, *Within and Beyond the Writing Process in the Secondary English Classroom*, discussed a reader response criticism as granting every reader the right to interpret a text subjectively, in a transactional process between reader and text (p. 157). In this way, the reader goes back and forth between

subjectivity and objectivity, as she works to find a middle ground between her own understandings and the abstract world created by the text -- all the while putting a name to the parts of the text that create new spaces for understanding. As with a good journal question, a good reader response should address the questions, “So what?” and “Why does this matter?”

As the first round of journal questions lacked this analytical quality, so too did the journal responses, as evidenced by the following examples.

Purpose

One student, in response to the question of how Miss Caroline might have felt after her first day and year of teaching first grade, did a fine job of interpreting from specific textual details that she might have felt some “culture shock” by discussing the disparity between her peppermint-drop attire and Walter Cunningham’s state of poverty. But my question to this student was whether or not Harper Lee was trying to relay a bigger message to us about education, perhaps, or culture. His response, though well-informed, lacked that critical focus on the author’s intentions. Of course, the question played some role in misguiding his response, but I was disappointed, since his response was short, that he didn’t push his thinking into a deeper analysis of why Harper Lee gave us such a vivid description of Miss Caroline in the first place. Why and how might those

cultural differences matter?

Lack of Evidence

Take, for instance, the following question and response: “Do you think the kids playing “Boo Radley” was true? If not, describe what you think Boo’s life was like?” The student who responded to this question simply states his opinion that the children’s play was “certainly imaginative,” but then wanders off into an elaborate background of the Radley’s family history. Boo’s Dad, according to this student, was from Europe, was mugged while he was visiting Maycomb, and eventually bribed a local farmer for enough money to buy a house. I wrote in the margins of this response, “What makes you think this is the real story?” It lacks textual evidence, which makes his claims dangerously uninformed. Furthermore, it serves no real purpose in helping the student better understand Harper Lee’s craft.

Granted, the question was tough to respond to after only reading the novel’s first five chapters, but a more critical response would have developed, first, from textual details. This student could have framed his interpretation in what he knew about Boo, which is mostly second and third-hand information from Jem, a child, and Miss Stephanie Crawford, the town gossip queen. He could have described the children’s games and analyzed the significance of only knowing a character through the eyes of children, which

would begin a discussion of the importance of perspective. Such moves would have helped harness this student's background story and saved it from random shots in the dark, as entertaining as those random shots were to read.

Clearly then, our job would be to help students focus their analysis on a reasonable data set and then use that data to support their claims.

Journal Writing -- Instructional Intervention

Because of time constraints and our focus on improving students' question-writing skills, our instructional intervention for journal writing did not occur until we had moved on to reading William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

At the beginning of the unit, our original plan was that students' final assignments for *Romeo and Juliet* would be two-fold: student-generated essay questions and a final three-page essay response. Our goal, then, was to provide instruction for students that would help them write an essay that included the following qualities: a clear purpose including some level of analysis that relied on supportive examples and evidence from the text.

In order to start preparing students to understand how to make supported claims and inferences based on textual detail, we asked them to do a character study. The main goal of this character study was to prompt students to infer what kind of advice they

would give Romeo and Juliet on their new marriage and what their predictions were for this couple's future. In a whole-class panel discussion, each student would role-play an assigned character.

In scaffolding for discussion, we designed a character research sheet that divided character notes into level I, II, and III thinking to connect the thinking required for different kinds of note-taking as well as different kinds of question-generating (See Appendix F for *Happily Ever After...or Not...*). Therefore, "describe your character," asked students to find the on-the-line descriptions of that character (gender, occupation, physical features, etc.).

"List character traits + evidence," required level II thinking, because the students would have to infer these traits based on the character's dialogue and actions. One student, for example, called Juliet "impatient," while another called her, "passionate." In either case, we wanted the student to reference what detail in the book made him/her interpret Juliet in that particular way so that we could see the students were using textual details to support their interpretations.

For level III note-taking, we asked students to imagine a scene between their character and Romeo and Juliet. How would this character picture the future of this marriage? What advice would he/she give? Who else in the play might this character agree or disagree with? Would their tone be calm and logical? Inflamed? Ecstatic? Again,

we stressed that this prediction should be based on what we already know about the character.

The final step in note-taking, then, was to design a symbol that would represent their character. They would add this symbol onto a name-tag so we could easily identify each character during discussion.

In grading the students' character research notes, our teacher comments focused mainly on checking that students were including specific, textual evidence to support their inferences and predictions. We commended quotes, the inclusion of act and scene numbers, and detailed summaries to stress that even though level II and III questions don't ask for information that is right there on-the-lines, they still require attention to those details in order to support claims. In contrast to a behaviorist's instructional motivation to simply encourage the behavior, our intention was to help students become more successful classroom participants in backing up their opinions with support. If dialogue is important to democracy, then we had to provide students with practice in what a dialogue with multiple view-points would look like.

In a second effort to prepare students to write successful essays, we gave them two days to draft and revise their essay questions. This two-day instructional period began with a hand-out that listed the qualities of an "essential question" and combined it with our previous "good journal question" template (See Appendix G for Writing the

Essential Question: R + J). Sarah modeled for students how to use the hand-out to get to an essential question. First, students helped her generate a general list of textual details we notice when reading a play: characters, dialogue, action, setting, wording, etc. We then advised them to pick one of these textual details to focus on for their question.

Sarah chose to focus on Lady Capulet. Students helped us describe her as grouchy, unhappy, and uncaring towards Juliet. Again, to highlight the importance of supporting claims, we pushed students to give us evidence that backed-up their descriptions. “When and how did she demonstrate that she was uncaring towards Juliet?” we asked until students recalled her dialogue and actions.

Next, students helped identify some of the themes in the play: true love, hate, revenge, violence, tragedy, relationships, etc. We modeled for students how to take our interest in Lady Capulet and link it to a theme by asking questions. For instance, if we chose “tragedy” as the theme we wanted to explore, then we could ask: “What role does Lady Capulet play in Juliet’s tragic death?”

When we opened this question up for discussion, some students argued that Lord Capulet was more to blame than Lady Capulet for their daughter’s death, since he was the one who ordered Juliet’s marriage to Paris. Others sympathized with Lady Capulet’s situation, since she, herself, had been forced to marry at age twelve. Still, others thought Lady Capulet should have developed a more loving relationship with her daughter so

Juliet wouldn't grow up to be unhappy in marriage, too.

The discussion turned into an impromptu debate, with many students chiming in with their take on Lady Capulet's role in the tragedy of her daughter's death. We constantly pushed students to provide reasons for their interpretation by drawing from support and evidence from the text. We were pleased to see that one question could spark so many different responses and that students were getting the hang of providing examples to support their opinions. In Nussbaum's (as cited in McCann, 2006) words, this was not just a classroom of competing interest groups, but a classroom of students capable of reasoning about their beliefs.

From there, the discussion easily swung us into a bigger question, "Who was the most responsible for this tragedy?" Some students thought Friar Lawrence because he should have known better than to serve the lustful whims of teenagers, many thought the Montagues and Capulets were to blame for continuing this useless feud in the first place, and interestingly, some female students even thought Romeo was to blame for pushing Juliet too hard to make an impossible decision between love and family.

While students were still primed from the discussion, we had them work in pairs to write their own essential question that included textual detail, thematic connection, and room for personal opinion. We collected these in order to compile them into a master list from which students would select their essay prompt.

For our final instructional preparation for the essay, we photocopied two journal response examples from *To Kill a Mockingbird*. We considered one more effective and successful than the other, and told students to determine which one that was by noting each essay's different features. Students immediately picked up on how one response was organized around a clear purpose (or thesis), used examples and quotations from the text, and reflected a certain amount of time and care put into attending to surface-level clarity of grammar. The other essay, students noticed, included no examples from the book, did not have a clearly definable purpose, and seemed to wander only towards the goal of reaching the two-page limit rather than building toward a conclusion.

For all practical purposes, students demonstrated that they knew what an analysis-focused essay with supportive textual evidence looked like in writing. We felt they were ready to write.

However, as the year quickly approached end-of-year examinations, we had a decision to make regarding how to best use the rest of our class time. Given students' success with generating and discussing their essential questions, we decided to revise our expectations and drop the final writing assignment. We simply ran out of time to give the students the extra day they would need to write their essays as thoughtfully and successfully as we wanted, so we gave them a choice: design a "ThySpace" page for a character based on the popular networking webpage "MySpace," or write the essay.

Only one student chose the essay. But we weren't surprised. In light of why we did not push students into a final essay-write, it is useful to consider what we would have done, had we followed through with the essay preparation. Namely, as Andrea Lunsford (2009) suggests in the *Everyday Writer*, the steps would have proceeded in the following order: first, help students understand the purpose of the writing assignment, second, ask students to craft a working thesis or hypothesis that makes an opinionated claim about the text, third, give time for students to gather and organize information that relates to the working thesis, fourth, invite students to revise the thesis as necessary, and fifth, provide a structural template that would help students draft an outline.

After we analyzed students' notes on the hand-out, "Writing the Essential Questions," we realized they were already going through those steps -- not in a direct way, but certainly in a very similar way. Look at the first question on the chart, for instance [See Appendix H for Essential Question Chart].

What do you think Shakespeare wanted us to learn from Romeo taking vengeance on Tybalt? What effect did this have on Romeo's life? Have you ever taken revenge on someone? Did it pay off or did you regret it later? Would you do it again? Explain.

Underlying the student question regarding what effect vengeance had on Romeo's life is the hypothesis that vengeance had any effect at all on the events of Romeo's life.

Granted,

the hypothesis is not clearly identified by the question, but I would guess that if we asked its authors what Shakespeare wanted us to learn from Romeo's actions, they would respond with something along the lines of "Vengeance begets vengeance," or, "Two wrongs don't make a right." In any event, at some point in formulating this question, students were at least subconsciously relying on a working thesis of their own.

Also behind this question is a focused set of data: 1. Romeo as a character 2. The scene in which Romeo kills Tybalt 3. The scenes that unfold as a direct result of Tybalt's death. The authors of this question were obviously attending to these textual details in order to look for a cause and effect connection between events.

In a way, this question also inhabits its own sense of internal order and organization. The first question prompts an opinion, a thesis, that could serve as the central claim for an essay response. The second question prompts an analysis of events in the book that support that claim. The third question explores the lasting dangers of vengeance, or potentially sets up a conclusion on the significance of vengeance by allowing the responder to compare his/her own experience with vengeance to Romeo's.

For the most part, the questions reflect internal logic, a set of related data, and a hypothesis. In a sense, the questions were mini-essays. Given more time, we would have certainly used the opportunity to transfer this question-writing process into drafting an extended essay, as students would surely benefit from seeing how they can use an essay

prompt to aid in the organization and data collection for their responses. However, we were content that dedicating so much time to crafting the question as a genre produced such organized, evidence-based theorizing about literature.

LIVING THE QUESTIONS

As mentioned in previous sections, a limitation that we saw in AVID's approach to teaching questioning strategies was its lack of real-life application. To me, the usefulness and power in teaching students how to question information, is its transformational potential. Sarah and I had discussed from the start of reading *TKAM* that we didn't want to get students fired up about injustice, prejudice and intolerance without giving them an outlet for acting on that frustration. We weren't entirely sure what the final project would be, but we knew that it had to move beyond the book and address issues of concern in students' lives. Introducing an "essential question" allowed us to do this because it primed students to make text-to-self connections.

During our unit in *TKAM* an unfortunate joke ran in the school newspaper whose humor was based on stereotypes about Jews and Canadians. Seeing this as a teaching moment, Sarah brought the "joke" to the attention of the students and asked them what they thought about it. A group of students in her first period class decided to take action. What they embarked on was a campaign that would include a letter to the editor of the school newspaper, a public service announcement and a photo-spread in the next edition of the paper with a caption that read, "Labels are for soup cans, not people." (See Appendix I for School Newspaper)

One student, in particular, took it upon herself to do most of the planning. In her

letter to the editor she wrote, “We ask that you think of how others might interpret jokes or material you put in the [school newspaper]... There are some kids of the Jewish religion or of Canadian heritage that could’ve been offended by that joke. If we want to rid the world of racism, we must first rid ourselves of it.” She then had the letter signed by approximately fifty other students who supported her complaint. Later, she organized a group of students to film a public service announcement about hurtful and devastating consequences of labeling. Clearly, this student *questioned* the intent and effect of information. Beyond that, she took on the role of *living the question*.

This event crystallized for us what the culminating project would need to be: a public service display informing others about how they can support the “mockingbirds” in our own communities. We asked students to research a social justice issue that mattered most to them, be it the environment, animal protection, homelessness, poverty, immigration, etc. and create a display that told us the history of the issue, who the mockingbirds were, and why and how we could help.

Humorously, a group of students in the seventh period class handed Sarah a letter one day during their work on the project. It read, “This project is about standing up for our rights, and the rights of others around us. According to Article 24 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, ‘Each workday should not be too long, since everyone has the right to rest and should be able to take regular paid holidays.’” The student author

then went on to list the various responsibilities of a ninth grader as well as the costs of not getting enough sleep at night. Ironically, we had given the students the tools they needed to question the status quo and they used it against us to draft a protest letter for an extension on their project! It was perfect.

Without hesitation, we gave all of the classes a time-extension and eventually filled the ninth grade halls with posters, tri-folds, and even videos that ranged in subject matter from over-population, to gay rights, to drug and alcohol abuse, to domestic violence. The national day of silence in support of gay rights happened to be taking place during students' project displays and many students -- across the ninth grade student body -- took an oath of silence to support the cause.

To the chagrin of other instructors who also had to deal with non-communicative classes, I personally applauded the fact that students were not afraid to visibly activate change on an issue that they researched and cared about. To me, the silence was a deafening success that we had -- at least for some students -- connected critical literacy to life.

IMPLICATIONS

A prudent question is one-half of wisdom.

-Francis Bacon

Questions and Critical Literacy

As students moved from mastering an ability to write leveled questions, journal questions, and eventually, the essential question, whether they knew it or not, they had to take on the role of an expert reader's critical stance. Particularly, using questioning strategies as a tool for critical literacy seemed to be effective because of the interrogative and examination-driven nature of a question. It forced discerning and skeptical attitudes, which I believe are the habits of mind that critical thinkers adopt.

If we consider critical literacy an active deconstruction and reconstruction of the world as it is represented through words and texts, then at its heart is an examination of the status quo. Texts are intersecting points of struggle for the personal, the political, and the social reflecting back at us human truths. Therefore, any instruction that helps students read more critically may help them, as individuals become more conscious, as Freire hoped, of the ways in which *their* identity has been constructed by social and historical contexts. This awareness, in turn, opens the door for free will and informed choice to redefine that identity.

The most rewarding aspect of this study was observing how students embraced the value of critical literacy. Teenagers, in general, know first-hand about power, struggle, and injustice, so highlighting literacy as an authentic means of combating that struggle hits close to home. Going beyond the parameters of any classroom assignment, students wrote letters of petition and took oaths of silence. That says a lot for the activism that a liberatory pedagogy promotes, but it also says a lot for the importance of striving towards the level III question that ask how issues we see in texts apply to a broader scope of an actual, lived reality.

Questions and Responsibility

What also seems to be gained from teaching students how to craft meaningful questions is not only a freedom and liberation from teachers doing all of the work of probing, wondering, and making connections, but also a freedom and liberation for students to pursue their own interpretation of a text. This exempts students from having to play the game of “what does the teacher know that she wants me to know?”

Conversely, it invites students to do the work of expert readers by attending closely to textual details, making inferences and personal connections, gathering evidence, testing hypotheses, and considering the author’s intent. This, in turn, presents an opportunity for *struggle*, as we observed from students’ first attempts at constructing

questions. With apprenticed instruction through that struggle, students eventually gained independence in strategic knowledge about engaging with texts. Their final questions represented *change* -- not only in grammatical clarity and effectiveness, but in attitude. Student questions were less rote and perfunctory and more transactional, reflective and personal.

Students, in their surveys, even mentioned that they felt more responsible for their learning when they were the ones who posed the questions. Likewise, they admitted that generating their own questions forced them to search for deeper meanings in a language that was more authentic, understandable, and accessible to them because it was their own. Considering Dewey, Bruner, and Piaget's perspective on learning, being able to phrase questions in ones' own words may just get at the fringes of understanding in a way that a teacher-posed question cannot.

If nothing else, direct instruction on the kinds of thinking required to respond to level I, II, and III questions certainly helped students read more strategically. Any work that teachers can do to delineate and define the difference, for example, between "recall" and "analyze" -- to look at the question as its own genre worth studying -- will at least improve students' ability to successfully answer such a question.

Questions and Debate

Questions, by their very nature, are a spring-board for discussion, research, exploration, and revelation of multiple points of view. In making questions a central focus of the classroom, teachers help students engage with the full process of learning -- from problem identification, to data collection, evaluation, and to a final act of application.

Furthermore, as Wilhelm (2007) and Nussbaum (as cited in McCann, 2006) suggest, focusing learning around central questions that can be debated sets the stage for instructing students how to reason about their beliefs and opinions. This Socratic ability is the mark of civic freedom. Though students may need additional help in formulating evidence-based opinions, the ability to discuss, revise, and accept differences in thinking is what will ultimately produce citizens ready to participate in a democratic society.

Q AND A?

Writing leveled questions in order to get to the “essential question” promotes higher-level thinking. As discussed in my analysis of the students’ last essay question for *Romeo and Juliet*, the questions reflected theory-testing and evidence examination. In terms of Marzano and Kendall’s (2008) taxonomy, this includes the thinking skills of retrieval, comprehension, analysis, and knowledge utilization.

Coupled with additional documentation of students' thinking and note-taking, having students write essay *questions* rather than essay *responses*, may be a valuable assignment in any teacher's repertoire for a number of reasons.

- It potentially saves time for student and teacher.
- Promotes choice.
- Develops interpretive skills.
- Places students in the role of the expert.
- Links learning to a clearly defined problem.
- Helps students see the connection between question and response.
- Privileges an authorial reading of a text.
- Encourages thematic attentiveness and a consideration of the "Why?" and "So what?" of texts.

In response to Francis Bacon's assertion that a prudent question is one-half of wisdom, this study challenges that a prudent question may, indeed, be more.

DISCUSSION

Any final discussion would be remiss if I did not admit that wrapped up in this project is really two prongs of learning; first, is what the students demonstrated they learned from questioning, and second, is what I learned from questioning. The significance of partaking in teacher research, especially during my professional year internship, is that it encouraged me not only to name my philosophy as a teacher, but to find a way to make that philosophy work within district curriculum and the context of another teacher's classroom. It provided a focused occasion for me to zoom in and out of practice and theory, constantly checking to make sure that any prescriptive instruction I was giving was in the service of students becoming more independent learners. Turning the questioning over to the students certainly was a move toward providing them with more choice and ownership over their learning, especially in light of the necessity of reading a whole-class novel.

Teacher research also calls for a praxis of reflection and action. In closely analyzing student work, I was constantly tapped in to what students were understanding and misunderstanding. This allowed grading to be fairer and instruction to be specifically targeted at problem areas. I have learned from this that the tapestry of teaching needs to be fluid and flexible. Though I may have fantastic lesson plans for day three of a unit, if students are missing a key component of understanding on day two, then I have to adjust

my lesson accordingly. Learning how to learn from my students is a vital part of my own *struggle followed by change* as a teacher.

Small bites of improvement make this task more digestible. A new teacher is overwhelmed by standards, classroom management, delivery of instruction, differentiation, modification, encouraging, holding accountable, and sometimes just surviving in a sea of one hundred and fifty students. Having a clearly focused problem narrowed the scope of my concern to what I could reasonably control, contain, and improve. Teacher research, at its core, is empowering to teachers because it systematically tackles a problem that *can* be overcome. As my supervising mentor Jeff Wilhelm told me, “You can only chew the elephant one bite at a time.”

Adding direct and explicit questioning strategies to my instruction may have been a small bite, but it was packed with educational benefits. Namely, if it is a question that drives learning, then it is disconcerting to wonder what happens in the classroom when students aren't asking questions. From my observations, schools have done a fine job of grooming students to be standardized test-takers, it does not necessarily encourage the active construction of new knowledge, original thought, or change. Questions, on the other hand, invite students to engage confidently and critically with texts, each other, and adults. Questions rattle not only the cage of the brain, but of the social structures that privilege some and not others. For teachers, questions may even rattle instruction.

What I still wonder about using Costa's questioning scheme to help students get to the essential question is:

- Are there alternative questioning schemes that may be more accessible to students?
- How can questioning strategies be applied to other genres besides the novel?
- Would it be easier to introduce questioning strategies with non-fiction rather than a novel?
- How can I extend the use of questioning in the classroom to allow for students to explore their own essential question?

I also see further potential for transforming student journaling into dialogue journals and discussion seminars in order to promote and deepen the exchange of ideas among students. Because of time constraints I mainly focused instruction on teaching students how to ask leveled and essential questions, but in the future, I foresee an expansion in how we can *explore* the questions in the classroom. Students could potentially lead their own literature circles, design their own responses to literature, or even create their own "essential questions" to pursue in a unit of study. Moves such as these would further align my ideals in a liberatory pedagogy with my actions -- or more accurately, students' actions.

It is undeniable that questions beget more questions. Like Rilke, in his *Letters to a*

Young Poet, the questioning mind must sometimes accept ambiguity. Admit now -- in this skin -- that answers are not possible. This is an important statement to accept, because it is my experience that a mind unwilling to question is not only unwilling to entertain the possibility of learning, but incapable of it. Questioning reflects that uncertainty, curiosity and wonderment that leaves a mind open to new ideas or complicating evidence. Not questioning means unexamined acceptance, or worse, complete complacency. Nowhere in that is *change, struggle, or learning*.

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Appendix A: Problems with Initial Question Attempts

Scope	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Why was Aunt Alexandra so into Scout's business? Have you ever had a similar experience having someone not minding their own business? What does this say about the world minding their own business? 2. Have you ever misunderstood someone like Scout did to Boo? Explain. 3. Boo Radley scares people. What does this say about the way that we interpret or handle fear in the world around us?
Variety	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Why is it that Mr. Radley doesn't want Boo to form a relationship with Jem and Scout, and has someone ever tried to stop you from developing a relationship with another person? Why do you think anyone would try to take that privilege away from you? 2. Mr. Radley fills the hole in the tree with cement to stop Jem and Scout from receiving Boo's gifts. Has an authority ever done this to you in your life? How does it feel to be cut off, and why do you suppose they do it? 3. ...Have you ever had a similar experience?
Essentiality	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Have you ever felt excluded like Dill from his parents? 2. Like the kids' reaction to the snow in the book have you ever been super excited about a new experience that someone else might take for granted? Likewise have you ever taken anything for granted that someone else might think is really special and what does that say about how great experiences can lose their zest?
Contextualization	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. When you were growing up, did you ever act like Jem? 2. In Miss Maudie's conversation with Scout, what was she trying to convey about religion? 3. Have you ever prejudged someone badly enough that ended up being kind and compassionate like what has happened to Boo Radley so far?

Appendix B:

Level 1, 2 and 3 Questions:

Level One Questions (On the lines)

Readers can point to one correct answer right in the text.
Words found in these questions include:

- defining
- observing
- describing
- naming
- identifying
- reciting
- noting
- listing
- summarizing

Level 1 statement

- Define irony.
- Where is the setting of *To Kill a Mockingbird*?
- Summarize the events in Chapter 15.
- Why is Tom Robinson in jail?
- Is Atticus racist?

Level Two Questions (Between the lines)

Readers infer answers from what the text implicitly states, finding answers in several places in the text. Words found in these questions include:

- analyzing
- grouping
- synthesizing
- comparing/contrasting
- inferring
- sequencing

Level 2 Statement

- Compare and contrast Mr. Ewell and Mr. Cunningham as fathers.
- Explain the effect of the word nigger on Atticus. How is that different from the way Scout views it?
- Why is Atticus different from his neighbors?
- Why is Aunt Alexandra disturbed by Scout? What does this say about Alexandra?
- Why is the character Lula brought in to the story? What does she seem to represent?

Level Three Questions (Connections)

Readers think beyond what the text states. Answers are based on reader's prior knowledge/experience and will vary. Words found in these questions include:

- evaluating
- judging
- applying a principle
- speculating
- imagining
- predicting
- hypothesizing
- generalize – how does this apply in a bigger scope?

Level 3 Statement

- Predict how Boo Radley will change in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.
- Imagine you were Tom Robinson. How would you feel?
- How might Miss Maudie be at least partially responsible for the prejudice in Maycomb?
- Why do we continue to deal with racism as an issue?

Appendix C: Improved Questions

1. Why does Atticus tell Scout it isn't okay to hate Hitler regardless of what he does to the Jewish people?
2. On page 276, Heck Tate says to Atticus, "Let the dead bury the dead." What does he mean by that?

Close Reading

1. In what ways is Jem becoming more like his father, Atticus?
2. Scout says punishing Boo Radley would be like killing a mockingbird. Explain why this is.
3. Who are the mockingbirds in the book? Would you consider yourself a mockingbird?

Connections

1. When Miss Maudie tells Scout about the foot-washing Baptist, how do you think Scout feels when she hears 'women are a sin by definition'? Is sexism visible in your life?"
2. What does Bob Ewell mean when he blames Atticus for "getting" his job? And would it have made more sense for Bob to blame Atticus for taking away his societal status?
3. Why is Jem starting to care for animals that aren't important to society? (referring to his anger at Scout for squishing a bug)

Sincerity

Appendix D: Question-Writing Survey Results					
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
In general, I am confident that I can recognize the difference between a level I, II, and III question.	4	3	0	0	
In general, I am confident that I can generate level I, II, or III questions for To Kill a Mockingbird.	2	3	2	0	
I understand that writing and responding to level I, II, and III questions requires different kinds of thinking.	7	0	0	0	
Writing leveled questions for each chapter helped me focus my attention on the surface action of the book as well as the deeper meaning/importance of events. I believe that my reading comprehension improved by paying attention to these different levels.	1	2	3	1	
When generating essential questions for each chapter, I often re-read passages to clarify my own understanding, check details, or reconnect to important moments in the book.	2	5	0	0	
Writing my own questions improved my ability to connect, personally, to the characters, events, or themes in the book. I actively notices passages that seemed troubling, interesting, or important.	1	4	2	0	
Writing questions forced me to make sense of the parts of the book I didn't understand.	2	2	3	0	
When collaborating with my group to write quiz or journal questions, we often debated over whether or not a question was essential, or helped each other revise questions to fit the appropriate levels. Our debates often lead to "fact-checking" in the book.	3	2	1	1	

<p>I think that generating our own quiz and journal questions improved my preparedness to respond to these questions. The act of writing the questions gave me a chance to study.</p>	2	2	3	0
<p>In general, the questions my peers asked gave me a chance not only to demonstrate my knowledge of TKAM, but to extend my thinking of how it might relate to my own life.</p>	1	4	2	0
<p>In general, the questions my peers asked were interesting, engaging, and qualified as "good" questions, as decided by our class template (prompting detail from the book, personal opinion, and connection to theme).</p>	2	3	2	0
<p>I prefer responding to student-generated questions rather than teacher-generated questions.</p>	3	1	2	1

Appendix E: Open-Ended Survey Responses

Narrative Prompt	Student Narratives
<p>Put yourself in teacher shoes. Why do you think we had you write the quiz and journal prompts? What have you learned about questioning, reading, writing, and thinking from posing your own questions about the text? What are the pros of YOU asking the questions? What are the cons?</p>	
Student 1	<p>To give us more responsibility and see if we could find the deeper and more valuable questions. I learned to look and read between the lines. With me asking the questions, I really wanted to make them good to allow me to write a better answer, instead of other students or teachers I may not understand.</p>
Student 2	<p>To make it easier for us to understand, but sometimes they were confusing.</p>
Student 3	<p>To make it easier for people to get the proper knowledge.</p>
Student 4	<p>I think we had to write the quiz and journal questions because it made us think more and it would've been pointless just to receive the questions. We have learned to look at the deeper meaning of things and look from a different perspective. The pros of us asking the questions is that it's student-to-student and we may understand it better, but at the same time, it may not be a well-generated question.</p>
Student 5	<p>No narrative</p>

Reading check, Pro -- learning on own Con -- if I didn't understand something in the book, it was hard to figure it out

Student 6

I think you guys wanted to make us understand things that were hidden so we could see the "bigger picture." It makes me have a broader range of thinking and helps me have a crystal clear image of what I'm supposed to be understanding. It's better when you answer questions from your own intelligence level. Teachers are too smart.

Student 7

Appendix F:

Happily Ever After...or Not...?

In class, we will be holding a panel discussion of the marriage of Romeo and Juliet. Some of you may think the union of these two young lovers is ill-advised and doomed for disaster; others may find it honorable and romantic. We want to give each character a chance to speak their support or admonishments. So get ready to role-play...



On the Panel:

Prince Escalus	Romeo	Lady Montague	Sampson/Gregory Combo
Paris	Mercutio	Lady Capulet	A citizen of Verona
Montague	Benvolio	Juliet	Friar Lawrence
Capulet	Tybalt	Nurse	William Shakespeare

Character Research Notes: In preparation for panel discussion, you and a partner will research your character and prepare discussion notes on the back of this sheet.

1. Provide a brief description of your character. (Think Level I for this. Literally, on-the-line, what do we know about this character?)
2. List their character traits + evidence from the book that demonstrates these traits. (Think Level II for this. What can you infer about your character's personality traits based on what we know about him/her?)
3. Draw a symbol to represent this character. This can be any sort of pictorial design or emblem.
4. Based on your character research, predict what you think your character would think and say about Romeo and Juliet's marriage. (Think Level III for this. You may even imagine a scene with your character sitting down to give advice to Romeo and Juliet. What would he/she say? What kind of tone would he/she use? Who else on the panel do you think your character would agree with? Disagree with?)
5. You also need to create a name-tag for your character. *Feel free to bring in props or articles of clothing that might also help you "get into character."

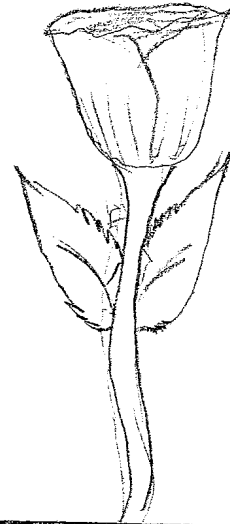
Character Research Notes: 25 points

1. Level I Description of your character

- young
- innocent
- in love with Romeo
- loyal
- impatient
- unsure
- Brave (going through w/ all of this)

2. A symbolic representation of your character

"What's in a name? that which we call a rose by any other name, would smell as sweet?"



3. Level II Inference of character traits + textual evidence

Juliet is very cautious about her relationship w/ Romeo.

Balcony Scene: "it is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden; too like the lightning, which doth cease to be ere one can say 'it lightens'"
She thinks that it is way too rushed and sudden.

She is very impatient when it comes to the nurse coming home from talking to Romeo.

4. Level III Predict + Imagine

Imagine you were in Juliet's place. How would you deal with all of this? You're in love with your family's enemy and your mother is trying to get you to marry someone else. How brave do you think Juliet is? and what decision would you make? Marry the love of your life or make your family happy and marry Paris?

Appendix G:

Writing the Essential Questions: Romeo and Juliet

An essential question should:

- *Develop from textual evidence (and real-life experience)...we need to have enough data available to answer the question successfully.
- *Get to the heart of the text (why did Shakespeare write this? Why did he write it this way? What did he want us to notice or think about?).
- *Be open-ended and debatable (open to interpretation).
- *Concise and clearly stated (refer us to specifics in the play if you need to; spelling & grammar matter too!).
- *Be interesting and relevant to YOU!

Textual Detail

Character - Iambic Pentameter - Lady Capulet
 Setting - wording -
 Plot - Conflict - Tragedy -
 Blower, Groovy - unhappy
 close minded,
 uncaring, social standing

Thematic Connection

True love
 hate
 feuding
 impulsivity
 Tragedy
 Why is lady capulet so
 unhappy, Bitter/Angry

Personal Opinion

- lord capulet is in control of her
 - 12 yrs old when married.
 I think that this is
 sad
 A lot of adults do this
 to kids.

Draft 2 essential questions for Romeo and Juliet:

Lady Capulet was pulled away from her parents so she isn't very close to Juliet. Do you think that if she hadn't been married off so soon she would be closer to Juliet, then Juliet wouldn't be in such a hurry to find love. Then she wouldn't have died? Have you ever had an experience that happened one way and you wonder what would have happened if the circumstances were different and how does your experience relate to my one in the story.

Appendix H: Writing the Essential Questions:

Romeo and Juliet

Student Questions	What They Show Us
<p>1. What do you think Shakespeare wanted us to learn from Romeo taking vengeance on Tybalt? What effect did this have on Romeo's life? Have you ever taken revenge on someone? Did it pay off or did you regret it later? Would you do it again? Explain.</p>	<p>What did Shakespeare want us to learn...? -- Awareness of author intent; Connection to theme -- vengeance/violence; Connection of cause and effect in the play -- "What effect...?"; Invitation to explore personal connection and formulate own opinion</p>
<p>2. In the play Romeo and Juliet, the young couple met, fell in love, got married and killed themselves all within about five days. How do their impulsive decisions affect bad outcomes? How have impulsive decisions affected you and your life? Explain a time when impulsive decisions ended badly for you.</p>	<p>Awareness of the importance of time in the play and what point the author may have intended in his choice to rush the events; Hypothesizing reason for tragedy (or Romeo and Juliet's tragic flaws) might be "impulsive decisions"; Connection of cause and effect in the play; Invitation to explore personal connection and formulate own opinion</p>
<p>3. Romeo thought he was in love with Rosaline, but he got over her quickly. What does this say about his "love" for Juliet? Have you ever ignorantly thought you were in love with someone and then later it just turned out to be a crush? What do you think this says about the impulsive lust that occurs in young love compared to the true compassion and understanding of one another that occurs in true love?</p>	<p>Quotes around "love" -- students recognize that it can be defined many ways, depending on perspective; "lust" and "young love" versus "true compassion" in "true love" -- hypothesizing that age might have something to do with perspective, hypothesizing that Romeo's love might not be "true"</p>
<p>4. Do you think Shakespeare thought that this play was going to be applied to everyday life even 500 years later? After watching and reading Romeo and Juliet, what did you take away from this story? Do you think that every ninth grader should read this play? Explain.</p>	<p>Do you think Shakespeare thought... -- Awareness of author intent; "...what do you take away...?" -- Critical approach to play's applicability/essentiality; Awareness of potential cultural differences vs. universal human truths, but also open-ended enough that students might even become critical of the Boise School District curriculum (citing the difficulty of language in the play); This question is "meta."</p>

COMEDY

Top 4 Homer Simpson Quotes

- #1 'I'm normally not a praying man, but if you're up there, please save me, Superman.'
- #2 'What's the point of going out? We're just going to wind up back here anyway.'
- #3 'Weaseling out of things is important to learn. It's what separates us from the animals... except the weasel.'
- #4 'Kids, you tried your best and you failed miserably. The lesson is, never try.'

On a dark and stormy night, an American, Canadian and a Jew were in a horrible car accident. All three were rushed to the hospital, though all three had died before they arrived. Just as they were about to put the toe tag on the American, he awoke and opened his eyes. Astonished, the doctors and nurses asked him what had happened. "Well," said the American, "I remember the crash, and then there was a bright white light, and then the Canadian and the Jew and I were standing at the pearly gates of heaven. St. Peter approached us and said that we were all too young to die, and that for a donation of \$150 we could return to the earth." He continued, "So of course, I pulled out my wallet and gave him the \$150, and the next thing I knew I was back here." "That's amazing!" said one of the doctors, "But what happened to the other two?" "Last I saw them," replied the American, "the Jew was haggling over the price and the Canadian was waiting for the government to pay his."

Retraction-

An apology from the Journalism Class.

In the latest issue of The North Star, a joke was published in the comedy section of our paper that negatively portrayed people of the Jewish religion and people of Canadian heritage. It has been brought to our attention that many were offended by the image it portrayed. When this joke was published, it was not taken into context by our class that it gave out a message of white supremacy.

Jokes like the one that was put in our paper may seem harmless, but in Nazi Germany, it was little "harmless" jokes that eventually led to the holocaust. These jokes supported the stereotypes, building up a growing hatred towards the Jewish religion.

The student who submitted this didn't mean it that way and did not think of the overall message of this joke, but that does not mean that it's okay. We all realize now what sort of image this gives not only the journalism class itself but the entire school as a whole. We assure you that something like this will never happen again, and we hope that you can forgive us for this lapse of judgment.

Sincerest Apologies,

The Journalism Class

Stereotypes

"They say that time changes things, but you actually have to change them yourself"

- Andy Warhol

I will begin this article by saying, I am not writing this to criticize or blame anyone for what happened in the paper last month. I believe that it was a fault that not only one person can be blamed for. I believe though, we can use this mistake and turn it into a learning experience, This is a live example that we truly do stereotype people without realizing it.

We all know what a stereotype is. There is never any basis to it or in-depth knowledge. It is just a generalization. Honestly, judging someone will get you nowhere. Like calling a smart kid "nerdy" or someone who is unique, "weird". One thing to keep in mind is that no one person is greater than another in this world. What I believe is that "stereotypers" and "stereotypee's" run parallels, since they all are the victims and yet also the guilty ones. Though, why don't they stop, if they know how it feels first hand?

If all it takes is just an open mind, why is this among one of the hardest things for us to do?

By being accepting and understanding, you will be accepted and understood.

Labels
are for
soup
cans,

not
people.



SPORTS ETC.	COMEDY	EXTRA EXTRA	NEWS	CREATIVE	STUDENTS
NOT APPEARING	LOTS OF LAUGHS PG. 8	SAMWISE PG. 2	GUY FIERI SPRING BREAK PG. 5	PUZZLES PG. 6	INTERVIEWS GUESS WHO PGS. 2, 3, 4