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5 Ways to Help Your Students Become Better Questioners

by Warren Berger

The humble question is an indispensable tool: the spade that helps us dig for truth, or the flashlight that illuminates surrounding darkness. Questioning helps us learn, explore the unknown, and adapt to change.

That makes it a most precious "app" today, in a world where everything is changing and so much is unknown. And yet, we don't seem to value questioning as much as we should. For the most part, in our workplaces as well as our classrooms, it is the answers we reward—while the questions are barely tolerated.

To change that is easier said than done. Working within an answers-based education system, and in a culture where questioning may be seen as a sign of weakness, teachers must go out of their way to create conditions conducive to inquiry. Here are some suggestions (based on input from question-friendly teachers, schools, programs, and organizations) on how to encourage more questioning in the classroom and hopefully, beyond it.

How to Encourage Questioning

1. Make It Safe

Asking a question can be a scary step into the void. It's also an admission to the world (and more terrifyingly, to classmates) that one doesn't know the answer. So teachers must somehow "flip the script" by creating an environment where questioning becomes a strength; where it is welcomed and desired. The Right Question Institute, a nonprofit group that teaches inquiry skills in low-income schools, encourages teachers to run group exercises dedicated entirely to formulating questions (no answers allowed!)—with clear rules and guidelines to ensure that students' questions aren't judged or edited, and that all questions are written down and respected. There are many variations on this type of exercise. The second-grade teacher Julie Grimm uses a "10 by 10" exercise, in which kids are encouraged to come up with 10 great questions about a topic during a 10-minute span. But the bottom line is, designate some kind of safe haven in the classroom where all students can freely exercise the "questioning muscle."

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2. Make It "Cool"

This is a tough one. Among many kids, it's cool to already know—or to not care. But what if we could help students understand that the people who ask questions happen to be some of the coolest people on the planet? As I discovered in the research for my book on inquiry, questioners thought of many of those whiz-bang gadgets we now love. They're the ones breaking new ground in music, movies, the arts. They're the explorers, the mavericks, the rebels, making the world a more interesting place—and having a heck of a time themselves. How cool is that?

3. Make It Fun

Part of the appeal of "questions-only" exercises is that there's an element of play involved, as in: Can you turn that answer/statement into a question? Can you open your closed questions, and close your open ones? There are countless ways to inject a "game" element into questioning, but here's an example borrowed from the business world: Some companies use a practice called "the 5 whys," which involves formulating a series of "why" questions to try to get to the root of a problem. Kids were practically born asking "why" questions, so why not allow them to use that innate talent within a structured challenge? Or, show them how to use the "Why/What if/How" sequence of questioning as a fun way to tackle just about any problem. Whatever the approach, let kids tap into their imaginations and innate question-asking skills in ways that make inquiry an engaging part of a larger challenge.

4. Make It Rewarding

Obviously, we must praise and celebrate the questions that are asked—and not only the on-target, penetrating ones, but also the more expansive, sometimes-offbeat ones (I found that seemingly "crazy questions" sometimes result in the biggest breakthroughs). Help create a path for students to get from a question to a meaningful result. A great question can be the basis of an ongoing project, a report, an original creation of some kind. The point is to show that if one is willing to spend time on a question—to not just Google it but grapple with it, share it with others, and build on it—that question can ultimately lead to something rewarding and worthwhile.

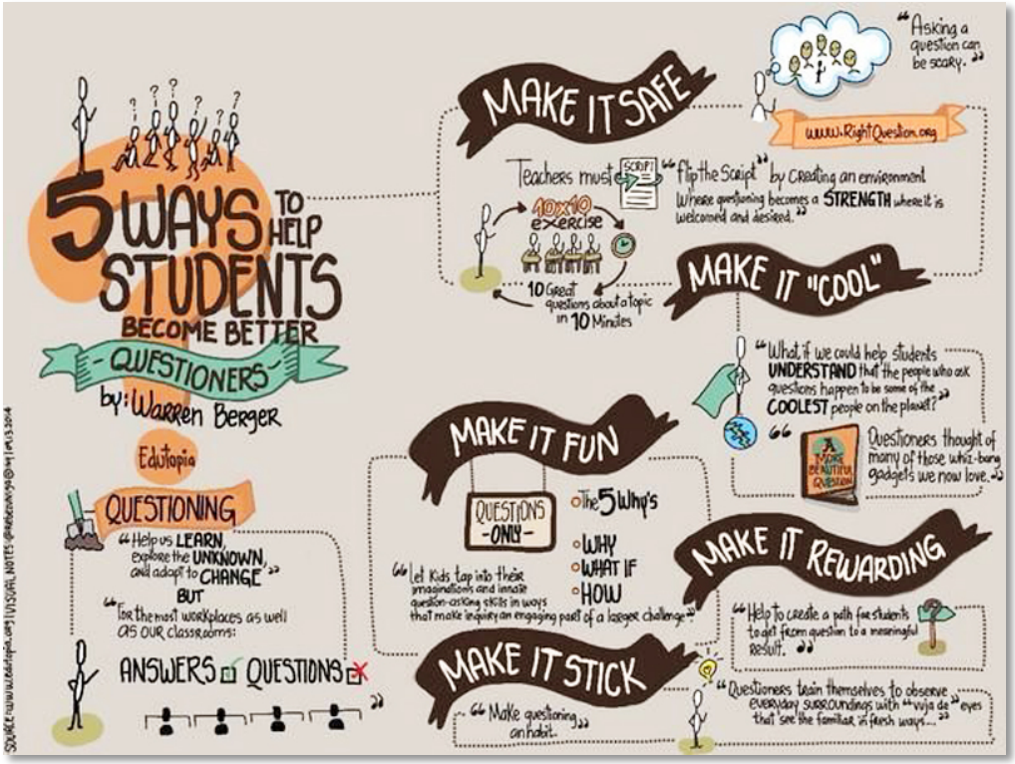
5. Make It Stick

If the long-term goal is to create lifelong questioners, then the challenge is to make questioning a habit—a part of the way one thinks. RQI's Dan Rothstein says it's important to include a metacognitive stage in question-training exercises wherein kids can reflect on how they've used questioning and articulate what they've learned about it, so they can "pave a new neural pathway" for lifelong inquiry. As for the behavioral habits associated with good questioning, here are a few: Questioners

train themselves to observe everyday surroundings with “vuja de” eyes that see the familiar in fresh ways; they’re always on the lookout for assumptions (including their own) that should be questioned; and they’re willing to ask questions that might be considered “naïve” by others.

So ask yourself this beautiful question: How might I encourage more questioning in my classroom? And how might I instill the habit of questioning in my students? After all, knowing the answers may help them in school, but knowing how to question will help them for life. I look forward to your thoughts—and questions!—in the comments area.

Visit http://amorebeautifulquestion.com/category/education-2/ for lots more stories about kids, questioning, and education.



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