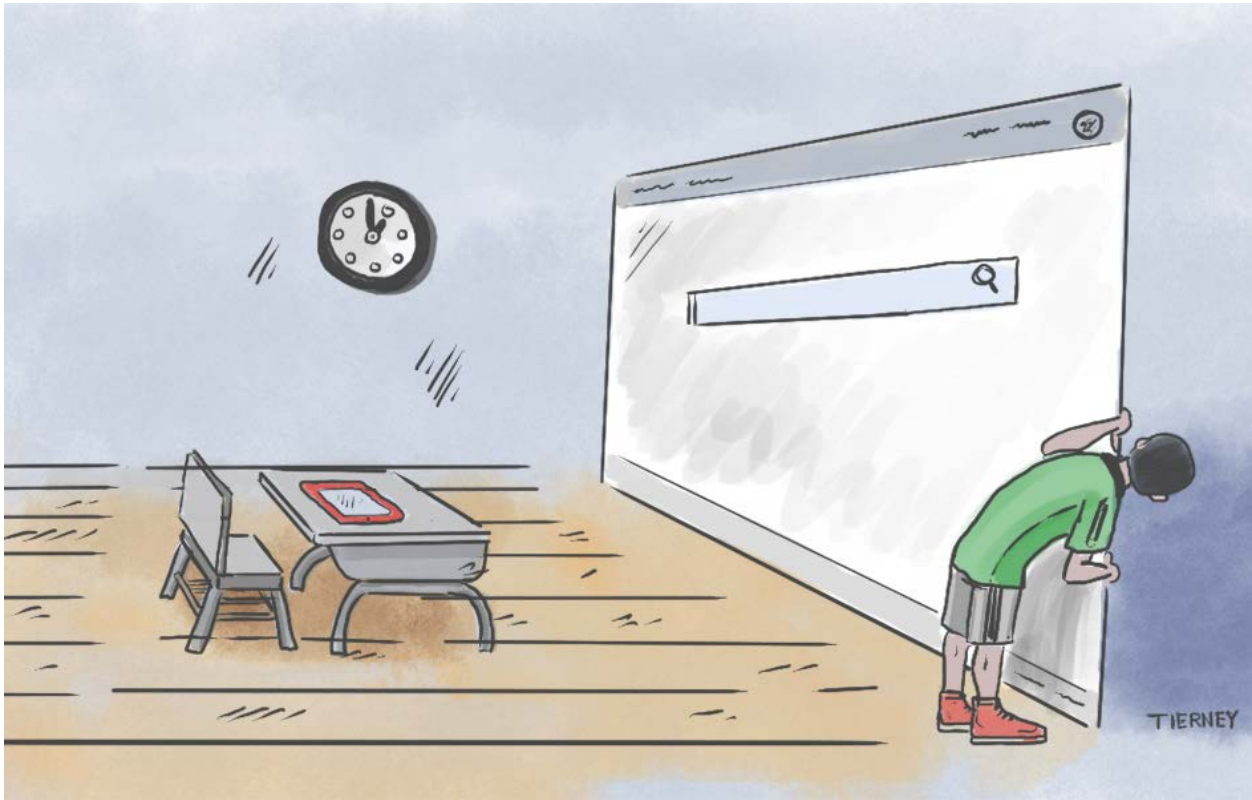


## “Asking Questions in the Age of Google” Post-Webinar Q&A



More than 450 educators attended our November 2017 webinar, “[Asking Questions in the Age of Google](#),” which introduced attendees to the [Question Formulation Technique \(QFT\)](#), a strategy that 250,000 educators worldwide are using to help students generate their own questions. As students produce, improve and prioritize their own questions, they not only sharpen their critical thinking skills but also take ownership of their learning.

Since our presenters did not have time to answer all the questions posed by attendees during the live session, Connie Williams and RQI’s Andrew Minigan have kindly responded to those questions below.

### **How much time do I need to teach the QFT?**

**Connie:** It may take a minimum of 40 to 45 minutes for your students to complete all six steps the first time you introduce the QFT process in your classroom. As your students gain experience using the QFT, you will find that they can run through the process very quickly, in 20 to 30 minutes, even when working independently or in small groups.

## How do you address teachers who say they don't have time to do the Question Formulation Technique or that the process takes too long?

**Andrew:** The QFT is not a detour, but rather a shortcut for educators to more efficiently or effectively get to where they are already going with a lesson or unit. Educators can design a QFT to help students to develop thesis statements. Spending more time on their questions and theses at the beginning of a research project can help students improve the quality of their research and writing. By no means is the QFT a silver bullet, nor is it relevant to every lesson you will ever teach. However, with some thoughtful lesson design it can be one technique to support the work you are already doing *and* one small change you can make in your teaching to provide another opportunity for student-centered learning.

**Connie:** I view it not as an 'add on' but rather as a different approach to teaching the skills we currently teach. Doing QFT the first time to introduce the process is the longest that you will do it. After that, question building, prioritizing and identifying open/closed questions becomes a part of the class vocabulary and you can put all of it or some of it in wherever and whenever you want.

## Once students have asked their questions, what do they do next?

**Andrew:** There are examples on how to use the QFT at different points in a lesson in this [Educational Leadership](#) article. There are many examples across grade levels and subject areas that [you can find here](#), and [rightquestion.org](#) offers free educational resources to support your work in teaching students how to ask *their own* questions.

## Aren't open-ended questions better than closed-ended questions?

**Connie:** Research answers a question — so once students have generated them, and chosen their priority questions, they can begin their research. Using open-ended questions can generate more ideas for topic-building, open up those big ideas for discussions, or create opportunities to see different perspectives. A distinct benefit to closed-ended questions is that they spur us on to search for facts so that we can develop a context for our topic. Learning benefits differently from both open-ended questions and closed-ended questions, and there are advantages and disadvantages to both types of questions depending on what you are hoping to learn.

## How can I use the QFT with English Language Learners?

**Andrew:** RQI Director of Professional Learning Sarah Westbrook and RQI interns Erin Kim and Caroline Glaenger worked on crafting [this document](#) which details adaptations. This document was informed and driven by the work of educators in the field who are innovating and tailoring the QFT ingeniously to better support their work.

**Connie:** English is so different from many languages in how we frame our question sentences. In an ELL class, we can scaffold the QFT process by working together as a class and write them as spoken, finish the content direction of the lesson; and then go back at another time and look at them with an English language lesson in mind. “What does this word order really ask?” or “What are other ways we can ask the same things?” That way you’ve separated the question-building process from the language-building process.

### **What are some best practices for using the QFT with younger students?**

**Andrew:** [This is a blog written](#) by a group of educators from Melrose, Mass., that captures well how the QFT may be used in pre-K. [This blog paints a comprehensive picture](#) of the QFT in a first grade classroom, and the piece illustrates how the QFT may unfold over the course of a few days in an early elementary context. I quite enjoy [this video clip](#) featuring Sheila Varney, a kindergarten teacher from Kentucky where she speaks to her students’ question-asking abilities. [Peruse this PDF](#) for additional insight into using the QFT with younger students.

**Connie:** Ask members of the class to write questions on a piece of butcher paper that stays up in the room during the whole unit. Each day, students can jot down on the paper the answers that they find. This models not only question-building, but source identification — an excellent research skill. In addition, the Library of Congress Teaching with Primary Sources [TPS] process works well with even our youngest students because primary source images can be quite compelling.

### **What kind of educational technology is necessary for the QFT?**

**Andrew:** Typically, the QFT is implemented as [a paper-and-pencil technique](#) (or chart paper and marker technique!). There is something powerful about the turn-taking, the co-constructing of questions as students build off one another’s thinking, and the speaking and listening aspect that may not translate to online mediums. As with any adaptation, however, educators should think critically and intentionally about how the adjustments will benefit their lesson, their teaching and student learning.

**Connie:** I agree that while one could easily use applications such as Padlet or Google Docs for group question-building, using QFT with paper — small group work with butcher paper, or whole group on the board — keeps the questions alive and in an order that helps the process work smoothly.

### **The QFocus seems to be the most challenging task. Does it take time to get good at it?**

**Connie:** It is helpful to remember that there is no “right” QFocus. Anticipating possible student questions to be generated from a QFocus ahead of time can help check to see if the process

might go in a direction we like. Ask colleagues! The [RQI website](#) offers some valuable worksheets that help with this process.

**Andrew:** The quality of the QFocus depends on the aims and goals of your lesson or unit, how you intend students to use their questions, and whether what you anticipate students will ask about the QFocus is in fact what is elicited. These aspects should all be aligned. The QFocus can be anything — except a question. Keep it simple. Consider using a visual or provocative statement that students can relate to. [This PowerPoint](#) and this [QFT planning tool](#) can support your QFT design. Many educators have said that the QFocus design becomes easier the more often they use the QFT in the classroom.

### **What about quiet students? Will they feel comfortable asking questions?**

**Andrew:** For some students, one of the major takeaways from the QFT is learning that their peers also have intriguing and salient questions to ask. The QFT is an equitable teaching strategy, and the rules and steps create a space that invites even the quieter students to feel comfortable contributing. This is partially because students do not feel the pressure to *know everything*. Instead, they are given time to think about what they do not yet know. As one student from Newton, Mass., shared, “A lot of times someone will come up with a question that I would have never thought of, and it really helps everybody understand more just because of that one question.” For students who tend to participate regardless of the activity, hearing from quieter students is an extremely powerful learning experience. The QFT creates an engaging environment for *all students* to learn from each other’s questions.

**Connie:** Using the QFT with health classes on topics like STDs or sexting allowed questions to be asked that might not be asked in more traditional ways. It’s often difficult as a teacher to stand back and let students move forward in their own way especially with these kind of topics; but this process allows us to give them that space and lets them express their own perspectives. When it’s a sensitive subject, highlighting the QFT rules that expressly state that we’re looking for ALL kinds of questions opens the door for them to think big, think crazy, and think of all the things that they [or maybe their best friend] might want to ask but couldn’t elsewhere.

### **What if my students don’t ask the questions I was hoping they would ask?**

**Connie:** I just wrote a [blog on this very topic here](#).

## **About the Experts**

### **Connie Williams**

*Teacher Librarian*

Connie spent 28 years as a teacher librarian for Petaluma City Schools. She recently published her book *Understanding Government Information: A Teaching Strategy Toolkit for Grades 7-12*.

### **Andrew P. Minigan**

*Director of Strategy, Education Program at the Right Question Institute*

Andrew P. Minigan is the Right Question Institute's Director of Strategy, Education Program. His work has appeared in *Education Week*, *Educational Leadership*, *Social Education*, *The New England Journal of History*, and *Memory*. You can find him on Twitter [@AndrewRQI](https://twitter.com/AndrewRQI).