Student-Generated Essential Questions

Inquiry Strategy
Essential Questions: Opening Doors to Student Understanding (Wiggins and McTighe 2013)

- Essential questions help target standards as you organize curriculum content into coherent units that yield focused and thoughtful learning. In the classroom, essential questions are used to stimulate students’ discussions and promote a deeper understanding of the content.

- **Essential Question Criteria:**
  1. They stimulate ongoing thinking and inquiry.
  2. They're arguable, with multiple plausible answers.
  3. They raise further questions.
  4. They spark discussion and debate.
  5. They demand evidence and reasoning because varying answers exist.
  6. They point to big ideas and pressing issues.
  7. They fruitfully recur throughout the unit or year.
  8. The answers proposed are tentative and may change in light of new experiences and deepening understanding.
How do we get students involved in generating essential questions?

If we have an understanding of essential questions, now what? How do we transfer the ownership of essential questions, and in turn learning, to our students?

- Begin by piquing our students’ curiosity and having them generate as many questions as they can.
- Help students use the criteria to focus on questions that could guide and sustain inquiry.
- Students will need scaffolding and guidance in order to focus their questions!
QUESTION FORMULATION TECHNIQUE

http://rightquestion.org/

The Right Question Institute makes it possible for all people to learn to ask better questions and participate more effectively in key decisions.

Learn more about our work: Teaching & Learning, Schools & Families, Health Care

"This book begins with the seemingly simple request to get students to ask their own questions, but at heart it's a book about creating a classroom alive with dialogue, inquiry, and respect for students' minds."

--MIKE ROSE, author of Why School? Reclaiming Education for All of Us

Make Just One Change by Dan Rothstein and Luz Santana

MAKE JUST ONE CHANGE
Teach Students to Ask Their Own Questions

DAN ROTHSTEIN and LUZ SANTANA
Foreword by WENDY D. PURIEFOY
Step 1

With your group, write down as many questions as you can about the focus.

Rules
- Do not stop to discuss, judge, or answer any question.
- Write down every question exactly as it was stated.
- Change any comments to questions.

What might be difficult about following these rules for us? For our students?
Step 2

- Follow the rules for producing questions.
- Number your questions.
Step 3

Categorize each question as explanation (E) or argument (A).

- An explanation question is researchable and can be reported as fact.
  (These could also be called closed questions.)

- An argument question requires you to choose a position and defend it with evidence.
  (These could also be called open questions.)
Step 4

- Are there any questions you can revise?
- Can you change any from explanation (closed) to argument (open)?
- From argument to explanation?

Add those questions to your list too.
Step 5

Select the *2 most interesting questions* you think the class should discuss.
Please share...

- What were your two priority questions?
- Your rationale for selecting those questions.
- Questions you changed from *explanation to argument* or *argument to explanation*. 
Sample Questions Generated

**Explanation**
- Why is there fire?
- How did the fire start?
- Why are there so many people walking?
- What time of day was it?
- How come there is a lot of fire from the building?
- What are the tall round things?
- Why is every window on fire?
- Where is this?
- What place is this?
- How many buildings are there?
- Is this in a city?
- How many people are there?
- Where did the fire come from?
- What was the year?
- Is that a boat by the building?
- Why is there water there?
- What type of damage did the city have?
- How many people died?
- Were there people in the buildings?
- How did the fire end?
- How much of the city was destroyed?
- Where are the firefighters?

**Argument**
- Why are the people so crowded to each other?
- How come there are so many people trying to go the same way?
- Why is so much of the picture white?
- How come there are so many tall buildings?
- Why did the artist choose to only color part of this print?
- Why are only parts of the picture colored?
- Why does it look like the end of the world?
- Why does it look like the underworld?
- Why are there not many children in the picture?
- Why are so many people wearing hats?
- Was the fire started on purpose?
- Were the people forced to leave?
- Why did the fire spread so far?
- Did anyone try to stop the fire or put it out?
Using Questions Generated To Guide Classroom Inquiry

Several options exist for how these questions can be used in the classroom to guide inquiry:

- Students are divided into groups, different groups focus their inquiry on different questions
  - Based on groups who created questions
  - Students can self-select the question that interests them (teacher arranges groups?)
- Use questions generated to “drill down” to one essential question to guide the class
  - Take similarly themed questions:
    - Was the fire started on purpose? Were the people forced to leave?
    - Why did the fire spread so far? Did anyone try to stop the fire or put it out?
    - What type of damage did the city have? How many people died?
    - How did the fire end? How much of the city was destroyed?
- Facilitate a discussion to come up with a unifying question based on key theme of those generated:
  - What impact did this event have on the people and city in the future?
4th Grade Possible Inquiry

- Use a variety of sources (books, images, videos, websites, etc.) to allow students to investigate questions generated
  - Think about what will they do with information they’ve learned? Both during the process and at conclusion of inquiry.

- Standards Targeted:
  - **All Inquiry Skills** standards can be targeted if students have the opportunity to actively participate in all steps of the inquiry arc.
  - SS.H.3.4: Explain probable causes and effects of events and developments in Illinois history.

- Possible Connections (depending on direction of inquiry):
  - SS.CV.1.4: Distinguish the responsibilities and powers of government officials at the local, state, and national levels.
  - SS.CV.2.4: Explain how a democracy relies on people’s responsible participation, and draw implications for how individuals should participate.
  - SS.G.2.4: Analyze how the cultural and environmental characteristics of places in Illinois change over time.
  - SS.H.1.4: Explain connections among historical contexts and why individuals and groups differed in their perspectives during the same historical period.
Classroom Inquiry Example
EXAMPLE: SHONDA RONEN’S 1ST GRADE CLASSROOM

WHAT QUESTIONS DO YOU HAVE ABOUT THIS PICTURE?
IF FIRST GRADERS CAN DO IT...

Questions They Developed:

- Is she nervous? What school?
- Where are they going?
- Why does she have a book + ruler?
- Did someone throw a tomato? Who?
- Is there blood on the wall?
- What is the note in his pocket?
- Are they police officers? U.S. Marshals?
- Why do they have medals?
- Why is she by herself?
- Why are the men surrounding her?
- Is she in trouble? No.
- Why are they ignoring her? No.
- Does she live in a castle?

Plans for Research:

Where can we find answers?

- Internet
- Facebook
- Google
- Amazon
- Vudu
- Siri
- YouTube
- Netflix
- Phone
- Teacher
- Principal
- Look for the girl, ask her
- Ask people in town, or family
RESEARCHING & DEVELOPING MORE QUESTIONS:

IF FIRST GRADERS CAN DO IT...

TAKing ACTION:

- Writing Letters to Ruby Bridges
- Group presentations to the other 4 first grade classrooms explaining what they had learned from their inquiry.
Dear Ms. Bridges,

Jan. 19, 2017

My name is Alex. I am in first grade. We have been learning about you. I think you were brave and nice. You helped our world. I got to go to school with everyone. Thank you for integrating our schools. Did anyone say sorry? Do you still talk with Mrs. Henry? Do you have white friends now?

Yours Truly.

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Dear Ms. Bridges,

Jan. 19, 2017

My name is Kiera. I am in 1st grade. We have been learning about you. I think you helped things change in the world, brave and peacefully. You helped black people. I got to go to school and be friends with Kent. Thank you for black and white people being friends and changing the laws. Do you still talk to Mrs. Henry?

Yours Truly.
What Did They Learn?

- Students actively participated in each step of the inquiry arc.
- This unit also fulfilled a state mandate: African American History

Every public elementary school and high school shall include in its curriculum a unit of instruction studying the events of Black History.

- The inquiry skills were used to teach the history standard:

  SS.H.2.1: Describe individuals and groups who have shaped a significant historical change.
That’s Not All...

- RI.1.1 Ask and answer questions about key details in a text.
- RI.1.3 Describe the connection between two individuals, events, ideas, or pieces of information in a text.
- RI.1.4 Ask and answer questions to help determine or clarify the meaning of words and phrases in a text. ("segregate"/ "integrate")
- W.1.2 Write informative/explanatory texts in which they name a topic, supply some facts about the topic, and provide some sense of closure.
- W.1.8 With guidance and support from adults, recall information from experiences or gather information from provided sources to answer a question.
- W.1.7 Participate in shared research and writing projects.
- SL.1.2 Ask and answer questions about key details in a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media.
- SL.1.3 Ask and answer questions about what a speaker says in order to gather additional information or clarify something that is not understood.

What’s Next? Let Them Decide!
Inquiry Reflection

- What is the teacher’s role in the inquiry process?
- What does the inquiry process look like in practice?
- What types of activities could support the different stages of inquiry?
- In what ways do you see inquiry with primary sources being utilized in the school/classroom?
Final Thoughts

- Standards are not asking you to change your content
- Rather, they \textit{are} asking you to change the way you think about students’ roles in social science classes
  - want students to take more active role in learning process
  - asking questions, learning how to discover the answers, communicating their learning, and applying what they’ve learned by being active in their school, community, and beyond
- Remember, inquiry goes hand in hand with content – they work together to shape future citizens who can think about and solve issues.