1993

Pulling Students Toward Meaning or Making Meaning with Students: Asking Authentic Questions in the Literature Classroom

Brian White

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

Recommended Citation

White, Brian (1993) "Pulling Students Toward Meaning or Making Meaning with Students: Asking Authentic Questions in the Literature Classroom," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1603>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

**PULLING STUDENTS TOWARD MEANING OR
MAKING MEANING WITH STUDENTS:
ASKING AUTHENTIC QUESTIONS IN THE
LITERATURE CLASSROOM**

Brian White

When I think about the literature classes I had in high school, college, and graduate school, and when I think about all of my teachers and professors of literature, I can break them all down into two basic categories: those who wanted to know what I thought about the literature, and those who wanted me to know what **they** thought about the literature.

Those two kinds of classes and teachers were fundamentally different. In classes where the teachers wanted to know what **we** thought, the literature was exciting, the discussions were energized, the students were engaged. In classes where the teachers wanted us to know what **they** thought, the class discussions were really just mini-lectures and teacherly expositions, and the students' job was to write down what the teacher said about the text. Discussions of literature in those classes often degenerated into games of "Guess What the Teacher is Thinking." When asked a question, we spent so much time searching for the teacher's "right" answer that we often didn't consider alternatives to the teacher's point of view or even take the time to respond to the literature ourselves.

Bracha Rubinek Alpert's study of classroom discussions of literature strongly suggests that teachers of literature often convey to their students that "there are certain 'correct' answers the teacher expects students to reach," and she says that teachers maintain "a close control over students' talk by responding to each student's comments or questions and by *pulling toward expected answers*" (32, emphasis added). Alpert argues that students resist this pulling approach to teaching in part because it is unnatural, because it is unlike authentic conversation in which the partners are on equal footing (Mehan). Nystrand and Gamoran also argue that the most successful

classroom discussions of literature closely resemble conversations "in which student-teacher exchanges unfold not simply according to the teacher's preplanned agenda of questions, but rather where teachers and students work in terms of each other, and where, as a result, the course of classroom talk depends on what both teachers and students bring to the instructional encounter" (264-265).

However, in his analysis of patterns of discourse in classroom discussions of literature, Marshall found strong evidence that "discussions" are usually dominated by what teachers bring to the interaction and that students' contributions are often severely limited and shaped by those teachers. Marshall concluded that the teachers in his study "dominated most of the large-group discussions The general pattern seemed to be one of students' contributing to an interpretive agenda implied by [the teachers'] questions. . . . The students' role was to help develop an interpretation, rarely to construct or defend an interpretation of their own" (44). Of course, such instructional interchanges are not discussions but recitations (Mehan) in which students simply parrot the meanings constructed, provided, and privileged by the teacher. Like Alpert, Marshall found that students are rarely encouraged to create meaning. They are, rather, pulled toward a meaning previously established by the teacher. Conversion, and not conversation, seems to be the goal.

Alpert's and Marshall's studies were relatively small in scope. But more far reaching studies of classroom discussion have yielded similar results. For example, in his wide ranging and insightful analysis of the entire curriculum,Sizer found that true discussion plays a very minor role in instruction in the United States. According to Sizer, "save in extracurricular or coaching situations, such as in athletics, drama, or shop classes, there is little opportunity for sustained conversation between student and teacher. . . . Dialogue is strikingly absent, and as a result the opportunity of teachers to challenge students' ideas in a systematic and logical way is limited" (82). And in their study of 58 eighth grade literature classrooms, Nystrand and Gamoran found that recitation was the dominant pattern of discourse; discussions of literature occurred, on average, less than a minute per day (277). In light of the relative paucity of instructional conversations, "one must infer that careful probing of students' thinking is not a high priority" (Sizer 82).

Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) and Nystrand (1991) cogently demonstrate that one of the chief obstacles to conversation (and, hence, to the careful probing of students' thinking) in the literature classroom is the frequent use of "test questions," questions to which teachers have prespecified answers. By contrast, "authentic questions," questions whose answers have not been prespecified by the teacher, serve to enhance students' achievement by increasing substantive engagement, understanding, and recall (Nystrand and Gamoran; Nystrand). Authentic questions are questions to which we do not know the answer, or questions which have many possible answers. Teachers who ask authentic questions do not pull students toward preconceived interpretations. Rather, they encourage students to engage in meaning-making conversations with one another and with the teacher. Authentic questions are truly "discussion questions" because they invite the students to enter into a thoughtful conversation. Students responding to such questions are seeking not to guess what's on the teacher's mind, but to express what is on their own minds.

According to Nystrand, teachers of literature rarely ask authentic questions (48). Perhaps this is because many questions in literature anthologies are not authentic; they ask students to recall information from the surface of the text or to state the motivation of a character. And even when a question appears to be more "open-ended," there is often little room for debate: the editors of the anthologies provide an answer key in the teacher's edition. As a teacher of literature I've found that, if my questions are going to be authentic, I have to create them.

The following section introduces three kinds of authentic questions, questions which students can answer in many and various ways: **prediction** questions, **author's generalization** questions, and **structural generalization** questions. There are, of course, other kinds. For example, a question which calls for the student to respond honestly and personally to a character ("Sandra, what do you think of Pip right now? How do you feel about him and the direction he's heading in?") is also authentic because the teacher has no prespecified answer in mind. I have chosen to discuss the following three types of authentic questions because they are perhaps more rare and because they encourage students to think carefully for themselves both about *what* works mean and *how* works come to have meaning.

When teaching literature, I frequently ask students **prediction questions** aimed at getting them to make predictions about plots and characters.

In order to answer such questions, in order to predict well, students must understand pretty thoroughly what has taken place already in the text. They must know these characters, what they have experienced, how they have responded in the past, how they think. They must also understand the world of the story, the parameters of the setting. In short, prediction questions require that students understand a text and synthesize their understanding of characters with their understanding of the world—either the world of the text or the real world. Students answering a prediction question must consider carefully the parameters of setting and character established by the author and must consult their own understanding of the possibilities of change and consistency in human circumstances and relationships. Teachers should encourage this sort of thinking about literature. We tend to ask students *what happened*, an often unauthentic (but frequently useful) question which requires only surface knowledge. We should more frequently ask *what might happen* in the future of a text, requiring students to think deeply about characters, settings, and plots.

Prediction questions can serve to break down one of the fundamental, binary oppositions which plague English teachers, that of production versus consumption (Scholes). Students who are confined to the consumption of literature are trained to accept meekly whatever is set before them by the text and by the teacher. According to Scholes, however, teachers should work to enhance students' understanding of the production of literature and should encourage students to *produce* text in response to text. The way out of the consumption/production opposition, he says, is "first to perceive reading not simply as consumption but as a productive activity, the making of meaning, in which one is guided by the text one reads, of course, but not simply manipulated by it" (8). Students engaged in predicting are manipulating and synthesizing their knowledge of text and of the world. They are no longer mere consumers of literature.

Below are some examples of prediction questions for different familiar literary works.

1. For *MacBeth* (after the murder of Duncan):

"Based on what we have read so far (and on your knowledge of people and guilt) what do you think MacBeth's life will be like from now on? What will happen to him now that Duncan is out of the way? How will

he feel about what he has done and how will he respond to others (like Banquo) as a result of what he has done?"

2. For *The Scarlet Letter* (after Chillingworth discovers Dimmesdale's malady):

"Do you believe that the Reverend Dimmesdale will ever admit to being Hester's sinful accomplice? If not, what will hold him back from telling the truth? If so, what do you think will cause him to tell the truth? How do you think his admission of guilt would be accepted by the society?"

3. For *Pride and Prejudice* (post-reading):

"Darcy and Wickham can hardly help being thrown together from here on out. How do you think they'll react to one another at the next Bennett family Christmas gathering? What do you suppose Lydia might say to Elizabeth?"

A second kind of authentic question is the **author's generalization question**. An author's generalization question focuses students' attention upon a message in the text that is implied by the author and intended for the reader and the extra-textual world. According to Hillocks (see also Hillocks & Ludlow), an author's generalization "corresponds roughly to what English teachers call *theme*" (57). Hillocks argues, however, that an author's generalization is more specific than the general notions evoked during many discussions of "theme," because "discussions of theme frequently result in one word statements about content, e.g., 'The theme of the story is love'" (57). An author's generalization question requires students to go beyond these simplistic statements of theme or topic (e.g., love, racism, growing up) and to consider what it is the author might be trying to tell us about the theme or topic. Hillocks writes that "A question in the category of author's generalization demands a proposition, a statement about what love is, how it operates, how it affects people" (57). Here are some example of author's generalization questions that meet Hillocks' criteria.

1. For *To Kill a Mockingbird*:

"Jem and Scout have met quite a few 'different' people: Boo, Dill, Mrs. DuBose, Tom Robinson, and many others. What do you think the

author of this book might be trying to tell us about 'different' people? If she were here, what do you think she might say to us about our interactions with people who are different from us?"

2. For *A Wrinkle in Time*:

"Much of this book focuses on the battle between good and evil, between light and darkness. What do you think the author might be trying to tell us about the conflict between good and evil? What message might she be trying to communicate to us? Support your answer by referring to specific passages in the text."

3. For *Great Expectations*:

"What do you think the author of this text might be trying to tell us about family relationships? About success? About growing up?"

4. For *Pride and Prejudice*:

"What do you think the author of this book might be trying to tell us about marriage? About first impressions?"

A third kind of authentic question we can ask in our literature classrooms is the **structural generalization question**. These questions require that students explain how parts of the work operate together to achieve certain effects. They focus on authorial choices regarding certain aspects of a story's structure and require explanations of the functions of those aspects (Hillocks; Hillocks & Ludlow). Such questions are important because they encourage students to step back from a text, not in awe but in order to achieve a critical distance. Teachers who ask questions about authorial choices are modeling an essential aspect of the reader's role and can help their students to think carefully about the ways in which authors' decisions regarding structure, plot, characterization, and setting can influence readers' responses to texts.

Questions of structure are essential to what Scholes has termed the "pedagogy of textual power": "helping students to recognize the power that texts have over them and helping students to gain a measure of control over

textual processes" (39). In short, questions of structure help students to understand not merely *what* a text means, but *how* it comes to mean those things, not merely what the structure *is*, but how that structure works to achieve certain effects (Hillocks & Ludlow). Below are some examples of structural generalization questions:

1. For *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*:

"We've seen that Huck usually gets into trouble when he's on land and that things are 'mighty free and easy' on the river. Twain seems to have gone to great lengths to set up a contrast between life on the river and life on land. But Huck meets the Duke and the King on the river. Why do you suppose Twain made that decision? Why didn't he introduce these scoundrels on land? How does that decision help him to get across an important point?"

2. For *The Scarlet Letter*:

"Why do you think that Hawthorne chose to give Hester Prynne a female child instead of a male child? Would the sex of the child make a difference in the novel?"

3. For *To Kill a Mockingbird*:

"How do you think this story or its characters might have been different if the author hadn't included Dill? Harper Lee could have told the stories of Jem and Scout, of Boo Radley, and of Tom Robinson without ever mentioning Dill. Why do you suppose the author decided to include him? How does his presence influence Jem and Scout? How does his presence influence our reading of the novel?"

Authentic questions such as those presented above have proven to enhance students' understanding and recall in the literature classroom (Nystrand & Gamoran; Nystrand), but both teachers and students must be prepared for their use. Teachers must be prepared for their use in four ways. First, authentic questions should be created in advance for use in the classroom—they are sometimes hard to think of and hard to phrase authentically (we can make them sound like test questions), and if we are not

prepared in advance to use them we might revert to the exclusive use of test questions and recitation. Second, teachers must be emotionally and intellectually prepared to *converse* with students, to consider and to accept as valid a wide range of supportable responses, some of which might be in conflict with the teacher's own interpretation. Third, teachers must be prepared to express to their students that they genuinely want to know what their students think, that they will be satisfied with nothing less. No amount of careful wording and authentic phrasing will carry the day if students remain convinced that the teacher is hiding one right answer for them to find. This means that teachers must work with students to develop an atmosphere of honesty and trust so that students know that their thoughts will be heard, explored, and respected. And fourth, teachers must be prepared to widen the conversation by inviting other students into the conversation, asking classmates to respond to one another's ideas. This will help teachers to prevent the one-on-one teacher-student debate which, however instructive it might be for the student-debater, excludes the rest of her classmates from the conversation.

But simply asking authentic questions does not ensure that discussion will take place. Students must also be prepared for the use of authentic questions because they generally find such questions to be most difficult (Hillocks & Ludlow). Beginning a class discussion with a structural generalization question could (and probably would) overwhelm students who are not used to being asked such questions and who might not even understand the plot of the story. We must move gradually toward the most difficult and most useful authentic questions, starting at a more literal level (Hillocks; Hillocks & Ludlow; see Appendix A for an example of sequenced questions). In addition, some research (White; Smith & White) has demonstrated that when students are prepared through the use of prereading activities (Smagorinsky, McCann, & Kern; White) to make connections between literature and life, they are much more likely to be engaged in considering and answering authentic questions.

Asking literal questions, asking fact questions, is surely important in discussions of literature. Certainly we need to help our students understand the surface of the text. But we also need to teach our students that various interpretations of those surface features can be advanced and supported. Authentic questions serve to draw students into the interpretive game, more evenly balancing the power and responsibilities shared by students and teachers.

Perhaps most importantly, the use of authentic questions demonstrates to students that we expect them to be authentic participants in classroom discussions of literature, that we want to converse with them, that it is not our aim to convert them to our way of thinking about a text, and that we respect what they know and what they think. This might be especially crucial for students who are "at-risk" or whose culture is distant from the culture of the literary work (Hamann, Schultz, Smith, & White)—students, that is, who may have been trained to believe that their lives and opinions are not important to the academic enterprise. Authentic questions and conversations about literature can help such students to build bridges between their lives and their schooling.

Whatever our students' backgrounds, they have much to bring to classroom discussions of literature. We must decide either to ignore or to privilege what they can bring. We must decide either to pull them toward some previously established interpretation, or to invite them into the meaning-making process. By relying too much upon "test questions" and recitation, we cheat not only our students but ourselves, for only in the give and take of authentic conversation are our students free to teach us.

Works Cited

- Alpert, B.R. "Active, Silent, and Controlled Discussions: Explaining Variations in Classroom Conversation." *Teaching & Teacher Education* 3 (1987): 29-40.
- Hamann, L., L. Schultz, M.W. Smith, and B.White. "Making Connections: The Power of Autobiographical Writing Before Reading." *The Journal of Reading* 35 (1991): 24-28.
- Hillocks, G., Jr. "Toward a Hierarchy of Skills in the Comprehension of Literature." *English Journal* 69 (1980): 54-59.
- Hillocks, G., Jr., and L. H. Ludlow. "A Taxonomy of Skills in Reading and Interpreting Fiction." *American Educational Research Journal* 21.1 (1984): 7-24.

- Marshall, J. D. "Patterns of Discourse in Classroom Discussions of Literature." (Tech. Report No. 2.9). Albany: University of Albany, State University of New York, Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature, 1989.
- Mehan, H. *Learning Lessons*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979.
- Nystrand, M. "Making it Hard: Curriculum and Instruction as Factors in Difficulty of Literature." *Difficulty in Literature: A Symposium*. Ed. A. Purves. Albany: SUNY at Albany Press. 141-156.
- Nystrand, M., and A. Gamoran. "Instructional Discourse, Student Engagement, and Literature Achievement." *Research in the Teaching of English* 25.3: 261-290.
- Scholes, R. *Textual Power: Literary Theory and The Teaching of English*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.
- Sizer, T. *Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985.
- Smagorinsky, P., T. McCann, and S. Kern. *Explorations: Introductory Activities for Literature and Composition*, 7-12. Urbana: NCTE, 1987.
- Smith, M. W., and B. White. "That Reminds me of the Time. . . .": Using Autobiographical Writing Before Reading to Enhance Response." *Constructive Reading: Teaching Beyond Communication*. Eds. S. Straw and D. Bogdan. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton-Cook/Heinemann (in press).
- White, B. "Writing Before Reading: Its Effects upon Discussion and Understanding of Text." Dissertation, U of Wisconsin-Madison, 1990.

Brian White teaches in the English Department at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Michigan

APPENDIX A

Sequenced Questions for Discussion of Keith Wilson's "Growing Up"

"Growing Up"

by Keith Wilson

A big Jack, cutting outwards toward blue,
little puffs of my bullets hurrying him.
Sage crushed underfoot, crisp & clean—

My father, a big Irishman, redfaced & watching,
he who could hit anything within range,
who brought a 150-lb. buck three miles
out of the high mountains when he was 57

—a man who counted misses as weaknesses,
he whipped up his own rifle, stopped the Jack
folding him in midair, glanced at me, stood
silent

My father who never knew I shot pips from cards
candleflames out (his own eye) who would've
been shamed by a son who couldn't kill. Riding
beside him.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The Surface of The Poem

- A. Are there any words in the poem which you'd like clarified?
Any words or phrases you're not sure about? (Does everyone
know what "pips" are?)
- B. OK. How many people are there in this poem? Who are they?
(Literal).

- C. Where are they? Someone describe the setting of the poem.
What are they doing? (Literal).
- D. What does "little puffs of my bullets hurrying him" mean?
(Translation).
- E. What does "Stopped the jack, folding him in midair" mean?
(Translation).

The Father

- A. What do we know about the father? What's he like? What does he look like? What's he good at? What sorts of things are important to him? (Literal to inferential).
- B. How does the father feel about his son? How do you know? (Inferential).
- C. Everyone write down what the father communicates to the son in "the glance." What does the glance say to the son? What does the father intend the glance to say? (Inferential).

The Son

- A. What do we know about the son? What's he like? How do you picture him? Does he look like his father? What's he good at? What's important to him? (Literal to inferential).
- B. How does the son feel about his father? How do you know? (Literal to inferential).

What and How the Poem Might Mean

- A. Do you think the son will ever tell the father how he really feels? Will he ever disclose his own marksmanship? If so, how do you think he might do it? Will he do it with words or some other way? If not, why don't you think he will? (Prediction).

- B. Why do you suppose the author ends the poem with the words "Riding beside him?" instead of "before" or "behind?" (Structural Generalization).
- C. Let's generate some alternative titles for the poem—what COULD the author have called this poem (besides "Growing Up")? (Structural).
- D. Then why do you suppose he chose "Growing Up"? Surely he could have generated these alternatives. (Structural).
- E. What do you think the author might be trying to tell us about "growing up?" What message might he be trying to get across to us about what it means to be mature or grown up? (Author's Generalization). What in the poem leads you to think that?
- F. And what might the author be trying to tell us about parent/child relationships? (Author's generalization).