Chapter 7. How Do We Use Essential Questions Beyond the Classroom?

The focus of this book has been on what teachers can do to improve the quality of inquiry and intellectual engagement in their classrooms. However, the culture of the larger organization (school and district or university) surely influences the behavior of staff and students. Accordingly, we conclude with a consideration of ways in which policymakers, district and school administrators, and teacher leaders can contribute to an institutional ethos that encourages professional inquiry into matters of learning, teaching, curriculum, assessment, and concomitant school policies and structures.

Using Essential Questions with Staff and Colleagues

One straightforward and practical method for encouraging an organizational culture of questioning is to regularly use essential questions with staff and colleagues. Principals, department chairpersons, and team leaders can naturally "walk the talk" by framing important initiatives, committee work, and faculty/team meetings around recurring EQs. In fact, the same thought experiment applied to academic content applies to school and district matters: if a targeted initiative or program is viewed as an "answer," what are the questions? For example, if differentiated instruction or curriculum mapping is being advocated by school or district leaders, what problems is each expected to solve? Are there other approaches that might also (or perhaps better) address the identified needs or problems?

Throughout our long careers, we have witnessed numerous cases in which worthwhile school- and district level reforms failed to take root or endure because leaders assumed that teachers would embrace them on face value. Indeed, it is often the failure to make the case for the reform that dooms an initiative. How many times have we heard veteran educators dismiss a staff development topic or new initiative as "this year's new thing" or reflect a "this too shall pass" attitude? In other words, unless staff and other constituents
understand the need for a change and its implications for their work, it is less likely to be embraced and enacted with fidelity.

This principle applies to our own work. We never recommend that school leaders simply mandate Understanding by Design (UbD). Rather, UbD must come to be seen as the answer to such questions as these: *What are the most persistent and important student performance deficits? Why do our students have such trouble in doing higher-order work and in transferring their learning? To what extent are our students engaged? Do they perceive that they are involved in meaningful schoolwork? What initiatives are therefore suggested by this analysis?* UbD can only take root and be seen as a natural solution to problems we acknowledge if it is seen as an answer to honest questions we have posed and considered as a staff.

Essential questions can thus play a critical role in making school reform be better understood, embraced, and enacted with fidelity. Rather than jumping right into an implementation action plan, savvy leaders can pose EQs to engage staff in exploring the need for various initiatives and associated solutions. Here are examples of essential questions that have been used to engage staff in collaborative inquiries resulting in greater understanding of, and dedication to, enacting needed reforms.

**The Mission of Schooling**

To what extent does our (team, school, district, community) share a common mission?
To what extent do our policies, priorities, and actions honor our mission?
Are we adequately preparing learners for life in the 21st century?

**Beliefs About Teaching and Learning**

What educational beliefs about teaching and learning do we hold? Are all those beliefs supported by research, best practice, and our own experience?
What assumptions about learning guide our instructional and assessment practices?
To what extent do our policies, priorities, and actions reflect these beliefs?
To what extent do our beliefs about learning align with our practices?

**Standards**

How would people know that we are a "standards-based" school or district?
To what extent are we "walking the talk" in using standards to guide our work (e.g., curriculum, assessment, instruction, professional development, staff appraisal)?

**Curriculum**

Is our curriculum truly planned backward from our long-term goals and priorities?
To what extent is our curriculum coherent and aligned—from the learners' perspective?
To what extent does our current curriculum support inquiry, transfer, and authentic performance?
What content should we "cover" and what needs to be "uncovered?"
For what do we need textbooks? Why? If so, how should they be used?

**Assessment**
How are we doing? What's working, what's not?

What evidence is needed to answer these questions, and do we have it? If we don't, where might we find more credible, valid, and accepted evidence?

How will we know that students really understand?

Are we assessing everything we value or only those things that are most easily tested and graded?

Is anything important falling through the cracks because we are not assessing it?

How might our assessments promote learning, not simply measure it?

**Instruction**

To what extent is our instruction engaging and effective?

To what extent does our instruction reflect research and best practices?

To what extent are we engaging students in "doing" the subject?

Are we effectively reaching all students, especially low achievers?

**Professional Development**

To what extent do our professional development practices reflect our learning principles?

How does our staff really view professional development?

To what extent are our professional development practices results oriented?

Is our professional development appropriately differentiated?

**Change Process**

What do we believe about educational change? To what extent are these beliefs shared? To what extent are these beliefs supported by research?

To what extent are various initiatives seen as connected and coherent (as opposed to being seen as separate things or "add-ons")?

How might we "work smarter" and more effectively?

**Policy and Structures**

To what extent do our policies, structures, and culture reflect our beliefs about learning?

How might we restructure to enhance learning?

What is the best use of our time when teachers are not with students?

What messages do our policies send?

To what extent is our current staff appraisal process working?

What is a culture of continuous improvement? To what extent do we have one?

What existing factors support this (priority initiative)? What factors resist change?

How do our staff and leaders receive the honest feedback they need to improve?

To what extent do our grading and reporting practices communicate clearly, honestly, and fairly?
Are resources (e.g., time, money, facilities, technology) being used optimally to advance learning?

Other

Would you want your child to attend our school? What, specifically, might give you pause, and why?
How boring is the average day, from the students' perspective? How much of that boredom is unnecessary—a consequence of less than ideal practices on our part?
Where do unthinking habits and rituals get in the way of a better education?

Understandably, educational leaders may harbor concerns that the process of involving staff in deliberations and (sometimes messy) discussions and debates will take too long and allow the saboteurs to better organize to derail the effort. Over the years we have heard the predictable "yes, buts"—"That's all well and good, but we have to get things done"; "You don't understand; we're under the gun"; "People will just talk forever if we let them"; "We've got deadlines to meet"; and so on.

We acknowledge that examining an issue in intellectually honest ways using essential questions will take longer than simply mandating actions. Certainly, leaders can simply issue directives (and there are times when rule by fiat may be necessary), but mandates rarely engender understanding and commitment among professionals, and sometimes they have the opposite effect. We liken the challenge to the one that virtually every teacher faces; that is, there is lots of content to cover, and it would be so much quicker if we just talked fast in class! But the most effective teachers understand that unless the students are engaged and come to understand through active meaning-making, their learning will likely be superficial, not enduring. We believe the situation is similar with staff and constituents. Worthy initiatives require inquiry-based meetings in order for staff to understand and take ownership of the why and the how of proposed initiatives. Essential questions provide the vehicle for the kind of focused and rich professional conversations needed to inspire dedicated implementation.

Using Essential Questions with Professional Learning Communities

A growing number of educators are involved in professional learning communities (PLCs), and the PLC structure clearly offers potential for making inquiry more deliberately central to the adults in schools. Indeed, we contend that one of the most intellectually engaging and effective uses of PLCs are related to collaborative inquiries into the persistent challenges of teaching and deficits of performance. In this regard we have described three primary roles for teachers and administrators in PLC groups: (1) critical friends, (2) analysts of student work, and (3) action researchers (McTighe, 2008). Here is a summary of these roles, with corresponding questions.

Critical Friends

Most teachers plan lessons and units of study based on an established framework of national, state, or district standards. However, teacher-developed curriculum plans are often created in isolation and are rarely reviewed by administrators (with the exception of plans prepared by untenured novices) or colleagues. Moreover, teachers can sometimes get too close to their work and have difficulty seeing any weaknesses. PLC groups offer an antidote to these problems by offering educators opportunities for collaborative planning and serving as critical friends to review each other's unit plans, lessons, and assessments. Simply put, working in teams to plan curricula and offer helpful reviews reduces teacher isolation while enhancing instructional effectiveness.
Unfortunately, collegial feedback is not the norm in many schools. Indeed, some schools unwittingly support a "go it alone" ethos that translates academic freedom into "let me close my door and do my thing." Even in collaborative school cultures, educators tend to avoid criticizing each other's professional practices. Yet we know feedback is necessary for improvement. Honest, specific, and descriptive feedback from peers can be invaluable to beginners as well as veteran teachers. Accordingly, we recommend that structured opportunities for peer reviews of each others' curriculum plans be included as a formal aspect of professional learning communities.

Of course, any collegial review process should be guided by an agreed-upon protocol and set of review criteria so that the feedback is standards based and depersonalized. The Understanding by Design Guide to Advanced Concepts in Creating and Reviewing Units (Wiggins & McTighe, 2012) contains a module describing such a structured peer review process based on explicit design standards. It is in this context of collegial reviews that reflective questions can be applied. Here are sample questions to use in structuring peer feedback and guidance for unit plans:

To what extent does the unit plan

- Align with relevant standards, mission, or program goals?
- Point toward long-term transfer goals involving genuine performance?
- Focus on important, transferable ideas?
- Identify relevant, open-ended, and thought-provoking essential questions?
- Contain assessments that provide valid and sufficient evidence of all identified goals?
- Include authentic performance tasks requiring transfer?
- Include appropriate evaluative criteria or rubrics for open-ended assessments?
- Contain learning events and instruction to help learners achieve identified unit goals?
- Coherently align all activities and assessments with unit goals?

After several opportunities to receive peer feedback, as well as to assume the role of critical friend, teachers begin to internalize these questions and become more deliberate in their own unit planning. It has also been our experience that once the benefits of helpful feedback and guidance in a safe PLC environment are realized, teachers are likely to seek more peer interaction of this type.

**Analysts of Student Work**

Across the globe, educators are being encouraged to use student performance data as a basis for instructional decision making and school improvement planning. Often, however, the data come exclusively from the results of an external (e.g., state or national) test. Although these standardized assessments certainly provide some data on student achievement, such an annual snapshot is not sufficiently detailed or timely enough to inform and guide continuous improvement actions at the classroom and school levels. A more robust approach to school improvement calls for staff to engage in an ongoing analysis of overall student performance, examining a range of credible data from multiple sources. What is needed, metaphorically speaking, is a photo album of evidence—results from traditional tests along with a collection of student work generated from common assignments and varied assessment tasks.

When teachers meet in role-alike PLC teams (e.g., by grade level and subject areas) to evaluate the results from assessments, they begin to identify general patterns of strengths as well as areas needing improvement. We have previously published questions to guide the evaluation and analysis of student work...
and the planned adjustments to improve the results (Wiggins & McTighe, 2007). Consider these:

- Are these the results we expected? Why or why not?
- Are there any surprises? Any anomalies?
- What does this work reveal about student learning and performance?
- What patterns of strengths and weaknesses are evident?
- What misconceptions are revealed?
- How good is "good enough" (e.g., the performance standard)?
- What action(s) at the teacher, team, school, and district levels would improve learning and performance?

By regularly using such questions to examine student work, teachers properly focus on the broader learning goals (including understanding, transfer, habits of mind), while avoiding a fixation on standardized test scores. The regular use of such a collaborative process provides the fuel for continuous improvement while establishing a professionally enriching, results-oriented culture.

**Action Researchers**

One particularly robust form of professional inquiry is action research (AR). Action research involves ongoing, collaborative investigations into matters of teaching and learning, and it is well suited to a PLC structure. The action research process empowers teams to identify problems and shape solutions while fostering a culture of a collegial approach to school improvement. It operates under the assumption that local educators, not only outside experts, know best about where and how to improve their schools. Unlike the (sometimes) esoteric research studies conducted in universities by degree-pursuing students or by faculty members needing to publish, action research projects are initiated and conducted by teams of practicing educators, and the projects focus on relevant learning issues.

At its root, action research offers a structured process for professional inquiry. Here is a summary of a seven-step process for AR:

1. Identify an issue, a problem, a challenge, or an anomaly related to teaching or learning that is particularly interesting or puzzling to you and your team, and linked to an essential question. For example:

   **EQ:** How well do our students think? How might we enhance their critical thinking skills and habits?

   **Challenge:** We have observed that 8th graders are generally not critical thinkers; that is, it is difficult to get them to understand when and how they are being persuaded or manipulated by what they see and hear.

2. Once you have selected the issue, generate a more focused inquiry question.

   **Example:** How can we develop a sequence of learning activities using a variety of texts and media examples that will help 8th graders recognize various persuasive techniques; learn how to think more critically about what they read, hear, and see; and learn how to avoid being manipulated?
3. Form a hypothesis.

**Example:** Using a variety of texts and media, along with guided instruction (e.g., analysis of persuasive techniques and critical-thinking protocols), we can improve students' critical-thinking capacities.

4. Given the hypothesis, identify relevant data you will collect. Selecting data from several relevant sources (triangulation) will enable more valid inferences.

**Example:** We will create performance tasks that ask students to critically appraise print and media sources (e.g., advertisements, letters to the editor, political campaign commercials, and other persuasive texts), and judge their responses using a critical-thinking rubric. We will use informal think-alouds to listen to students' analyses of persuasive techniques and their influences. We will assess using a section of the Ennis-Weir Critical Thinking Test. We will have students create a persuasive piece using one or more designated persuasive techniques and judge their work using a rubric on persuasion.

5. Collect, organize, and represent the data.

6. Analyze the data. Look for patterns. Interpret the results. What does this mean? What do the results tell us?

7. Summarize your findings. Given what we have learned, what actions will we take? What new questions emerged? What new inquiries might we undertake?

Of course, not all action research projects in your school or PLC need to follow such a formal process. In fact, we recommend beginning with one or more simpler inquiries, such as those listed in Figure 7.1.

**Figure 7.1 Ideas for Getting Started with Action Research Around EQs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shadow a Student</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What's the student's real experience?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Pick a student at random and follow that student for a day. As you &quot;walk in the student's shoes,&quot; consider questions such as these: <em>Is the schoolwork engaging? Boring? Do the learners see purpose and relevance in what they are learning? Are they exploring big ideas? What are your impressions of their school experiences?</em> Take notes and report on your observations and reflections at the next faculty or PLC meeting.</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Monitor Questioning Strategies</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>How well do we question?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Monitor your use of classroom questioning. *What percentage of my questions requires factual recall? Application? Evaluation? What are the results of asking different types of questions? What</td>
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happens when I use various follow-up strategies—for example, wait time, probes, devil's advocate? Videotape yourself or visit other teachers' classrooms and take note of their questioning strategies. Then share your findings.

**Replicate A Place Called School Study**

**When are students most engaged and why?**

Repeat the classic John Goodlad survey as to which courses students see as most engaging (and why), as most worthwhile (and why), as most and least challenging, and so on (Goodlad 1984). Share your findings with the rest of the faculty.

**Survey Your Graduates**

**Are our graduates prepared?**

Contact recent high school graduates. Ask them to describe the extent to which their K–12 schooling prepared them for future study and the world of work. *In what ways were they well prepared? In what ways might their schools have prepared them better?* Present and discuss survey results with teachers and administrators.

**Survey Current Students**

**How well do students understand the point of school or class?**

*Do students understand the goals and priorities?* What will students say if you ask them the following questions: *Why are you doing what you are doing? How does yesterday's lesson relate to today's? What do you predict you will be doing tomorrow? What is your long-term goal for this unit? How will your learning be judged?* Compare your findings with other teachers' findings and discuss the implications.

**Examine Grading and Reporting**

**To what extent do grading and reporting align with (all) our goals?**

Survey students and parents regarding the current grading and reporting system. *To what extent do they think grades and reports are understandable? Consistent among teachers? Fair? Accurate in communicating student performance, progress, and work habits?* Compile and report on your findings and discuss the implications for current practice.

When schools and teacher teams employ EQs to examine proposed initiatives, engage in critical-friend peer reviews, examine student work in teams, and conduct action research inquiries, they are walking the talk—hallmark of true professionalism.
As the varied suggestions in Figure 7.1 indicate, the overall culture of the school can be substantially improved by a deliberate attempt to shape adult conversation in the school via EQs. Moreover, the recommendations we have made in the previous chapters about implementing EQs have their obvious parallels in adult interactions. For example, the summary of factors in Figure 6.5 (pp. 100–101) also apply to establishing an organizational culture of questioning.

Conclusion

We suggest that you be humble yet resolute. Fully embedding essential questions, and an inquiry focus more generally, into classroom and school life will likely require a significant shift in norms and actions. As we have noted throughout these chapters, there must be an assertive molding of classroom and organizational culture because the desired conditions rarely occur naturally in a world where traditional roles, staff isolation, unprioritized curricula, coverage-focused teaching (and thus student passivity), test-prep pressures, and grading practices take time-honored precedence. Fortunately there are expectations, structures, and pedagogies that can be put in place to make a culture of inquiry more likely. Such a culture happens, therefore, when educators act in purposeful, perceptive, and persistent ways to identify those unhelpful traditions and replace them with inquiry-supportive routines.

KEYWORDS

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questioning techniques, understanding by design, curriculum development, instruction, student engagement, student motivation

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