

Curiosity Killed the Cat: The Power of Not Knowing in the Humanities Classroom

Sarah Westbrook

Director of Professional Learning,
Right Question Institute

Lauren Carlton

English Teacher, Foxborough
Public Schools

Ling-Se Peet

Art Teacher, Boston Public Schools

Dana Huff

Instructional Coach, English
Department Co-Chair, Worcester
Academy

Jose (Jodie) Reyes

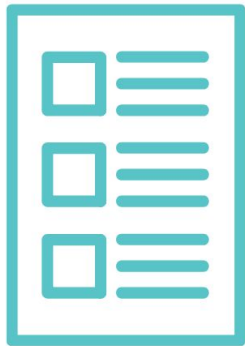
Supervisor of Humanities 6-12,
Marlborough Public Schools

Who is in the room?

Find Today's Slides & Free QFT Resources

Slides: <https://tinyurl.com/RQIatNCTE>

More: <https://rightquestion.org/education/resources>



Classroom Examples



Instructional Videos



Planning Tools & Templates

Use and Share These Free Resources

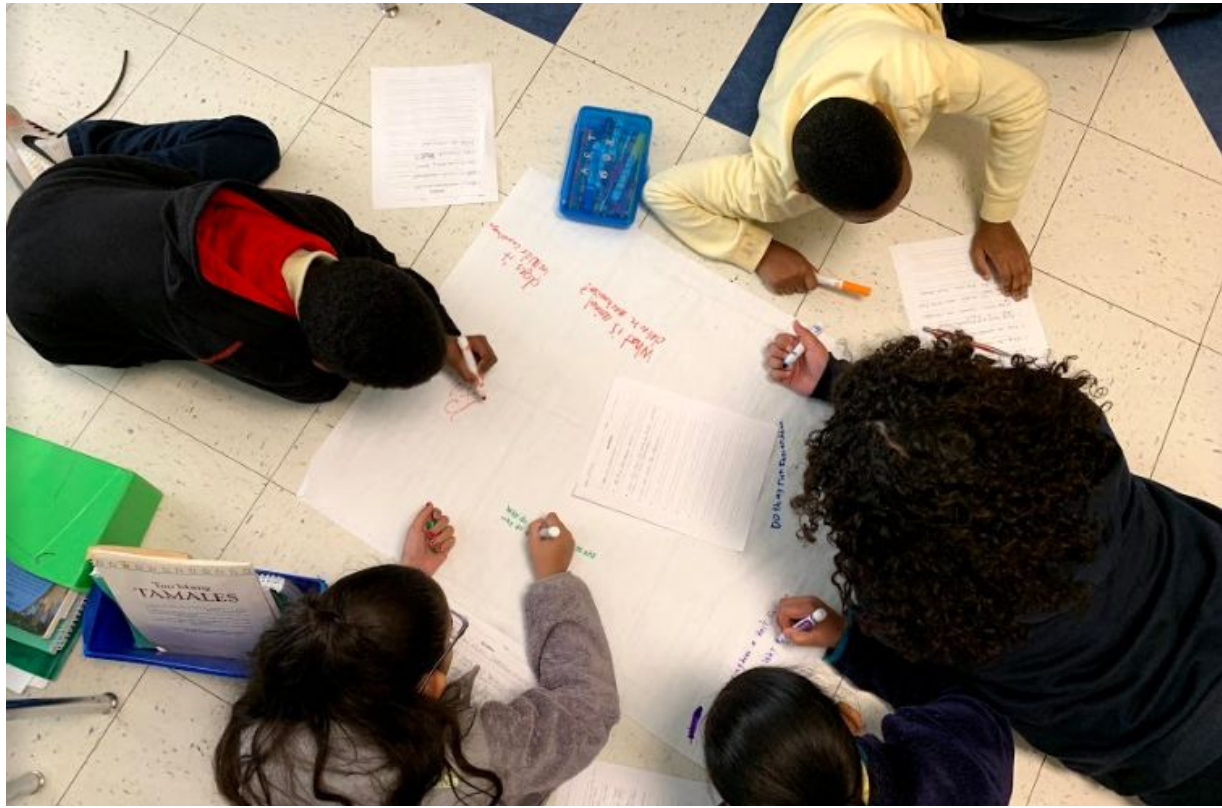


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“Source: The Right Question Institute (RQI). The Question Formulation Technique (QFT) was created by RQI. Visit rightquestion.org for more information and free resources.”

Today's Agenda

- 1) Why spend time teaching the skill of question formulation?
- 2) Collaborative Learning with the Question Formulation Technique (QFT)
- 3) Exploring Classroom Applications & Student Work
- 4) Closing and Reflection



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Why spend time teaching the skill of question formulation?

Origin of The Right Question Institute: Parents in Lawrence, Massachusetts, 1990

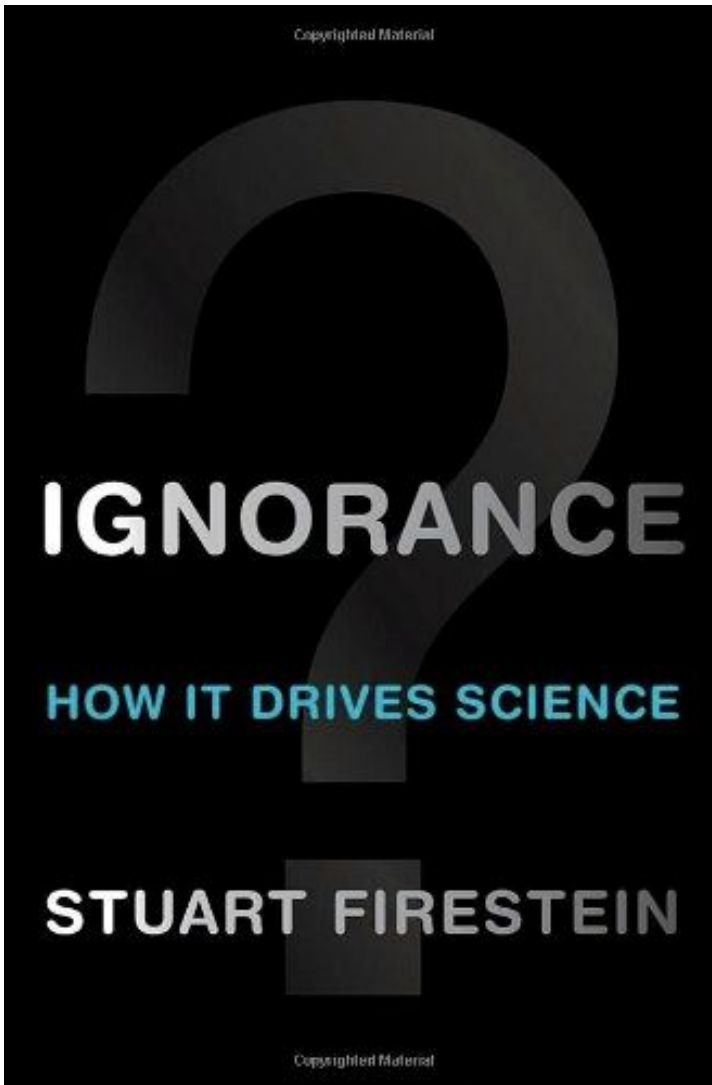


“We don’t go to the school because we don’t even know what to ask.”

"There is no learning without
having to pose a question."

- Richard Feynman

Nobel Laureate, Physics, 1965



“We must teach students how to think in questions, how to manage ignorance.”

– Stuart Firestein

Former chair, Department of Biology,
Columbia University

“Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose. It is a seeking that he who wishes may know the cosmic secrets of the world and they that dwell therein.”

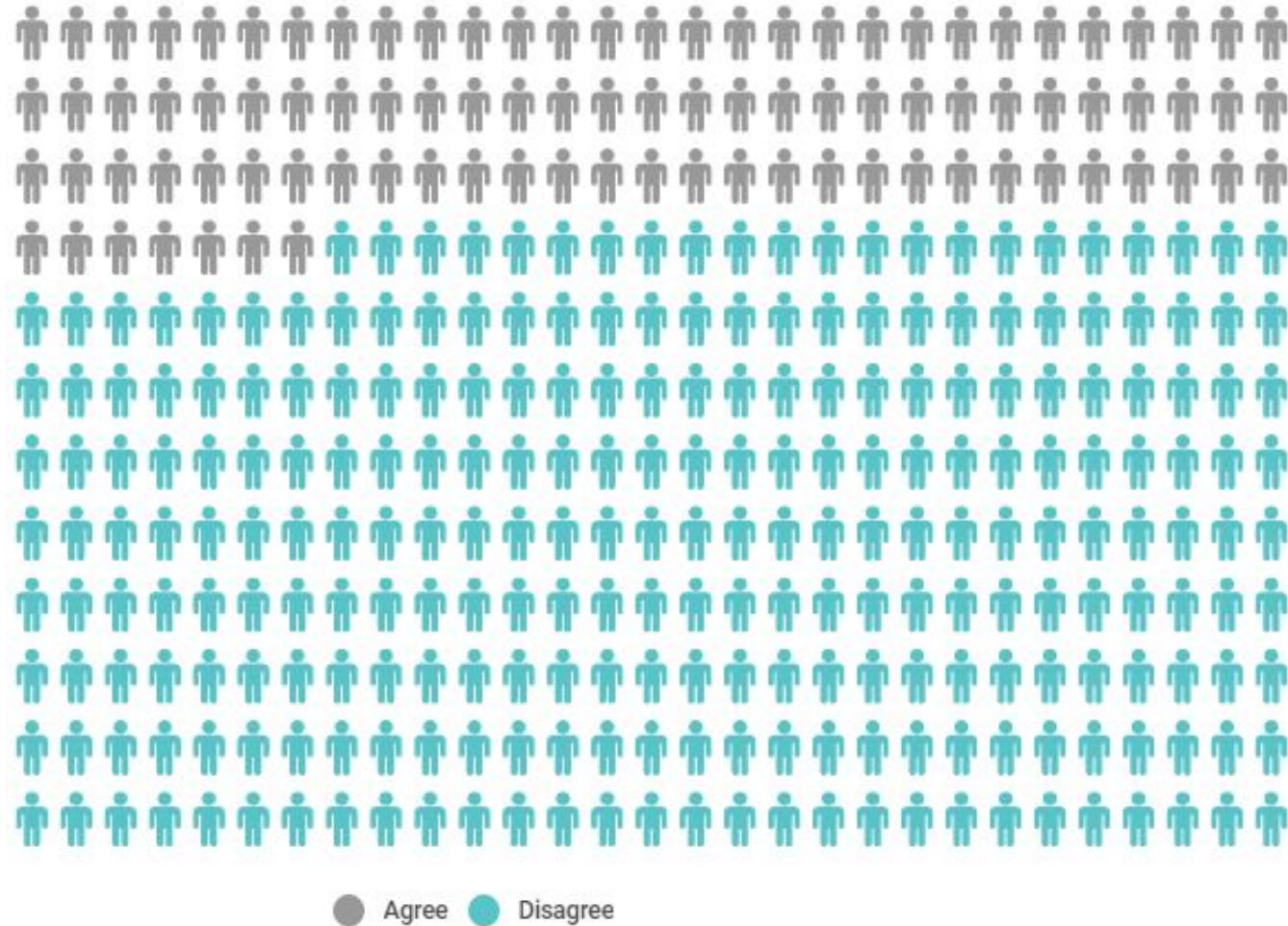
-Zora Neale Hurston

So many questions to put Them
Have I the Eagerness

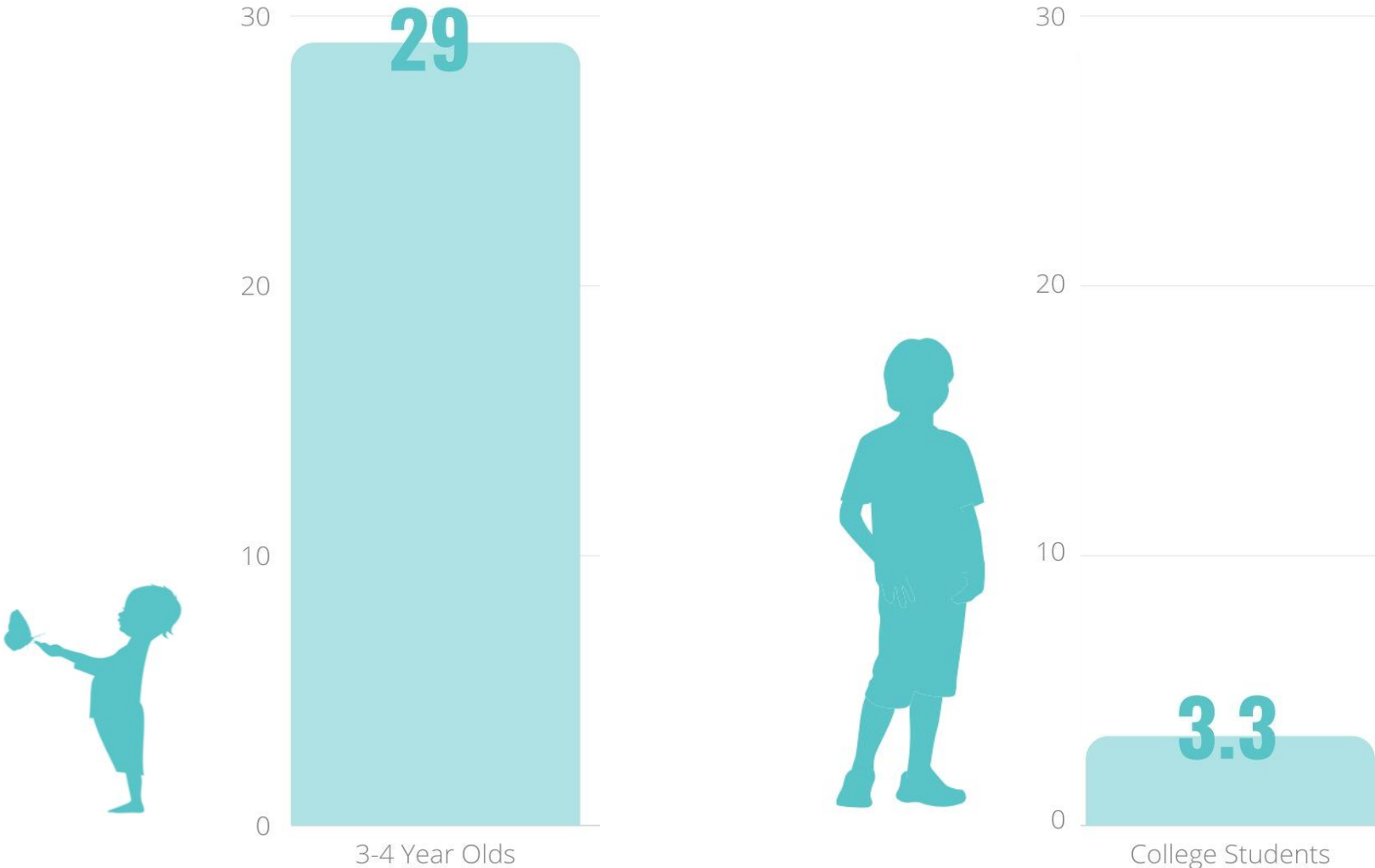
That I could snatch Their Faces
That could Their lips reply
Not till the last was answered
Should They start for the Sky –

—Emily Dickinson, excerpt of F1074

Yet, Only 27% of Graduates Believe College Taught Them How to Ask Their Own Questions



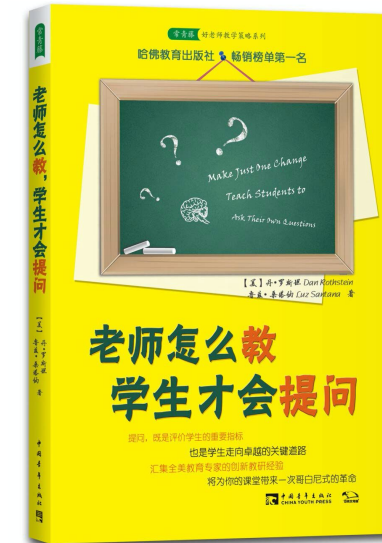
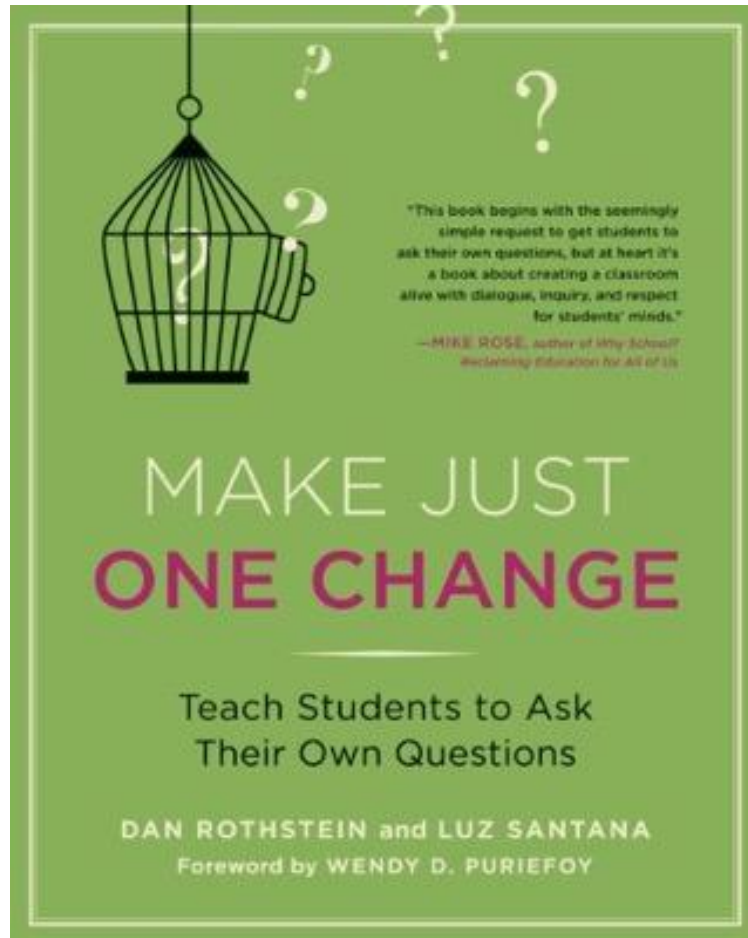
Question Asking Declines with Age



Tizard, B., Hughes, M., Carmichael, H., & Pinkerton, G. (1983).
Pearson, J.C. & West, R. (2009)

We are not alone

More than 1 million classrooms worldwide



What happens when students do
learn to ask their own questions?

Research Confirms The Importance of Questioning

Self-questioning (metacognitive strategy):

- Student formulation of their own questions is one of the most effective metacognitive strategies
- Engaging in pre-lesson self-questioning improved students rate of learning by nearly 50% (Hattie, p.193)

John Hattie

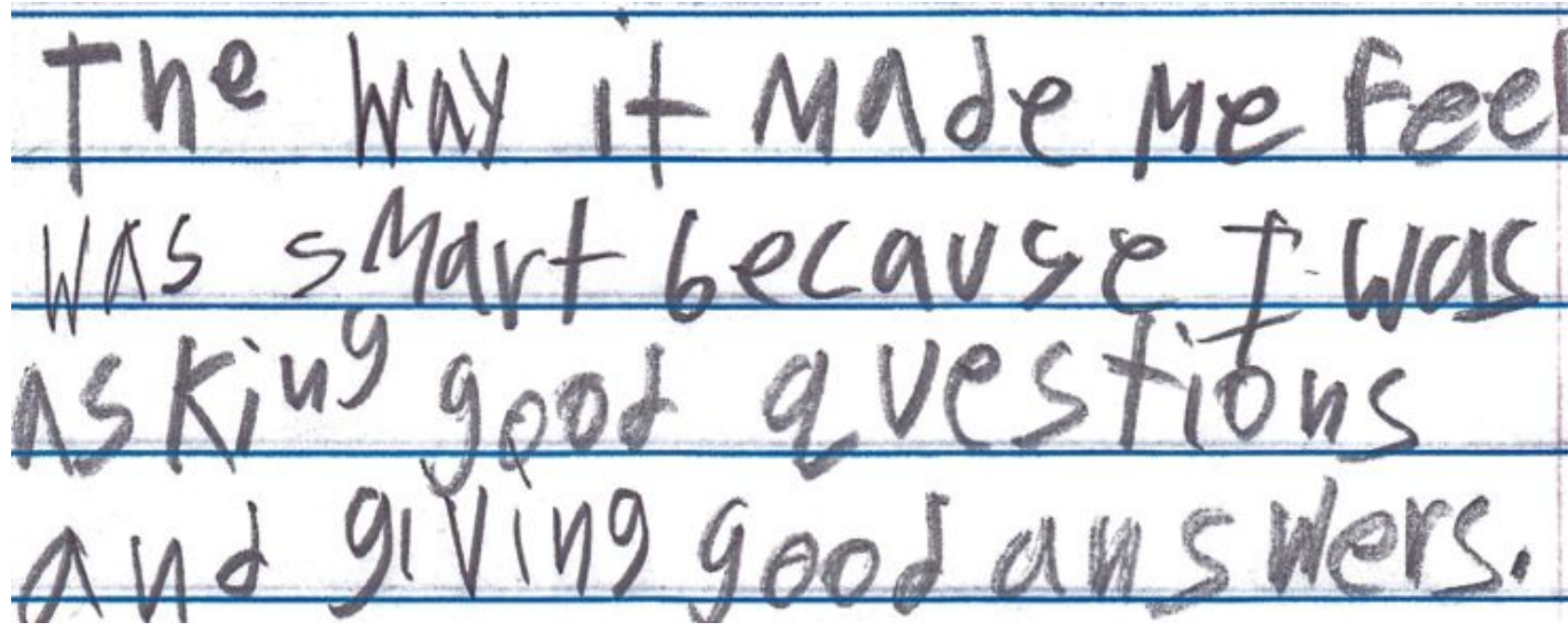
Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement, 2008

Research Confirms the Importance of Questioning

Student question generation:

- leads to **significant gains in reading comprehension and increased memory recall**, as well as identification and integration of main ideas (Therrien and Hughes, 2008).
- stimulates a **deeper elaboration** of the learning material and a **deeper processing** (King, 1992; Song, 2016; Ebersbach et al. 2020)
- Elementary students express enhanced **satisfaction**, a positive attitude, **enthusiasm, and excitement in learning** resulting from generating questions (Hinson et al., 2004).
- Increased **phonemic awareness and oral language development** in early learners (Causey and Spencer, 2024).

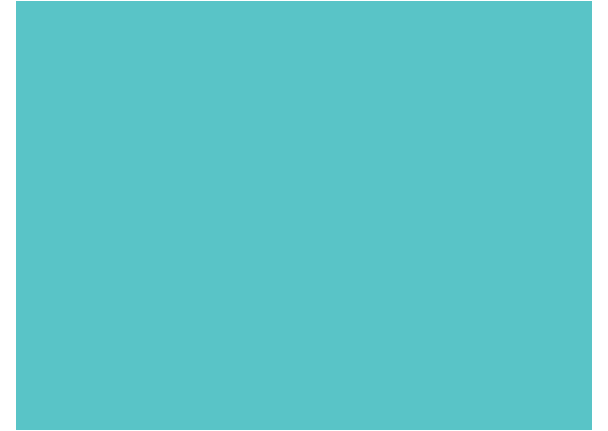
Student Reflection



The way it made me feel
was smart because I was
asking good questions
and giving good answers.

“The way it made me feel was smart because I was asking good questions and giving good answers.”

- Boston 9th grade summer school student



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Collaborative Learning with the Question Formulation Technique (QFT)

The Question Formulation Technique (QFT)

Individuals learn to:

- **Produce** their own questions
- **Improve** their questions
- **Strategize** on how to use their questions
- **Reflect** on what they have learned and how they learned it

Rules for Producing Questions

1. Ask as many questions as you can
2. Do not stop to answer, judge, or discuss
3. Write down every question exactly as stated
4. Change any statements into questions

Which rule may be difficult for you to follow?

Produce Questions

1. Ask Questions
2. Follow the Rules
 - Ask as many questions as you can.
 - Do not stop to answer, judge, or discuss.
 - Write down every question exactly as it was stated.
 - Change any statements into questions.
3. Number the Questions

Question Focus

Some students do not ask questions.

Remember to **number** your questions and follow the rules:

Ask as many questions as you can.

Don't stop to answer, judge, or discuss.

Record each question exactly as it was stated (or first came to mind).

Change any statements into questions.

Categorize Questions: Closed/Open

Definitions:

- **Closed-ended** questions can be answered with a “yes” or “no” or with a **one-word** answer.
- **Open-ended** questions require more **explanation**.

Directions: Identify your questions as closed-ended or open-ended by **marking them** with a “**C**” or an “**O.**”

Discuss

Closed-ended Questions

Advantages

Discuss

Open-ended Questions

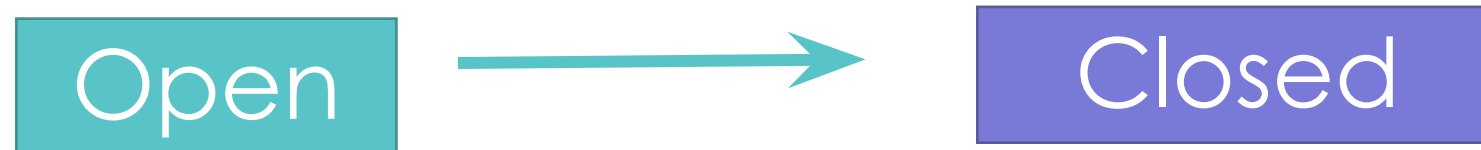
Advantages

Improve Questions

- Take one **closed-ended question** and change it into an **open-ended question**.



- Take one **open-ended question** and change it into a **closed-ended question**.



- Add these as new questions to the bottom of your list.

Prioritize Questions

Review your list of questions and **choose three questions that you think are most important.**

Then:

- Discuss why you chose those questions and where those questions fell in your original sequence.
- Discuss how you could seek answers to those priority questions. List a couple possible action steps. Be prepared to share.

Share

1. Your priority questions and rationale for selecting them.
2. One or two ideas about how you could seek answers to your priority questions.
3. The numbers of your three priority questions in your original sequence. (For ex: “2, 4, 7 out of 8 total”)

Reflect

- What did you learn?
- How did you learn it?

A Look Inside the Process



The QFT, on one slide...

1) Question Focus

2) **Produce** Your Questions

- ✓ Follow the rules
- ✓ Number your questions

3) **Improve** Your Questions

- ✓ Categorize questions as Closed or Open-ended
- ✓ Change questions from one type to another

4) **Strategize**

- ✓ Prioritize your questions
- ✓ Action plan or discuss next steps
- ✓ Share

5) **Reflect**

1. Ask as many questions as you can
2. Do not stop to discuss, judge or answer
3. Record *exactly* as stated
4. Change statements into questions

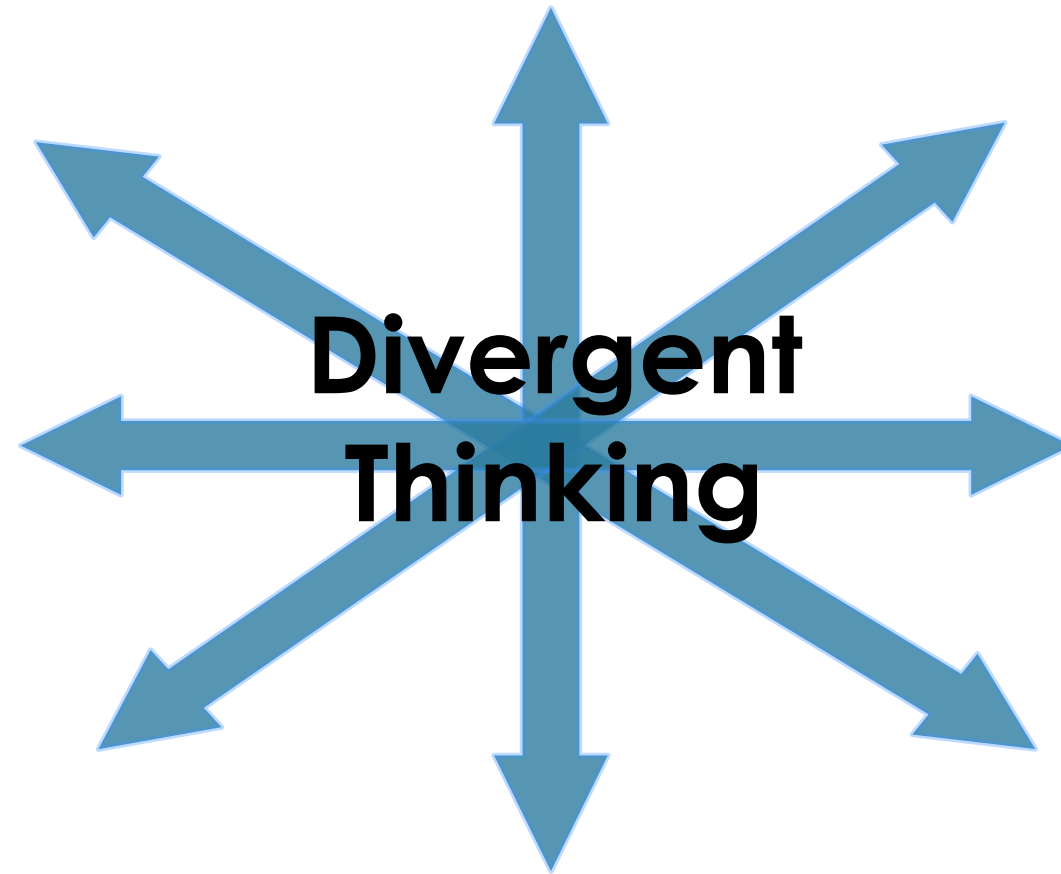
Closed-Ended:

Answered with “yes,” “no” or one word

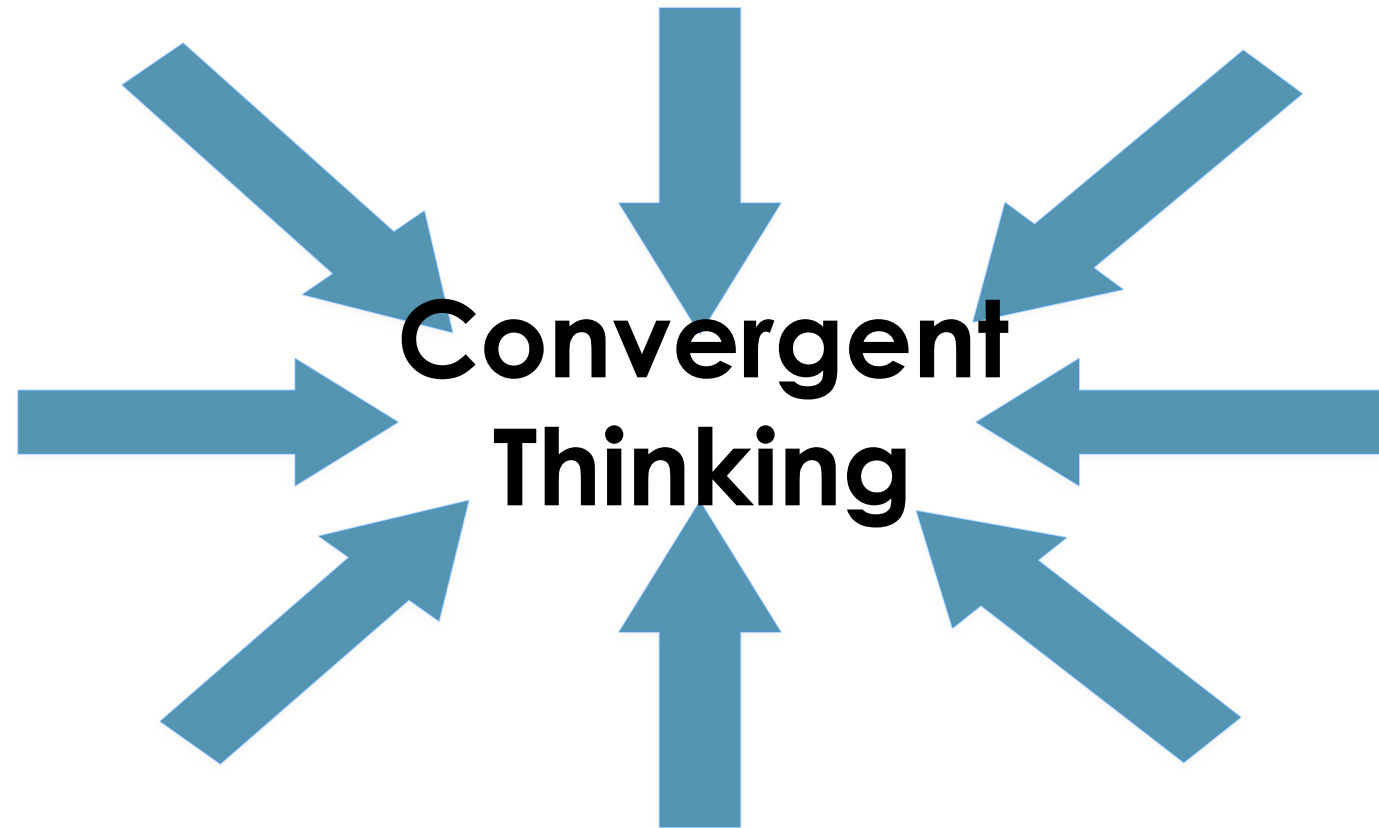
Open-Ended: Require longer explanation

Three thinking abilities
with one process

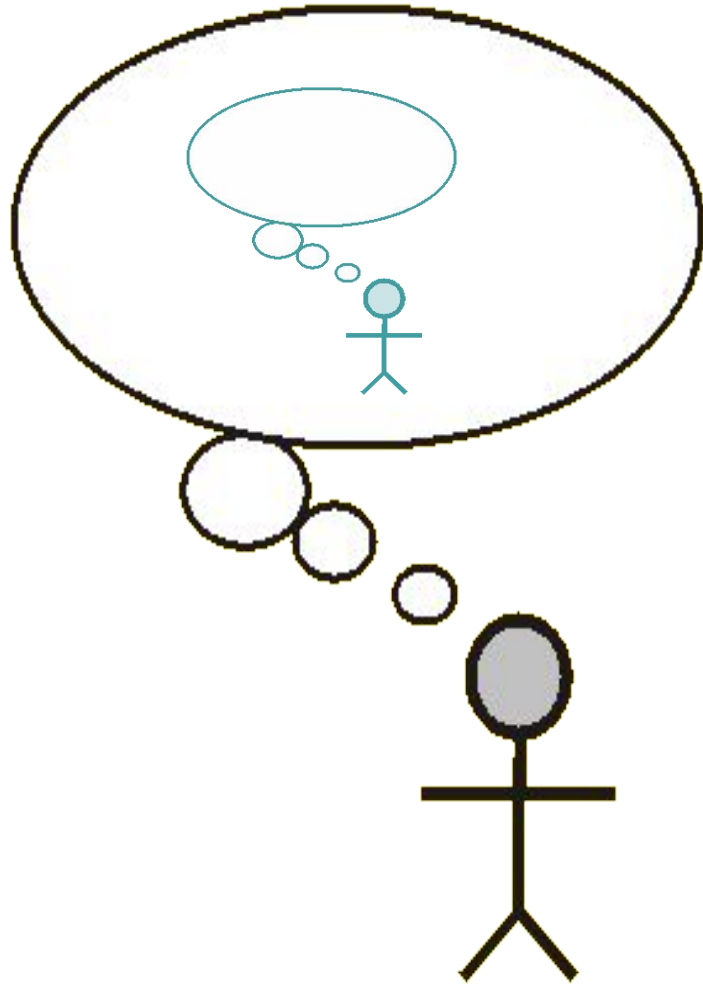
Thinking in many different directions



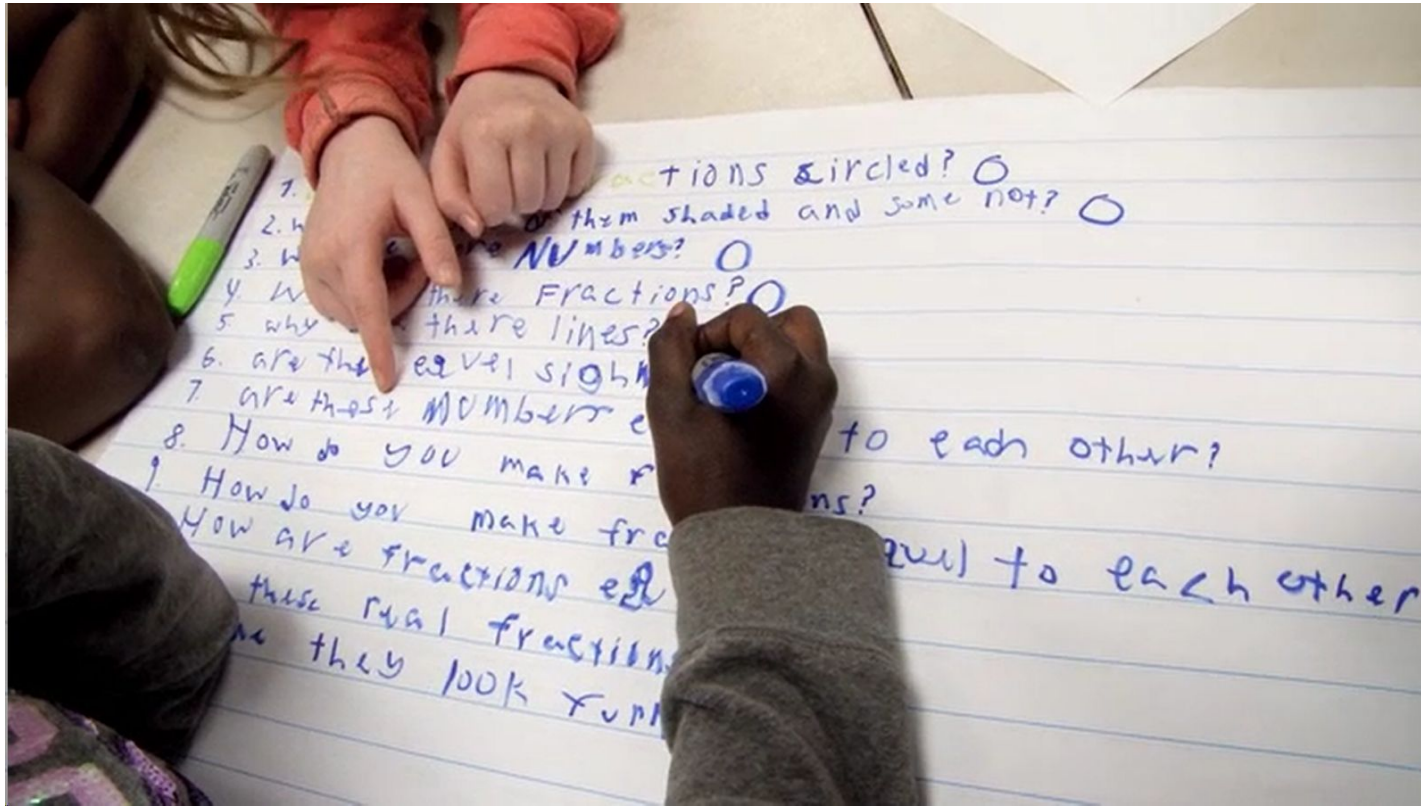
Narrowing Down, Focusing



Thinking about Thinking



Metacognition



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Exploring Classroom Applications & Student Work

Classroom Example: 10th Grade Honors English

Teacher: Lauren Carlton, Foxborough, MA

Topic: *The Crucible*

Purpose: To build students' background knowledge about the Salem Witch Trials and build empathy for the real victims who inform this work of fiction.

Question Focus



“To the honorable governor and council and general assembly now sitting at Boston:

The humble petition of us whose names are subscribed here unto now prisoners at Ipswich humbly share, that some of us have lain in the prison many months, and some of us many weeks, who are charged with witchcraft, and not being conscious to ourselves of any guilt of that nature lying upon our consciences...”

Selected Student Questions

1. Did they write it themselves or did someone write it for them?
- 2. Did they ever get released?**
3. Why were they allowed to write a letter?
- 4. If the women who were pregnant died, would the governor or the court get in trouble?**
5. Did the guards at the prison try to stop them from writing this?
- 6. How long is four scores?**
7. Were the prisoners allowed to interact with each other in jail? If so, how did they communicate?
- 8. Were the prisoners just trying to manipulate the governor into letting them out?**
9. Will the fact that so many women signed the document impact the assembly's willingness to take it into consideration? Do those in charge want the accused to suffer?
9. (cont'd) Why else would the prisoners be kept in such conditions?
- 10. Where was the baby that was born kept?**
11. Why have they not been tried yet?
12. Is this their first attempt to be released?
13. Why are there a lot of widows?
14. Are they really unafraid?
15. Who else is in support of this request whose names were not listed?
16. Who are the men and why can't they sign their names?
- 17. Why did they have to write their marriage status when signing their name?**
- 18. Why are the names of the women phrased differently from person to person?**
19. Could they have been punished for writing this?

Next Steps with Student Questions

Student questions about the letter itself served as a jumping-off point for rhetorical analysis

To the mighty Governor of our beloved Bay Colony and the esteemed Generall Assembly at Boston:

It is out of great fear that I write to you this evening. Not more than an hour ago it was brought to my knowledge that the witches now laying in the prison at Ipswich have presented to you a petition for their bail, but I beg you not to be deceived. While they may cry innocent to witchcraft, I know only of their crimes. 'Twas this summer that my wife gave birth to our first daughter, and unexperienced in maternity she employed the help of Goodwife Greene of Haverhill, who has already raised such good and pious girls. However, in her presence our precious baby neither ate nor slept. "Do not fret," she would tell us, "she will eat when she must", but mark this, when she left our house our baby's appetite returned. My wife and I have spent much time discussing this matter and are certain that Goodwife Greene of Haverhill wishes to use her supernatural abilities to starve our child. We think it obvious that Lucifer has bid her to murder the future of our prosperous Puritan faith, as Reverend Thomas and more than two others tell me the same thing happened with Goodwife Greene and their young. While I may not be able to contest to the crimes of the others, I am certain that their accusers are as honest and moral as myself. Why else would such a significant population of the prisoners request bail if they were not united under the common instruction of Satan? Because of such remarkable evidence, I think it clear that the prisoners supposed innocence is merely pretense. This notion deeply troubles me, and I think it necessary that you should not grant such accommodations to these witches. Let not their pleas for comfort lead you to unleash their evil presences upon our town. Does the Bible not instruct us to rid our world of witches? Worry not about their well-being, but the threat their existence poses to your good, Christian authority. In these troubling times, I think it necessary that the town at least have the protection of your rule. I will warn you once more, should you release the prisoners you will bring Hell upon our already shaken town and sacrifice your throne to their almighty Satan. Please, for the prosperity of Christianity and your authority, I call upon you to leave the witches in prison until they can be tried under our reliable courts.

Yours Respectfully, Henry Johnson

10 Honors Mrs. Carlton *The Crucible*

Let's think about this letter, and figure out how the prisoners tried to win over their audience.

Who are the **writers**? Prisoners in Ipswich suspected of witchcraft.

Are they **credible** sources? No, because they have been suspected of witchcraft, they are criminals; they want to get out of jail, they are desperate.

Why do we think these writers are/are not credible, based on what we know about them? The prisoners are criminals, suspected of witchcraft, and they are desperate.

What is the **subject** of this letter? They are arguing that they should be let out of prison until the spring when they will be freed.

Why might the writers be credible sources for this subject? They are experiencing a dire situation, they are not denying that they are witches, they have been accused.

How does the **content** of this letter establish the writers' credibility? Think about what they say in the letter that indicate they might be reliable sources of information here. Be specific. They say that they are willing to be tried. They know the intended audience's name and address. They state that they are desperate.

How do the writers feel about this subject? What is the attitude, or tone, of the letter regarding the subject? They feel strongly, it is a matter of life and death. They are not being afraid, they are pleading their case, they are not being desperate.

Find some specific words, phrases, images, and/or literary devices that indicate the writers' tone toward the subject and record them in the chart below.

Tone toward subject	Evidence (specific word/s, quote)	Intended Effect
desperate	"I do hope that you will put on the honestest compassion for her so be comforted at our suffering condition in the prison where we are in."	they want to gain sympathy from the audience, want to feel like other people, feel sorry for letting them out, appealing to sympathy
logical	"our earnest request is that seeing winter is so far gone that... we may be released."	it is stating that if they are not tried, they should be released
earnest important serious	"humbly there"	they are using formal language, properly addressing the problem

10 Honors Mrs. Carlton *The Crucible*

Who was the intended audience for this letter? How do the writers acknowledge their awareness of, and attention to, the targeted audience? Give specific examples.

The intended audience is the governor and several members of Boston. They address their targeted audience in the beginning when they say, "to the honorable governor and several assembly now sitting at Boston."

How do the writers want their intended audience to feel? How do they achieve this goal? Be specific. Look at specific word choice. What is the letter's **tone toward the audience**? Why? Record your ideas in the chart below.

Tone toward audience	Evidence (specific word/s, quote)	Intended Effect
empathetic	"I do hope that you will put on the honestest compassion for her so be comforted at our suffering condition in the prison where we are in."	they want them to feel compassion toward their current situation
urgent	"the present state we are in being like to perish with cold in winter upon the prison."	they want to direct the audience to the fact that they are not getting out, they will die if they don't
respected	"honorable governor"	they want to show respect and acknowledge the authority of the audience

What is the **purpose** in writing this letter? What do the writers hope to accomplish? The writing / prisoners want to be freed from jail until the spring.

Based on what you know about the witch trials, and having read *The Crucible*, do you think this letter would have been effective? Why or why not? I do not think that the letter would be effective. The authority will do any thing for their own benefit, and the opinion of an accused witch, would not be credible and nobody would believe it.

Can you think of any additional "strategies" the writers could have used to appeal to their audience? Again, base this on your knowledge of the trials and the play. The witches could have included names of their allies to the town, to make them believe who they are. They could also say that if they release them, they would be able to send prisoners, which is what they could make the audience want to seem more believable.

If you were the intended audience for this letter, how would it make you feel? What were the most compelling aspects for you? I would feel compassionate toward the prisoners, and I would want to let them out. They said they would still go on trial in the spring and that was convincing. They also mentioned how long they were and close to dying.

Student questions about perspective informed an assignment in which students assumed a role and wrote a response letter, demonstrating their understanding of rhetorical appeals and empathy.

Classroom Example: High School

Teacher: Jose Reyes, Marlborough, MA

Topic: Emily Dickinson

Purpose: To strengthen close reading skills and practice analyzing poetry.

Question Focus

Much Madness is divinest Sense - (F620)

By Emily Dickinson

Much Madness is divinest Sense –

To a discerning Eye –

Much Sense – the starkest Madness –

‘Tis the Majority

In this, as all, prevail –

Assent – and you are sane –

Demur – you’re straightway dangerous –

And handled with a Chain -

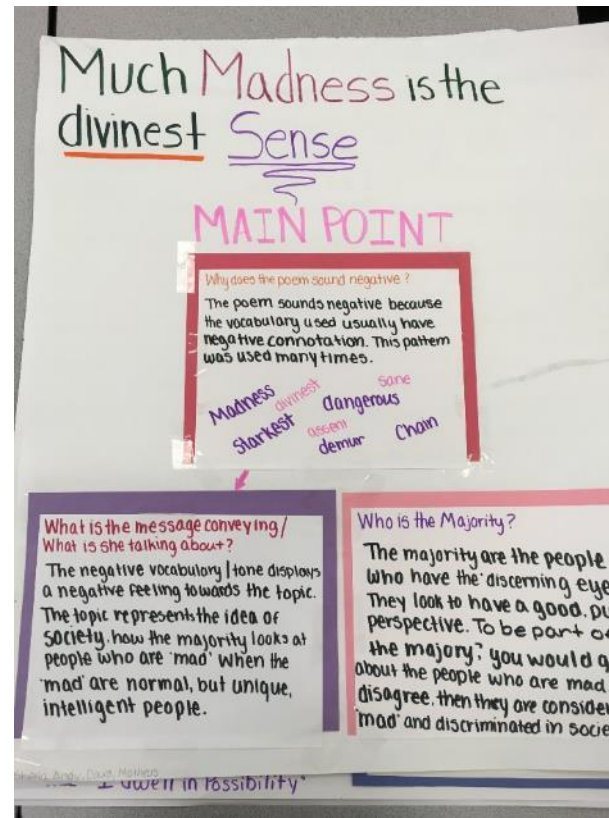
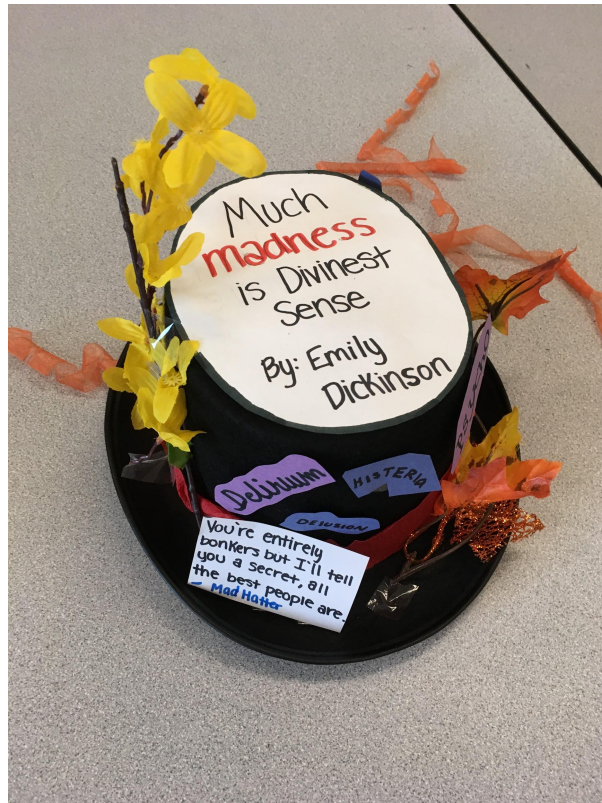
Selected Student Questions

1. Why are the first line and title the same?
2. What pattern do the lines follow?
3. What does 'discerning' mean?
4. Why are there dashes after every line?
5. Why are some of the words capitalized?
- 6. What does this poem mean?**
- 7. What is the deeper meaning?**
8. What is the poem describing?
9. What is she trying to achieve through this poem?
10. What does 'demur' mean?
- 11. How does 'madness' compare with 'divinest'?**
12. Why is this poem confusing?
13. What does 'assent' mean?
14. Who is the poem about?
15. Why is the poem only 8 lines?
16. What type of poem is this?
17. Who is Emily Dickinson?
- 18. Why did she write this?**
19. What was going on in her life at this time?
20. What does her word choice mean?
21. What is her tone, mood, attitude?
22. Why does the poem sound negative?
23. What literary devices does she use?
- 24. Is 'chain' a metaphor for something else?**
- 25. Who is meant by 'the majority'?**
26. Why is 'straightway' used as oppose to 'straightaway'?
- 27. What object is handled by a chain?**
28. What does (620) mean?
- 29. Is the intent of this poem to state that madn is dangerous as a sense?**

Next Steps with Student Questions

Students selected their three priority questions that would best help them make “Sense” of Dickinson’s poem during their discussion.

After their discussion, they created interpretive products that reflected what they learned.



Some Discussion Snippets

“I want to know who’s in the majority.”

“I feel she doesn’t directly say what she thinks...we have to infer what she says.”

“This poem makes me remember the twelve people after Jesus, who were considered mad.”

“It’s like Madness is the best sense, it’s godly, holy.”

“Like ‘common sense’.”

“I feel like I don’t know where this sentence ends and where the next is supposed to begin...Maybe [the dash is a] pause.”

“It’s like she’s reversing it. It’s literally the opposite.”

“If you agree madness is all around—you’re right.”

“Does that mean it’s good to have madness?”

“There’s many forms of madness.”

Dissertation Study

Setting: Spring Public Schools (SPS), a diverse Northeast district

Participants: Three secondary ELA and history teachers and 26 7th and 10th grade students

Data: Included classroom observations of QFT and post-QFT discussions, documents created during and after the QFT, interviews with students and teachers

Headline:

- Results suggest that framing the purpose of QFT and post-QFT discussions is critical for helping students build understanding and bring in their own funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2006; Moll et al., 1992) as they use the QFT to try to make sense of complex texts.

Classroom Example: 12th Grade AP English Literature

Teacher: Dana Huff, Worcester, MA

Topic: *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison and “The Case for Reparations” by Ta-Nehisi Coates

Purpose: To create questions for a Socratic seminar on the themes of both texts.

Question Focus

“Everybody wants the life
of a black man” (222).

—Guitar

Selected Student Questions

1. Why does everybody want the life of a black man?
- 2. How has systemic racism manifested itself in Song of Solomon? Is this in line with Coates's description of systemic racism?**
3. What questions in the Case for Reparations is exposed in this novel?
4. How does the novel provoke the reader to reexamine the racial identity?
5. How is this statement depicted in Song of Solomon?
- 6. Which character would agree and which characters would disagree?**
7. How is this present in today's society?
8. How does Guitar's statement manifest itself in Coates's work?
9. What has perpetuated the notion that Guitar suggests? What evidence do we see for this in the "Case for Reparations"?
10. What are the definitions of "want" in this sentence, and what is the significance of them?

Next Steps with Student Questions

- Students selected questions to discuss in an hour-long Socratic seminar.
- Students reflected on the learning after the seminar, in particular noting comments by other students that enhanced their understanding and evaluating their own thinking in the discussion.
- Some students continued to examine the questions in writing assignments following a study of the novel.

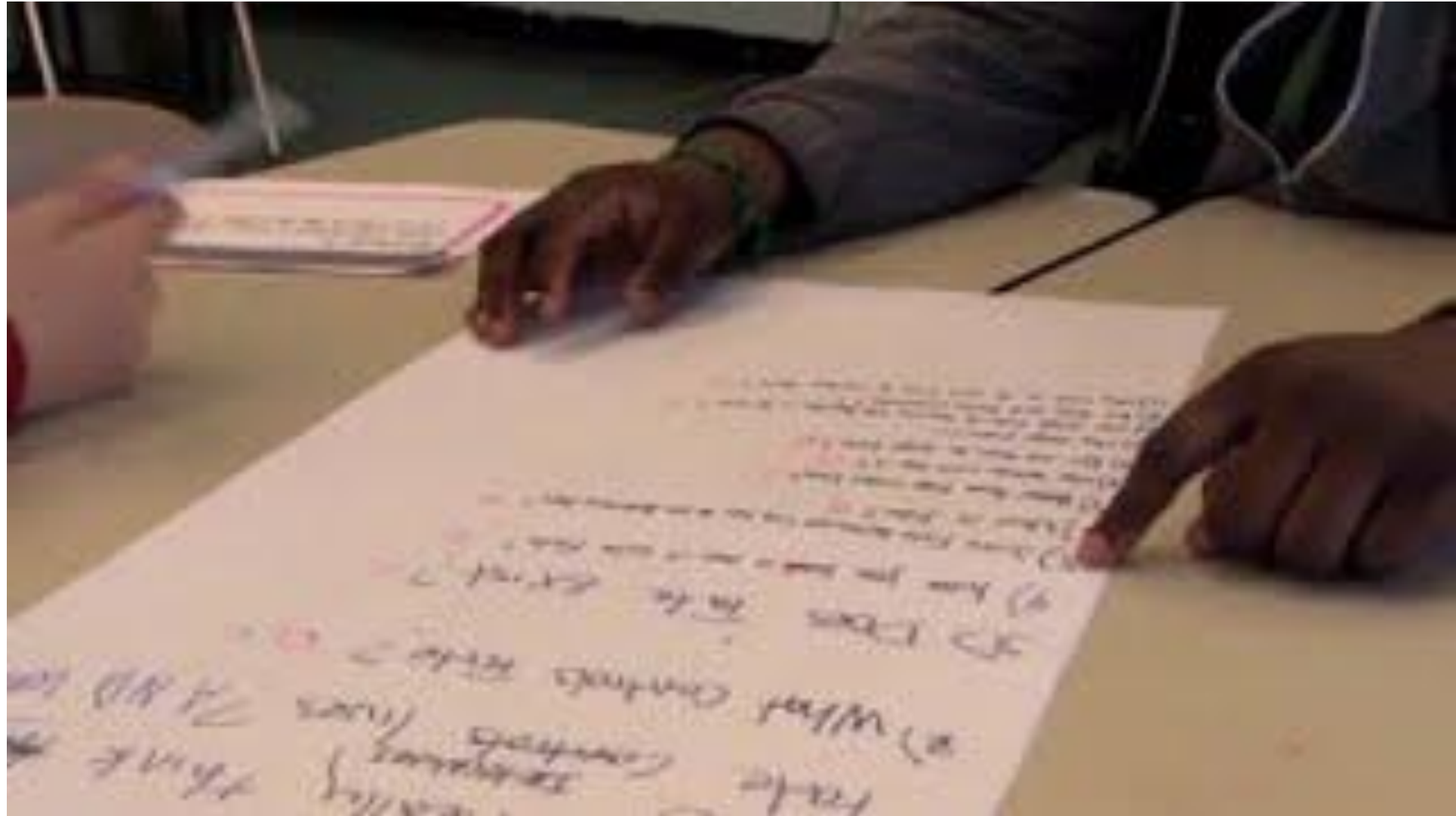
Classroom Example: 12th Grade

Teacher: Ling-Se Peet, Boston, MA

Topic: *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Diaz

Purpose: To help students generate questions for a Socratic Seminar at the end of the unit.

Reflections from the QFT



Classroom Example: 12th Grade

Teacher: Ling-Se Peet, Boston, MA

Topic: The *Kite Runner* unit

Purpose: To generate interest and curiosity in the setting of the novel, and to gauge how much students have learned about Afghanistan before they start reading the novel.

Question Focus

Afghanistan

Student Priority Questions

at the beginning of the Kite Runner unit:

1. Why is it always associated with terrorism?
2. What are their feelings toward the US?
3. Are the men sexually frustrated?
4. Are Afghanistan's troops going to invade the United States?
5. Will the war in Afghanistan ever be over?
6. Who started the war?

Student Priority Questions

in the middle of the Kite Runner unit (after learning about Islam and Afghanistan's ethnic groups):

1. Why do they have so many ethnic groups?
2. Are they only in war with the US?
3. Who killed Osama bin Laden?
4. How did the division of Shi'ites and Sunnis come about?
5. How are Sunnis and Shi'ites in Afghanistan different from other Muslims and Afghans?
6. Where do women stand in the religion?
7. Why is religion such a big focus in Afghanistan?
8. Why did they split from Islam to different sub religions?
9. Do they realize their fighting is pointless?

Next Steps with Student Questions

- Students compared their questions between the first and second QFT sessions.
- Students noted the patterns and differences between these sets of questions.
- Students identified what the differences signal about what they have learned and what they want to know.

Joy and the QFT - Unlock the inner child

“

I suggest making joy a learning goal.

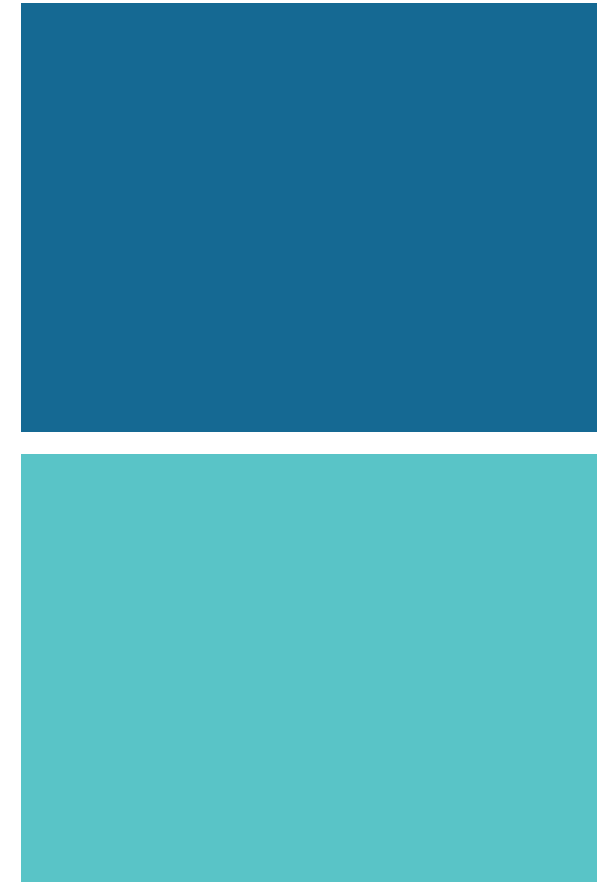
Gholdy Muhammad

Education Week

Why JOY you ask?

What brought me (and you) to teaching in the first place?

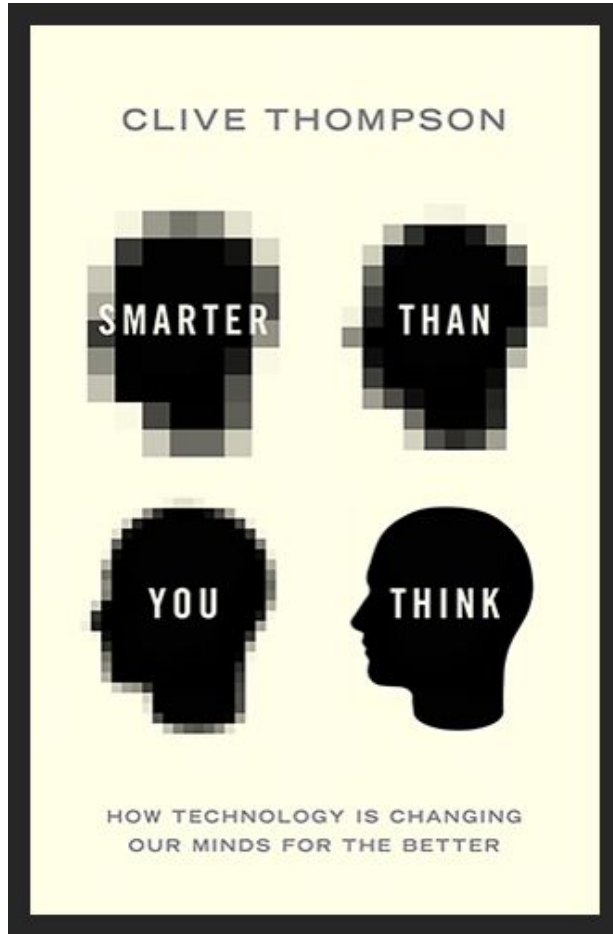
The QFT is one of the few practices that brings me and my students joy because the focus is on curiosity and learning, NOT on grades or assessment or treating students as a number/ a data point. The QFT unlocks our inner, joyful, curious child who is dying to ask questions just for the sake of asking.



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Closing and Reflection

In the Age of Google



“How should you respond when you get powerful new tools for finding answers?

Think of harder questions.”

– Clive Thompson

Journalist and Technology Blogger

Questions and Democracy



“We need to be taught to study rather than to believe, to **inquire** rather than to affirm.”

– Septima Clark

What are your questions, comments,
or reflections?

Evaluation



<https://tinyurl.com/RQINCTEPANEL>

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Find Today's Resources

Today's slides: <https://tinyurl.com/RQIatNCTE>

Resources to start a lesson plan:

- [QFT on One Slide](#)
- [Lesson Planning Workbook](#)

Email education@rightquestion.org if you have any questions or feedback.

The Right Question Institute at NCTE

THURS

11/21

Inquiring Minds Want to Know:
Teaching Students to Ask Primary
Source Questions in the ELA
Classroom

Presenters: Lauren Carlton, Sarah Westbrook

3:15pm - 3:45pm | Room 104 B

FRI

11/22

**Curiosity Killed the Cat: The
Power of Not Knowing in the
Humanities Classroom**

Presenters: Lauren Carlton, Dana Huff, Ling-Se
Peet, Jose Reyes, Sarah Westbrook

11:00am-12:15pm | Room 205B



FRI

11/22

**Cultivating Curiosity:
Questioning and Literacy
Strategies for Young Children**

Presenters: Cora Causey, Amelia Spencer

2pm-2:30pm | Room 158

FRI

11/22

**Sharing the Power of Questions:
A new model for fostering
independent thinking and
democratic habits of mind**

Presenters: Dan Rothstein, Luz Santana

2:45pm-3:15pm | Room 155

AUTHOR SIGNING

Meet the co-founders of RQI and the authors of *"Make Just One Change: Teach Students to Ask Their Own Questions"* and *"Partnering with Parents to Ask the Right Questions: A Powerful Strategy for Strengthening School-Family Partnerships"* Dan Rothstein and Luz Santana!

Friday, Nov 22
4:30pm-5:15pm
Booth #227

