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Mindset Change: “We Can’t” to “We Can”

by Linda Pinder

In my ten years of teaching, I have experienced numerous learning opportunities for students and myself. I have spent all of my years teaching students with special needs, most of which have been in a resource room setting. This has allowed me opportunities to push into classrooms as well as pull students for small groups. Most recently, I have had the pleasure of my own classroom, a self-contained classroom for high school students with varying degrees of cognitive impairments. It is in this classroom setting that I have learned the most about myself as a teacher; and I was able to put all of my “what ifs” and “I wonders” into place because I was no longer sharing the classroom with other educators and working to make my instruction fit with theirs. One of the most beneficial things I have implemented in my classroom to improve my students’ overall reading is multi-level discussions.

In this article, I will give you a glimpse into my classroom and how I empower my students to learn by using “thick” questions to meet their educational needs, as well as increase their motivation to read challenging material.

Questioning

Early on in my teaching career, I worked hard at maintaining the quiet and orderly classroom that was expected by administration because a quiet classroom, according to them, indicated a room in which learning was happening. As I worked with my small pull-out groups, I realized the students were perhaps learning isolated information and skills, but not learning to think critically and deeply. They would provide superficial answers to questions; but I wanted my students to understand what they were reading beyond literal interpretation and repetition of discrete information. Thus, began my self-reflection on my teaching practices.

First, I began to seek out ways to move beyond the initiate, respond and evaluate (IRE) model of questioning, in which students are asked a question, they respond,



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and the teacher evaluates their response (Reinsvold & Cochran, 2012). The skills and discrete knowledge involved in IRE questioning are not without value as a part of daily instruction; they form the basic understandings that are necessary in order to think more deeply, such as, building inferential understanding. For example, it would be helpful for a student to be able to accurately respond to, “What type of government does Cuba have?” before they try to respond to a question such as, “How would your life be different if you lived in Cuba?” (Taboada, Bianco & Bowerman, 2012). It is also important to develop practices that foster critical and deep thinking and allow students to answer questions like the second (Hollenbeck, 2011).

My early and quick research on incorporating more critical discussion led to some major classroom mistakes and a lot of unguided discussion that got us nowhere as I started my teaching journey as a resource room teacher. I would read with the students and say, “Now, let’s discuss what we just read...” leaving it so open-ended that even I did not know where to start; so, I would jump in with the easy-to-ask, surface-level, one-correct-answer questions—right back to IRE. I was lacking a clear understanding of what classroom discussions looked like and how they should be structured. I knew I needed to do more as a teacher; and I felt like I was failing my students. They could sense my frustration with the attempted discussions. It was important

to visibly continue researching discussion techniques, so it was clear to them my frustration was related to my delivery of instruction, not their efforts.

When I realized that our critical conversations needed more than just a window of opportunity, I began looking for specific strategies I could try to foster meaningful discussions. It was at this point that I came across the idea of instructional conversations (Hollenbeck, 2011). Instructional conversations occur when the class participates in dialogue-based discussions about what they have read. The teacher initiates the discussion with an open-ended, "thick" question, and the students participate by responding to the question and each other and working as a group to develop consensus. Instructional conversations can lead to deeper understanding of the material, the development of critical thinking skills, and the ability to work collaboratively with peers (Hollenbeck, 2011). In my classroom, instructional conversations and questioning work synergistically to foster deeper understanding of both fiction and non-fiction texts. I pose initial questions to my students, which we discuss as a group. If they are struggling to respond to the questions posed, I prompt with more questions, occasionally using the IRE format to solidify a base of literal understanding upon which we can build. However, I always come back to "thick" questions and prompts that require my students to think beyond what can be easily found in the text. For example, in our discussion of Cuba, I moved back to IRE to ask what type of government Cuba has, and then moved on to ask, among other questions, "Why do you think Castro established Communism in Cuba?" Our textbook explicitly stated the answer to the first questions, but for the second students were required to use the information they read about Cuba along with previous information regarding Communism to provide a response.

Building Critical Literacy Skills through Discussion and Questioning

Through much trial and error, I have found the following activities, repeated over time, have been the

most successful in setting up effective discussions and questioning in my classroom:

- Ask a thin question first, then add to the question by asking a thick question. Discuss how answering thin questions supports their ability to answer thick questions.
- Discuss the differences between the two question types, for example the kinds of information they ask for and what resources or processes they need to use in order to answer them.
- Have students practice transforming thin questions to thick questions.

Ask a thin question first. It was important to me to start with what my students knew and viewed as a relative strength, and they knew thin questions. Thin questions are surface level questions, the answers to which can generally be found explicitly in text (Taboada et al., 2012). Thin questions are not without value because starting with thin questions helped set the stage and scaffold to thick questions. For example, when we read Romeo and Juliet last fall, one of the thin questions I posed to the students was, "Who is Romeo's cousin?" The students were able to respond, "Benvolio." The question was simple, required little thought and could be easily identified with a quick reference to the text (Taboada et al., 2012). It was also essential knowledge for students to understand the basic plot of the play.

Add to the thin question by following up with a thick question. Using the initial thin question as a scaffold supported students when another layer was added and the question became thicker. Thick questions require more thought than their thin counterparts; thick questions are generally open-ended and the answers are not readily available in the text, alone (Hollenbeck, 2011). Initially, this transition required a great deal of probing as my students were not familiar with being asked questions that go beyond what is written in the text or those with one right answer. For example, building on the question of Romeo's cousin, I asked, "What type of relationship do they have?" Their first responses were, "good," "ok," and other simple responses. In the past, I might have settled for these more IRE-like responses, but I didn't cave! Instead I

prodded students to re-read and discuss interactions between the two characters. Tentatively, their responses expanded to statements like, “Benvolio is kind of mean, he laughs at Romeo a lot, so maybe they don’t really have a good relationship.” Another student chimed in, “But, it isn’t a bad relationship because Benvolio and Romeo stick up for each other.” This discussion pushed students to take on multiple roles in the discussion, as respondents (responding to a question), inquisitors (posing new questions based on interactions around the original question), and evaluators (pushing back on the ideas of others)—all roles that are hallmarks of engaged discussion (Almasi, 1996).

Discuss. After exposing the students to both thin and thick questions, we had a conversation about the difference, focusing on how asking and answering thin questions helped us establish a basic understanding, and asking and answering thick questions helped us to be deep thinkers and strengthened our overall understanding of what we were reading. This metacognitive piece is essential to students being able to internalize the strategy and evaluate its effectiveness, as well as their ability to transfer the strategy to multiple contexts (Cobb, 2017).

Repeat. Repetition was key for my students. As stated above, my students have varying degrees of cognitive impairments, so I cannot teach something once and expect it to stick. Whenever I pose questions to my students, I always start with a thin question to build confidence and common background knowledge, then add a thick follow-up and we discuss how it helps their learning. This repetition of process and instruction has paid off! Now, if I do not follow up with a thick question, some of my students will add a thick response on their own by giving the simple, surface answer and following it up with “because...” answering a thick question I didn’t even have to ask.

Moving toward independence: Transforming thin questions into thick questions. While reading *Romeo and Juliet* this year, we spent the first half of the play discussing the events as a group. I would initiate the discussion and scaffold thick questions, they would

respond to my questions and to other’s responses. As we moved into the second half of the play, I wanted to know if they were able to create thick questions on their own. I asked the students to transform 3–4 questions regarding the scene they had just finished reading from thick to thin, this time in small, student-led groups instead of as a class. Initially, there was a great deal of complaining, “We can’t do this, Mrs. Pinder.” “I need help.” “Do we really have to do this?” But, I did not waiver in my confidence in them; I walked from group to group encouraging them to try, “just one” and reminding them of what we did during our whole-class discussions. And then, an almost inaudible whisper, “Mrs. Pinder, I think we did one! Come check.”

Their initial question, “What happened when Juliet told her father she did not want to marry Paris?” was transformed to, “Why was Capulet so mad when Juliet said she didn’t want to marry Paris?” We talked about their questions to confirm their thinking. The first question, as stated by the students was in the section of the play they were reading. They could find the information without a great deal of thought. Their second question, was not available in the play, they had to remember the relationships among Capulet and Paris and Capulet and Juliet and draw a conclusion based on what they read. This required deep thinking and collaboration in the group. I encouraged them to try another. When I walked away, I heard another faint comment, “We can do this.”

Planning for Discussions

The following information can be helpful in planning discussions using thick questions:

- Explain the strategy to the students and let them know why it is important (Humphries & Ness, 2015).
- Choose a text that can be read and discussed in one sitting to model the strategy (Taboada et al., 2012). This will allow students to experience the process from start to finish with your support. The text can be an easy read for the students, but should be of interest to them so they do not lose focus.
- Prepare most of the questions ahead of time. This will lessen time on your part during the modeling

spent on generating thick questions. Mark other areas where a thick question can be posed to model how to compose a thick question.

- Model responding to thick questions. Think out loud as you do so to allow students to see and experience the thought process that goes into answering the questions (Humphries & Ness, 2015).
- Discuss the strategy with the students. Allow them to ask questions to help them process the information.

Lessons Learned

Often, questioning appears to be an easy strategy to implement with little preparation because it does not require multiple handouts or other materials. However, it does require a great deal of thought and planning, as well as some trial and error. For me, it has been important to make sure some questions were prepared ahead of time to eliminate the need to think of a "thick," thought provoking question on the spot, which didn't always go well. I also learned that intentional scaffolding and repetition are key factors in successful discussions.

This process of answering and creating higher-level, thick questions has encouraged my students to want to be better readers. After years of discouragement, they are finding a newfound love for books that they can now understand better as they guide their own thinking with questioning. These results are not surprising given models that relate expectancy, value, and cost to motivation to engage in a practice (e.g., Abrami, Poulson, & Chambers, 2004). The students believed that that they could ask and answer these types of questions (expectancy), valued their improved understanding of what they read, and took into account the amount of work they need to put into it (cost). In the end, they believed they could do it and the "cost" in effort was worth the value. They were willing and able to follow through with the questioning technique on their own. Not only did they become better readers, but their self-efficacy related to reading also improved. While using thick questions cannot, on its own, transform a student's desire to learn, it was without a doubt a game changer in my classroom.

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