

It is one tiny step from Mister Rogers to brain theory. Research regarding empathy and the brain is fascinating reading. This same research is easily applied to empathy and stories. We know that our brains are hardwired for stories and storytelling and that stories can engender feelings

*“Wouldn't it be great to be able to tell a story as well as Gay Ducey?”*

—Mister Rogers

of connection, inclusion, identification, and, yes, empathy. Good stories encourage the listener to enter the emotional and social world of a character, and to make that empathic leap to see the challenges and dilemmas the character faces. Listeners can feel these predicaments as if they are experiencing them directly.

It is just as if we received a letter that can change a life.

**MaryGay Ducey** tells all sorts of tales to all sorts of ages. She has appeared at festivals and occasions throughout the United States, Canada, and Ireland. A former social services administrator and librarian, Ducey is the co-author of *A Crash Course in Storytelling* [Libraries Unlimited, 2006], and has taught storytelling at several universities.

## Are You Really Listening? How Asking Questions Can Make Us Better Listeners

Sarah Westbrook



**W**e've all experienced the difference between being heard and being listened to. Good listeners validate, focus, check assumptions, and respond thoughtfully. Above all, good listeners ask good questions.

A recent study, “It Doesn't Hurt to Ask: Question-Asking Increases Liking,” [Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 113 No. 3 (2017): 430-452] found that “people who ask more

questions, particularly follow-up questions, are better liked by their conversation partners.” In fact, argues co-author Alison Wood Brooks, asking more questions not only causes people to “be perceived as more emotionally intelligent, but to actually be more emotionally intelligent as well.”



Above and on page 31: Students in Manchester, NH using QFT.

We need questions, in other words, to really understand someone else's story and empathize with their experience. Moreover, intentionally practicing question formulation could very well be a key to help us develop empathy.

In my work with Right Question Institute, I frequently hear from teachers and students who intuitively name the connection between asking questions and deep, compassionate listening: “I learned that questioning everything will produce unique answers, and gives you insight from people with different opinions and points of view,” one high schooler from San Francisco, CA, wrote. An elementary school special educator in New York City noted, “[By asking questions], students learned about the importance of community and listening to each other, and the responsibility we have to respect one another both inside and outside of school. Through all this, they began to value themselves and those around them, starting with their classmates.” We've heard stories like this from teachers and students across the country suggesting that asking questions is foundational to becoming a thoughtful, empathetic listener and an effective communicator and relationship builder.

Yet, the skill of question formulation is rarely deliberately taught or practiced. Similarly, we sometimes take for granted if someone is a “good listener” or not, believing listening is an inherent personality trait. However, research and stories from the field suggest just the opposite: that listening and asking questions are discrete skills that can be deliberately taught and learned.

In a multi-cultural climate, asking questions helps



students actively reach out across divides and listen to different perspectives and experiences.

### Cuba-Rushford High School, Cuba, NY

Ahead of a debate about capital punishment in a high



school forensics class, Krista Tompkins polled her students about their initial positions on the subject. In the initial poll, all but one student in the class was in favor of the death penalty. Tompkins was concerned to see that students chose sides quickly, “without a second thought, black and white,” Tompkins reported. “I wanted them to see the gray; I wanted them to struggle.”

So, Tompkins lead students through the Question Formulation Technique (QFT), a step-by-step protocol in which students ask and work with their own questions, to help her class examine assumptions and communicate productively about this provocative issue.

As a Question Focus (a prompt to elicit student questions), Tompkins showed students a clip of the death penalty carried out in the film *The Green Mile*. Students worked in groups to generate thoughtful questions, ranging from the practical (Is it efficient? Who pays for it? Who cleans up after?) to the moral (Why would people watch? Who would want to watch? Aren't those people killing, too? Should the mentally ill be subject to the death penalty?) to the personal (If you were judge or jury, could you impose a sentence to end a life?).

After the QFT, Tompkins polled students again on

their position; this time, the class was split 50/50 for or against the death penalty. “They really started thinking,” Tompkins said. Students weren't so firmly “set” on one side or the other anymore.

Through working with their questions, students questioned their initial assumptions about capital punishment and were inspired to do more research and thinking about it. They listened to classmates who had different perspectives, and ultimately approached the topic with more nuance and thoughtfulness in their final class debate.

### Abbott Middle School, West Bloomfield, Michigan [tinyurl.com/Abbottstudent]

Erin Wynn, a 7th grade English Language Arts (ELA) teacher, was preparing to start a new literature unit on the book *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton. Wynn wanted to engage students in thinking critically about the social dynamics in the book and their own experiences with navigating social conflicts.

Using the QFT, students asked questions about the phrase “Social groups judge each other based on differences.”

Students dove into the topic with a passion: “If everyone were the same, would we still have stereotypes?” “Does your gender affect how much someone judges you?” “How does society teach us how to treat each other this way?” “What can we do to stop bullying?” “How can we change our actions?” “What would change in our community if no one were judged?”

Through their questions, students built empathy for Hinton's characters and also for each other. Their curiosity led to interest in taking action against bullying in their school and rich class discussions about different forms of stereotyping and how these might be prevented.

“Overall, most groups came up with really thought provoking and touching questions,” Wynn reflected. “I was surprised at how many angles they looked at in the idea of ‘social groups’ without any prompting. Many groups wrote questions about groups based on gender and differences in economic class...that was surprising to me that a 7th grader would consider class complexities to this degree.”

### Student Reflections and What We Can Learn from Them

In classrooms across the country, teachers and students are demonstrating just what is possible when students have the opportunity to ask questions and learn from one another. By starting with a question rather than an assumption, students become more receptive to other viewpoints, and are able to engage with each other in difficult issues with sometimes surprising incisiveness and complexity.

"People are unique in their way of thinking. We all came up with different questions and mostly had different interests. Even with the same question, we all phrased it differently. My group mates and I all have quite different personalities and that has made the [group] super fun."

—High school student

"I learned to question reading beforehand and look forward to finding answers. Sometimes we read expecting to just receive the information from the authors instead of looking for what we want to know and finding it in the reading."

—High school student

For these students, asking questions activated a new openness, mental flexibility, and receptivity to other ways of thinking, reading, understanding, and learning.

What can we learn from them? So often, adults can be more closed, and less flexible and adaptable than students. We've had more years to become entrenched in our patterns of thinking and ways of interacting. Yet, asking questions can be similarly transformative for adults.

One educator from Colorado wrote, "QFT ignites that sense of purpose in students and they get so excited when they read something that answers their question...As teachers, we've noticed that this serves us even in our lives, like when we go to the doctor. I find that I now have more questions. My colleagues and I keep asking ourselves, 'why didn't we learn this a long time ago?'"

By making a deliberate effort to ask questions (and create space for others to ask their own questions), we can all be better friends and colleagues, more active readers and learners, and more effective, empathetic communicators.

#### Works Cited:

Karen Huang, Michael Yeomans, Alison Wood Brooks, Julia Minson, and Francesca Gino, "It Doesn't Hurt to Ask: It Doesn't Hurt to Ask: Question-Asking Increases Liking," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 113 No. 3 (2017): 430-452.

Rachel Layne, "People Will Like You More If You Start Asking Followup Questions," *Forbes*, October 30, 2017.

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## When the Story Is Ended... Storytelling for Community-Building

Charles Temple, Ph.D.

**A** hundred years ago, Alexander Carmichael attended a cèilidh on an Outer Hebrides Island. Villagers of all ages crammed into a small cottage, and were spellbound by a tale spun out by a seasoned teller:

*The tale is full of incident, action and pathos. It is told simply yet graphically, and at times dramatically—compelling the undivided attention of the listener... Truth overcomes craft, skill conquers strength, and bravery is rewarded... When the story is ended it is discussed and commented upon, and the different characters praised or blamed according to their merits and the views of the critics.* [Briggs. Emphasis added]

*"These days when storytelling so strongly emphasizes performance, it is easy to forget that in all the years before our time, storytelling was a more participatory event..."*

That last sentence is our focus here. These days when storytelling so strongly emphasizes performance, it is easy to forget that in all the years before our time, storytelling was a more participatory event: members of the audience were invited to create their own interpretations of what they heard and compare their views with those of diverse others. They not only listened to stories; they made meaning together. That's a good way to form trust among diverse people and build communities. I've learned to use those after-the-story discussions powerfully and fruitfully in the past 20 years working as a storytelling teacher in democratization and literacy projects in dozens of countries around the world. In this article I will share some techniques my team has used for creating discussions that follow good stories.

#### Stories That Invite Thinking and Sharing

Some stories pose their own questions. You can ask for

predictions about how the stories will end, or you can use a fancier strategy such as *Corners* that gives people group support as they think of reasons to support their answers.

Some stories contain moral dilemmas that invite exploration. These stories may not come right out and ask a question, but the questions aren't hard to find. There are strategies that can deepen the discussion and lead to debate about issues raised by the story. Some of those strategies are *Academic Controversy* and the *Value Line*.

Other stories seem straightforward, but can still yield up engaging issues and inspire interesting thoughts. But sometimes to get at the heart of things you need to twist them around, or climb inside the skins of the characters and see what they are going through. Strategies like retelling traditional tales by casting people in different dramatic roles, or using The Audience Directs strategy can lead to new understandings.

#### Strategies

**Corners** [Crawford, 2005]

After people have heard a story, invite them to choose and defend different positions on an issue raised in that story. For *Corners*, you need a story that poses a question with three or four defensible responses, such as "The Cowtail Switch."

Choose a question and tease out some likely responses; explain to the participants that they are going to think about a question, stake out a position on it, and be ready to support their position.

Once you put the question and several possible answers to the group, have the participants order the answers from the most to least preferred. Next, have all of the participants who preferred the first response go to one corner, those in favor of the second go to another corner, and so on. One corner can be designated for those who are undecided.

Have the people in each corner share their views with each other. What are their reasons for taking the position they have chosen?

Invite representatives from the corners to take turns stating their group's position and the reasons they support this view. Then welcome people from all groups to respond. Encourage them to politely (!) question and debate each other's ideas.

Explain that some people may have altered their opinions based on what they heard. If so, they may change groups by walking to the group they agree with.

Finally, once the discussion has ended and everyone has moved to their final group, ask each group to summarize its position and the reasons that support it.

Debrief by asking the participants what they learned from the exercise.

#### Academic Controversy

[Kagan, 1998]

Academic Controversy helps people practice the art of thinking critically—taking a position and producing reasons to support their arguments. It can also help them practice debating politely.

Assign people to groups of four and give them a binary question to discuss—one with a "yes" or "no," "this" or "that" answer, so people can take either of two sides to it (e.g., should the young man have stolen the skin from the selkie in "The Seal Skin"?)

Participants begin by discussing the question in their groups of four so they reach a common understanding of what the question means and why it matters. Then, have them count off within their group, 1

– 4. (If there are five people in any group, then there will be two with the same number.) Tell those with numbers 1 and 2 that they should prepare to argue for the point of view that says "Yes, we should." Tell numbers 3 and 4 that they should prepare to argue the point of view, "No, we shouldn't"—or however the issue divides. Direct both teams within each group to go off by themselves and spend a few minutes listing reasons to support their position.

Next, each of the participants with a "Yes" answer should find a new partner with a "Yes" answer from a different group, exchange reasons for their answers, and write down any they did not already have on their lists. Those with a "No" answer should do the same.

Then participants rejoin their original partners and add the reasons they learned to the list they already had. They should think carefully about all of the reasons listed, think of the ones that best support their position, and prepare to debate the others within their original group. For the debate, they come up with a statement of their position,



Jack & the Beanstalk: Work Projects Administration Poster Collection (Library of Congress), 1941 via Wikicommons.