

When Students Ask Questions

An Interview with Jane Schaffer by Marianne Finnegan

NOTE: At the time of this interview, Jane Schaffer was chair of the English department at Santana H.S. in California.

Q. *Academic Preparation in English* calls for particular attention to how teachers ask questions in the classroom. This book suggests that skill in teaching much include the practice of what Dennie Wolf calls the “art of questions.” Do you agree?

A. Wholeheartedly. *Academic Preparation in English* is right to point out that questions—usually those of teachers or textbooks—shape and give direction to much of what happens in the classroom. Others, of course, make a similar point. I have just read a national education report that comments that “questioning is the teacher’s most useful tool.” But despite this obvious importance, teachers do not get much training in understanding what makes a good question or in how to use questions effectively in class discussion. At least I didn’t, and I suspect this is true for most others as well. So I think we should begin to look closely at the experience we have had with questioning to see what it tells us.

Q. Can you suggest a place to begin?

A. I can tell you something about my personal classroom experience. Perhaps we can talk about reading and the study of literature to keep within some very general boundaries. Also, I’ll be talking about my tenth- and eleventh-grade classes. Maybe what I say will suggest some questions that other teachers may want to ask about their own classroom situations.

Q. Fine. Where do you want to begin?

A. By mentioning the place I want to reach with my students. In thinking about teaching literature, I always try to keep in mind the learning outcomes that we hope our students achieve during the time we have with them. Here I think *Academic Preparation in English* identifies one outcome that deserves special emphasis: the importance of a students’ ability to read critically by asking pertinent questions, by recognizing assumptions and implications, and by evaluating ideas. I give special attention here to “asking pertinent questions.” Too often we ignore how essential question making is to critical thought.

Q. How do you approach this with your students?

A. May I first say something more about his learning outcome? *Academic Preparation in English* states very explicitly that teachers should seek to have students frame and ask their own questions about the literature that they read. Let me quote: “If students rely entirely on questions asked by teachers, they will remain dependent learners. The ultimate purpose of the teacher is to encourage students to become independent learners. Students become independent—and thus responsible—to the extent that they formulate significant questions for which they desire to have answers.” I might say this a little differently, but the aim is exactly the same as the one I have for my own students.

Q. And how do you put this aim into practice?

A. By trying to remember from the outset that questions should emerge as part of a students’ reading and not just appear, or be imposed, as a kind of final thing that happens—in the way, for instance, that publishers tag on questions at the close of readings in anthologies or chapters in textbooks.

Q. Or that teachers place on final examinations?

A. Well, yes. Summary questions have a place, of course; but they frequently make for passive reading. If students expect that questions *only* come afterwards and from some source other than themselves, they are going to wait—usually not too eagerly—for them to show up. My students usually groan when I assign them questions from the

textbook. This is not because of the work involved. It's because the questions are—as students will tell you—so very predictable and so lacking in interest.

Q. Are these questions really so inadequate?

A. Many of them are. Often the questions ask for little more than factual recall. Students can see that they are extended fill-in-the-blank questions, not very different actually from those in the workbook drills they were required to do over and over again beginning in elementary school. A question on Orwell's *1984*, for instance, might ask, "Who was Big Brother?" Well, students are programmed to "look up" the answer. They will begin, "Big Brother is the symbol of the Party" and go on—usually not very long—in that vein. Their answers aren't incorrect, and the question does take them back into the story. Unfortunately, it does this in such a way that they merely parrot some version of what they find there. It doesn't provoke any genuine thought on their part—which is what Orwell hoped to do, of course. I often get answers to these questions that are accurate in a literal sense but seldom any that are enlivened by the student's own thought about the book.

Q. Isn't the problem with these questions, then, related to the whole culture of schooling in this country? What you say suggests that students begin very early to develop certain fixed ideas about what is expected of them when a teacher asks a question.

A. This is probably true, but we shouldn't make the problem appear so large that individual teachers think they can't do anything about it. I have observed teachers who have done a great deal to better the situation. Oddly enough, though, our very best intentions sometimes get in our way. Mine did anyway. For a long time, I worked very hard to make sure that questions I asked during class discussion and on exams were better, more thought-provoking, than those provided in the textbooks. Well, they *were* better and so were the results. But something still wasn't right. The predictable pattern remained. Most students were still passive, waiting to hear what the questions were going to be and then sort of groping for the answer they were sure was firmly planted in my mind. It was as if they thought nothing at all about the story until they heard my questions, and, also—hey, *I* was having all the fun! There I was up in front tap-dancing away, feeling the exhilaration of how keen my questions were—and not noticing that this was taking opportunity away from my students.

Q. What do you mean?

A. I mean partly that my own reading was sharpened because I was thinking about questions to ask as I went along, and also partly that asking these questions showed what *I* could do. So why shouldn't it be the same for my students? What if I asked them to think about questions that needed or wanted answering as they read? Isn't there a Chinese proverb that says, "What we do, we learn?" Well, my students needed to be doing. With things as they were, I was the active reader—or performer—and they the passive audience. To achieve a better balance, I thought, they should be a little more in my place and I a little more in theirs.

Q. How did you change your teaching practice to bring this about?

A. It would have done little good to say to the students that we will begin to base class discussion more on your questions and less on mine, though this was exactly my aim. I say it would have been of little help, because students are too accustomed to taking the passive part. They would have been at a loss and probably not very serious about what we were doing. I had to begin, therefore, by giving students practice in question making and also with modeling what I had in mind. How I should do this was not entirely clear first, but some ideas I picked up at a Junior Great Books workshop provided some help.

Q. Would you explain?

A. I now start with a simple story, or at least one we take to be simple. "Cinderella" works well. All the students know it, and nothing about it seems intimidating. Also, questions probably lurk in everyone's mind about familiar fairy tales.

I tell the students that each of us should construct a question about this story and that discussion in class will be based on these questions. There are only two rules to observe. The first is that the question must *not* be one that can be answered only by looking up a fact from the story, such as, “What were Cinderella’s jobs in her stepmother’s house?”; and second, each person must really care about his or her question—must, I mean, really be curious to have an answer.

Q. Do the students come up with questions immediately?

A. They do, but teacher modeling is very important in the beginning. I usually give the first example. My personal question about the story always has to do with why Cinderella’s stepmother didn’t want her to go to the ball. Maybe this has something to do with questions I have about my own mother. The important point, though, is that the students see immediately that this is a genuine question. It’s not one for which I have an answer, and it is one that I am eager to hear people talk about. This is crucial, I think. I mean that students begin to see how questions help us search for things we do not yet know and are not just information checks.

Q. It’s important then that the question be genuine in the sense that the answer is not known in advance and therefore must be sought through discussion. What kinds of questions do the students ask?

A. Yes, that’s right; but it is also essential that students care about their questions and accept the responsibility for caring. The response to so much is, “Who cares?” But you asked about their questions. They raise matters such as, “Why didn’t Cinderella run away when she was so badly treated?” or, “Why was there a midnight curfew?” or, “How did the prince know that he loved Cinderella, if this was only their first date?” In the discussion, they extend these questions further and ask questions such as, “Does anyone have the equivalent of a fairy godmother, someone who pulls them out of trouble?” This begins to pull away from the text a little, but it’s fine because they are continuing in a questioning rhythm and exploring aspects of the story that have significance.

Q. What comes next?

A. Well, we apply this same question-making approach to all of the literary works that we read. For example, Orwell’s *1984* or Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. I ask each student to construct three questions about the text we are reading. When you multiply this times 35 students in a class you can see the wondrous number of questions that we have to choose from.

Q. How do you decide which question to discuss?

A. I choose them. This helps to insure that we don’t become repetitious and also that we consider questions touching on a variety of different aspects of the text. Equity considerations are important, too. Research shows that much class discussion, if it takes place at all, actually happens between teacher and a very small number of students in any class, usually the outstanding performers or the most outspoken. Teachers hate silence, and to avoid it they will turn again and again to those students who give quick responses. We have to do much, much better than this and begin to draw as many students as possible into discussion, into inquiry. So I make sure that I select questions from everyone in the class over a given period of time. I actually keep a record, and I’m not sure how fair I would be if I didn’t. You should see how thrilled a student is when his or her question is chosen. Also, you might be surprised to see how courtesy and respect in discussion are promoted because the question chosen is one that a classmate cares about.

Q. So practice in speaking and listening comes into this, too. Can you tell me how the questions that your students ask differ from the prepared ones in the textbooks?

A. Let me give you a few examples. Instead of asking, “Who is Big Brother?” in Orwell’s *1984*, a student might ask, “Was Big Brother ever really alive?” The first question, as I said earlier, is likely to get a dull, literal response, while the second invariably moves beyond factual considerations and provokes students to speculate about such things as

the nature of symbolism, of propaganda, and the relationship of both to truth and deception. The second question, that is, asks something students want to know in order to feel comfortable with the book, but asking it almost immediately gets them into the uncomfortable matters that Orwell raises for us. The first question invites them to be bland.

Q. Can you mention a few others?

A. Sure. Every year students ask if Winston is alive or dead at the end of the book. Punishment and death are stark facts in Orwell's story. Students also have strong feelings about these things. So they want to know if Winston has survived and, if so, what kind of person he has become. This question, by the way, does not take students outside the book but rather directly into it. They try to figure out how much they can conclude based on what they know at the point where the story ends. Students also frequently ask questions that have to do with love or friendship. For example, "Did Winston and Julia really love each other, or were they only using one another?" or, "Did Winston regret betraying Julia?"

Q. It sounds as your students ask questions about very fundamental things—as you say, about love and friendship, life and death.

A. Very much so—and things about which we all have strong emotions. In the beginning, they ask almost entirely about character and never about form. They care a great deal about the choices that characters make—why they do this instead of that—and also about what fate befalls them. This is the way they make literature their own—by asking if they would make the same choice as the character in a story or how they would be if they themselves lived in similar circumstances. Asking these kinds of questions leads them toward the way a book illuminates human action and expands understanding of human behavior.

Q. But does it miss other important questions? I mean questions about voice and style, the intended audience, and the purpose of the author? Questions about the literary nature of a text?

A. Yes, you are right. Also questions about setting and the historical context of a story. Students questions almost never raise these as important considerations. So I have to prompt and prod to have them included, especially in the beginning. But your question brings me to an essential point about this approach. Allowing students to frame questions doesn't mean that a teacher forfeits his or her right to introduce questions or considerations into the discussion. The teacher does back off a little, but he or she does not step out of the picture entirely.

Q. So you do bring in things that student questions may miss or not touch on?

A. Of course. But I hope that I am not jumping in all the time, out of fear that something is being missed. I try to work things in over the course of time. This relates to the recursive approach discussed in *Academic Preparation in English*. One returns to a question often days or weeks after it has been raised and points to a new aspect of it or a deeper level of complexity. In this way students begin to see the many implications of questions and how pursuing their investigation involves ever more complex responses.

Q. So a question is never really dropped once it has been raised?

A. I hope not. My responsibility is to help a question grow larger, to work different sides of it at different times. In this way students begin to see how complex a question can be, and this shows in the work they do. The responses they make in March or April are very different from those I get in September or October. They do raise to the challenge of their own questions.

Q. Given what you have said about recursiveness, perhaps you won't mind if I return to the beginning of this conversation. The kind of classroom you have sketched seems so much richer, so much more lively, than the one in which a teacher clings to the workbook and lots of short-answer questions; and yet it is this second situation that research says prevails in many schools. Why is this so?

A. I think that Dennie Wolf touched on most of the reasons at the EQ Institute this summer. There is the old bugaboo of “coverage”: we insist that we have to hurry on, leaving questions literally seconds after they have been asked, so as to get everything read.

Q. As if *everything* could be read!

A. Exactly. And then, of course, high school teachers do not live in a climate of inquiry themselves. The organization of schools often involves everyone in a lot of “box checking,” making sure that we devote so many minutes to this and so many minutes to that. In many places we have a kind of “checklist” curriculum rather than the recursive strategy of every-deepening questions and ongoing inquiry that I mentioned. Also, to be fair, it’s a difficult thing to guide discussion among 35 students of varying abilities and interests.

But even more unfortunately, some teachers may not trust the ability of students to ask pertinent questions. This is the case, even though massive research has shown the incredible intellectual achievements of all young children, as beginning from birth they effortlessly learn so extraordinarily much about their language, their culture, the world. This achievement results from their own native curiosity much more than from what anyone deliberately tries to teach them.

Q. It’s this curiosity that you try to tap by letting questions flow a little more from students?

A. Yes, and also by letting the literature that we read speak to this curiosity. *Academic Preparation in English* says that “the voice of literature is almost always personal.” I try to remember this: that literature speaks to the individual and that the transaction between text and reader always takes place first in some private, personal way. Allowing students to have their own questions permits this transaction to take place more fully and to reveal something of it in a public way. I’m always surprised by my own discoveries as I become part of such discussions. One time we were reading Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and a student had asked, “Who was Stephen’s best friend?” The talk that followed was phenomenal—touching on so much about Stephen’s loneliness and its sources in country, family, and even in time. I came away from it understanding far more about the book than I had understood going in, and this was a question I would never have thought to ask. Certainly it’s not one that you could find in any textbook.