

2001

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Recommended Citation

Cavanaugh, M. P. and Warwick, Colleen (2001) "Questioning Is An Art," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 17: Iss. 2, Article 8.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1320>

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Questioning Is An Art

M.P. Cavanaugh and Colleen Warwick

As an English teacher educator, I am in a unique position teaching my students at the university and sometimes actually hearing what they have learned from me. This is, unfortunately, unique because so often our students at the university leave us, go out into the teaching field, and never communicate with us again. This time things were different. Colleen was a student of mine in an English teaching methods course. We remained in contact during her student teaching and her first “real” teaching position. We talked about what strategies, techniques, and ideas she learned from me and how she was using them in her classrooms. What an opportunity! I encouraged her creativity as she rearranged activities to suit her and her students.

We seem to spend more time in our classrooms reading and writing. We seem to neglect speaking and listening. Questioning is an art which our students seem to have lost. Remember when children asked questions non-stop? In fact, as adults, we almost put a stop to their relentless questioning. Actually, we do a pretty good job of ending the questioning, because they certainly don’t ask many questions in our classrooms. Therefore, the *Question-Only* strategy has always been a favorite of mine. Many students from upper elementary to sophomore level in college seem to lose the art of questioning. There is no doubt in my mind that it is an art. Being so, it needs to be cultivated, practiced, and eventually enjoyed.

The *Question Only* strategy came from studies on why children cease to express curiosity and

possible remedies for that lack (Legenza 309-316). *Question Only* is a pre-reading strategy, where students are encouraged to ask questions about the text before they read. Once they are accustomed to this type of questioning, students become quite enthusiastic about it. They learn, for example, to listen carefully to the questions being asked, and that one question can lead to another which leads to their gaining more information. Some students notice that one or two of their peers seem to be “natural questioners.” They observe this and learn the technique, the style, the types of questions.

The steps are as follows:

1. The teacher announces the topic to the class and explains that they must learn about it solely through their questions, and that they will be actually be tested on this topic prior to their reading anything about it. The test will cover anything and everything that the teacher deems important. It is up to the students to “dig it out.”
2. The teacher answers all questions fully but not giving away information related but unasked. If the teacher wants to be a bit more “managing,” he/she can manipulate the questioning by indicating how one question might logically lead to another. Allow as much time as considered reasonable.
3. Students take the test.
4. Now, the entire class can discuss the test, the questions, what they learned through their questioning, and what they should have asked.

5. Students read the text. Their subconscious is now activated toward information which they will read. This will make their comprehension, retention, and interest keener. Students will actually look for information to answer questions on the test which their questioning did not answer.

I have changed the original steps in one way. After several sessions with *Question Only*, I ask for student volunteers to make up a panel. They will read the text in advance and discuss it with me. Then, during the questioning session, they will answer their classmates' questions. This gives the students on the panel an opportunity to listen carefully to questions and to determine quickly how to answer them. It changes the perspective from the teacher always drilling students about what they have (or were supposed to have) read.

When I teach my university students the *Question Only* strategy, I use Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron." I begin by asking them what the world would be like if we had somehow managed to make everyone equal. I tell them that the story they are going to read takes place in the future. And that's it. The rest is up to them to ferret out enough information to pass the test. Depending upon the age of the students and the difficulty or complexity of the text, I might give more information prior to the questioning. An interesting discussion always ensues.

Even though my students are juniors and seniors in college, I tend to guide them to see how one question should lead to another. For example, if one student asks where the story takes place, I might encourage them to see that a possible follow-up question might be: "How does place influence the action in the story?"

Unfortunately, some students really struggle with this. But, to me, that indicates how important such an activity is. One frequently asked question is: "Will the students care about reading the text after all this?" The answer is a resounding "Yes!" They also realize that the reading is so much

easier since so much information has been discussed.

One warning I must mention. The first time this is used in a classroom, the moaning and complaining will echo with fear and frustration. The teacher must hold tightly to his or her conviction that this is worthwhile. Colleen did, and she was rightly rewarded.

The quiz that I give for "Harrison Bergeron" follows:

1. The author's name is _____.
2. The year the story took place is _____.
3. The title of the person in charge of maintaining equality is _____.
4. How old was Harrison Bergeron? _____
5. What was the characteristic of Hazel's perfectly average intelligence? _____
6. Why did George have to wear a radio in his ear? _____
7. Why were the ballerinas wearing face masks? _____
8. Why won't George take any birdshot out of his canvas bags?

9. Why couldn't anyone understand the television announcer? _____
10. Why do these people need so many rules in order to achieve total equality?

Thus far, no one has ever scored 100%, but we always see why they were able to answer correctly what they did, and we see areas where they never questioned.

With practice, students at almost any age can be motivated to raise questions. One of the areas students struggle with most is questioning. This strategy can make students feel like they are in charge, and yet the teacher can guide the questioning to take certain tacks, if necessary. Rather than feeling the job's all done, students are motivated to read the selection.

Colleen used *Question Only* in her classroom and here is her experience:

"I came into class excited as always (which always threw my students for a loop anyway) about this activity. I told my students that they were going to take a quiz . . . and they moaned and groaned. One intelligent student noted that 'Hey, you aren't allowed to give 'pop' quizzes!' I replied, 'It's not a pop quiz; it's about a short story.' 'Which one?' they asked. I replied, 'One you haven't read yet—and you are going to take the quiz before you do read it!' I smiled. They frowned, gawked, and threw their heads back. I continued, 'This is the deal: you can ask me as much as you want about the story. It is your job to try and find out as much information as possible, so that you can answer the quiz questions.' They didn't know where to begin. They honestly looked puzzled. 'C'mon,' I said. 'Drill away, what do you want to know?' And so the class began. The question session went on until they were bone dry—about 15 minutes.

As I handed out the quiz questions, I smiled to myself. Question One was 'Who is the author of the story?'—they hadn't asked. 'GOT 'EM!' They took the quiz. Next, I had them pass it to a partner and see if the partner could answer any questions that were left blank. Then, we read the story "Harrison Bergeron" by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. After reading, we discussed the story, its importance, and how it tied in with the rest of our unit, which was about Individualism. Then we looked at what questions they now could answer on their quizzes. I asked them why on earth would I give them a quiz before they had even read the story? They stared blankly for a moment. Then a buzz started in the class, and the consensus of that buzz was that "It got them thinking." YES! I applauded their response and said that it also helped to show them while they are reading other pieces what important information to look for. I explained how even broad, general information, like title and author, can give them some insight into what the story might have in store for them."

As you can see, Colleen had an enjoyable and fulfilling experience. Her students grumbled at first, but then students will grumble. Once they realized she would not back down, that this was the plan, they decided to play along with her. They spent fifteen minutes actively engaged in questioning and predicting. And one of the most pleasant responses was that they, the students, realized that they had actually been thinking about what they were going to read.

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