Are we asking the right questions?

Questions have surprising power to improve our lives, say a group of thinkers, if only we take the trouble to figure out how they work.

By Leon Nevfakh | MAY 20, 2012

On a recent Friday morning, a classroom of teenagers at Cambridge Rindge and
Latin School broke up into small groups and spent an hour not answering questions about Albert Camus’s “The Plague.” It wasn’t that the students were shy, or bored, or that they hadn’t done the reading. They were following instructions: Ask as many questions as they could, and answer none of them.

The kids wrote in rapid fire on sheets of butcher paper. “Why is everyone acting normal when people are dropping dead?” “Are the doctors aware of this great danger?” “Is there any benefit from the plague? Will it help anyone change or grow?” By the end of the exercise, the class had generated more than 100 questions and exactly zero answers.

In the back of the classroom, Dan Rothstein watched approvingly, taking notes. Though the kids didn’t know it, Rothstein was the one responsible for the unusual way they were spending their class time.

Rothstein is the cofounder of the Right Question Institute, a Cambridge-based nonprofit that exists to promote an idea he’s been nursing for more than a decade—that asking good questions is a life skill far more important than we realize. Rothstein, who has a doctorate in education and social policy from Harvard, believes that learning how to ask questions should be considered as critical as learning how to read, write, and do basic math. He thinks the ability to use questions strategically can make people smarter and better at their jobs, and give them more control when dealing with powerful bureaucracies, doctors, and elected officials.

“It’s not deliberately taught because it seems to be a natural part of speech that doesn’t require much work,” Rothstein says. “It’s assumed that anyone can do it.”

There is, as yet, no field of “question studies,” but Rothstein and his codirector at the Right Question Institute, Luz Santana, are among a handful of thinkers making a career of taking a close look at how questions work, what our brains are doing when they put a question together, and how questions could drive learning, child development, innovation, business strategy, and creativity.
All of them are driven by the belief that a question is more than the simple thing we might think it is—that, in fact, it’s a unique instrument that we can get better at using if we try. Wielded with purpose and care, a question can become a sophisticated and potent tool to expand minds, inspire new ideas, and give us surprising power at moments when we might not believe we have any.

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**Given how essential questions** are to the way we communicate with each other—“So, how’s it going with Sarah?” “Are you going to eat that doughnut?” “How did you get this number?”—there’s been a striking lack of scientific research into what our minds are doing when we ask them. “We know next to nothing,” said Paul Harris, a developmental psychologist at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. In a new book entitled “Trusting What You’re Told,” Harris argues that questions occupy a more central role than we realize in childhood cognitive development. Young children, he says, learn a great deal about the world simply by asking questions and listening to others—a position that contradicts the prevailing wisdom in psychology, which says that children are “little scientists” who learn by observing and experimenting with their environments.

Harris cites a study from 2007 in which the psychologist Michele Chouinard analyzed recordings of four children interacting with caregivers for over 200 hours, and found that on average they asked between one and three questions per minute. Extrapolating from that data, Harris estimates that the four kids Chouinard followed were on pace to ask a total of 40,000 questions between the ages of 2 and 5.

“We’re sort of used to the idea that kids ask a lot of questions, but that’s a huge
number,” said Harris. “Even if 90 percent of those bomb, in the sense that they
don’t receive an adequate answer or whatever, it seems likely that this is an
incredibly important engine for cognitive development.”

When Harris thinks of children asking questions, he sees them performing a
series of complex mental maneuvers. “The child has to first realize that they
don’t know something…and that other people are information-bearing agents,”
Harris said. “Then the child has to be able to, somehow or other, realize that
language is a tool for shifting stuff from that person to them.”

Adults tend to rush through those steps, perhaps because they seem like second
nature. But figuring out what makes a good question—or rather, what kind of
question will get us the information we want—isn’t such a simple thing, even for
grownups. It requires stopping to think about what we’re trying to find out,
what the person we’re talking to might know, and what words we should use to
coax them into helping us. Donald Rumsfeld infamously said in 2002, in
reference to the Iraq war, that there were “known unknowns” as well as
“unknown unknowns,” or “things we do not know we don’t know.” The
statement was mocked at the time, but in fact it reflects the difficult abstract
reasoning we all engage in when we’re trying to fill gaps in our knowledge.
Being good at asking questions is the art of identifying those gaps, sorting them,
and figuring out how to fill them. Considered that way, it is a strange skill: “the
ability to organize your thinking around something you know nothing about,”
said Rothstein.

That can get harder as we get older, in large part because we grow more
confident that we understand the world around us, and lose the capacity to see
past our own beliefs. This is a particular concern in the business world, where
companies hunger for advice on how to break out of their patterns. Business
consultant and former Hewlett-Packard chief technology officer Phil McKinney
has styled himself into something of a question specialist for the corporate
world, and in his book “Beyond the Obvious,” argues that crafting good
questions is precisely what allows people to make imaginative leaps. “The
challenge is that, as adults, we lose our curiosity over time. We get into ruts, we
become experts in our fields or endeavors,” McKinney said.

Ironically, the tendency to be blinded by our existing knowledge may be at its most extreme among a set of people specifically charged with asking questions: analysts and researchers. Duncan Watts, who studies networks and collective social dynamics at Microsoft Research and is the author of the book “Everything Is Obvious: Once You Know the Answer,” said he has noticed that many of the PhD candidates he comes into contact with are essentially taught to answer other people’s questions, and can be disconcertingly at sea when trying to ask their own.

“There are students who are incredibly good at answering questions but have no idea how to ask one,” Watts said, “and they’ve never thought about what it means.”

For Watts, a good question is one that is both “interesting” and “answerable.” “It’s relatively easy to come up with an answerable question that is not interesting,” he said, “and it’s relatively easy to come up with an interesting question that is unanswerable.” McKinney describes something similar in his book, writing that good questions are ones that can only be answered through investigation, such as, “What is surprisingly inconvenient about my product?” and “Who is using my product in a way I never intended—and how?”

Of course, for most people, asking questions is usually not just about coming up with innovative ideas—it’s about extracting information from others. But even seemingly factual questions can be deployed tactically: In their new book from Harvard Education Press, “Make Just One Change,” Rothstein and Santana from the Right Question Institute outline a basic classification system, dividing questions into ones that can be answered with a single word (like “yes” or “no”) and ones that require a more discursive response. Choosing the right question is in part a matter of making the right trade-off between clarity and depth: “Does the president support gay marriage?” versus “How have the president’s views on gay marriage evolved?” As part of their “Question Formulation Technique,” which is what the kids at Cambridge Rindge and Latin were engaged in that
Friday morning, they ask people to transform one type of question into the other, in order to demonstrate that the way a question is structured can determine the range of possible answers it can inspire.

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For their part, Rothstein and Santana have grander ambitions than simply enlivening class discussions of Camus. They also see questions as having broader power in people’s lives. Most of us are regularly faced with situations in which someone is making a decision that affects us, and when that happens, asking questions—the right kind of questions—is a way to capture a measure of control.

“For example, doctors makes decisions all the time—they change your medication, they give you referrals, they decide what kind of treatment you are going to get—and very often...people leave the office without really knowing what’s happening,” said Santana.

This is where appreciating the mechanics of questions can come into play. In this case, they say, it’s important to avoid the impulse to ask questions merely about the consequences, but to ask instead about the process: how the decision was made, based on what, and with whose input. And that’s true not just in the doctor’s office, but when you’re picking up your car from the mechanic, applying for a job, settling a claim with your insurance company, or talking to your child’s teacher at a parent-teacher conference.

“Years ago I was a welfare recipient, and at the welfare office they used to make a bunch of decisions that affected me—the kind of grant I was getting, whether I was getting one or not, for how long, whether I qualified for a child-care voucher,” said Santana. “Very often in those situations you are denied of services, and if you don’t know what questions to ask, it is likely that you won’t get what you need.”

In other words, the simple childhood habit of asking “What’s that?” and “Why?” takes on far more importance when it affects real life power dynamics. In the
adult world, when a question shifts information from one person to the other, things can actually change.

“It’s essential to democracy,” said Rothstein. “You want citizens to be able to ask good questions.”

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