

What questions did you ask today?

By Julia Lee Ai Cheng

"No other event better portends learning than a question arising in the mind," states Dillon (1988).

THE ability to ask questions is central to the processes of reasoning, understanding, and learning. All children grow up with the tendency to ask questions as they undergo a process of assimilation and accommodation in learning about the world around them.

I have lost count of the number of times I have to remind my undergraduate students that every question they ask in class is a valid question, there are no wrong or stupid questions and if they do have questions, they should ask. After much encouragement and cajoling, I usually get the students to participate a bit more actively and to clarify their thoughts by asking questions, much to my delight!

Question asking should be fostered and encouraged and not stifled in schools or in our homes. Questions should be addressed diplomatically. If it is wrong to ask questions, then the questioner will eventually stop asking questions and where would that lead us as a society?

I am not talking about questions that are cynical but about questions that generate new ideas, questions that seek to clarify issues, questions that lead to discovery learning and questions that probe the mind, our own minds, and our own mental habits. Question asking is important for sense making about the world around us.

A recent speech (*The Star*, September 10 2005 on *Education System Reform*) made by our Prime Minister indirectly stressed the importance of question asking. He mentioned that a revolution in teaching and learning methods was necessary to change the mindset of students so that they would be encouraged to think creatively, take risks, and adopt a discovery-oriented outlook.

This basically means that educators and parents must advocate more question asking among our students. There is substantial research suggesting that question asking has been advocated by many to be a crucial mechanism for comprehension, knowledge building, fostering greater learner agency, modelling, problem solving, expertise, and creativity (Palinscar & Brown, 1984; Scardamalia & Berier, 1991; Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1989).

However, in practice, the use of questions by teachers has been to exercise power and control, thus discouraging student questioning. Other constraints such as teacher domination, students' passivity, peer pressures, and institutional barriers impede question asking (e.g.: Dillon, 1988, Graesser & McMahan, 1993). What we need to do is to encourage question asking in the classroom and at home.

Dillon's (1988) research on question asking found that a traditional classroom teacher asks 96 per cent of the questions at an average of 69 questions per hour. These questions were usually short-answer questions as compared to long-answer questions, which required more thoughtful reasoning process.

A traditional teacher commonly initiates the inquiries in an Initiate-Response-Evaluation cycle (Cazden, 1986; Lemke, 1990), where a teacher asks a question, a student responds, and then the teacher evaluates the student's answer by saying for example, "Yes, that's correct" or "No, that's incorrect".

A teacher in a classroom I have observed previously, asked this question: "Faham tak murid-murid?" and the students answered loudly in unison: "Faham!" Such a sequence of questioning does not portray whether the students have truly understood the subject matter that they were learning. In fact I found the army-like response rather disturbing.

Researchers (van Zee & Minstrell, 1997) suggest that there is a need to shift to more reflective questioning behaviours by the teachers where one-word answers must be further elaborated. In the reflective questioning cycle, the teacher delays judgment of answers, asks for more student statements or questions, praises the students for their contributions, and encourages students who challenge the teacher's ideas.

Rather than to answer the questions immediately, the teacher should *to*ss the question back to the other students. The teacher should also probe more: for example, ask “*why*” a student thinks that is the answer or ask “*how do you know?*” or “*can you elaborate in greater detail?*” The purpose of these reflective questions is to get the students to think through their own thinking more deeply.

To enable more question asking in students then, educators and parents must encourage meaningful and specific questions. Educators and parents must strive to become the *guide by the side* rather than the *sage on the stage* simply because we don’t have all the answers that are asked of us and the consolation is that answers are obtainable from various reliable sources such as the Internet, dictionaries, and encyclopedias.

One day, while my 13-year-old brother was relaxing in front of the television set watching his favourite movie, I asked him: “Josh, did you ask any questions in class today?” He answered in his now husky puberty voice, “No.”

I was quite surprised because he asks lots of questions at home. “Well, why didn’t you? Did you understand everything that the teacher taught you?” He answered in a monosyllabic manner, “No.”

“Look, Josh, I can assure you that it is very important to clarify what you don’t know or what you don’t understand immediately after your teacher teaches you something new. Question asking is very important. If there is anything at all that you don’t understand, please ask your teacher, ok?”

Look — how did the Wright brothers build the first airplane if they didn’t ask some important questions about the possibility of mankind flying in the sky? And how did we get cameras on our handphones if nobody asked whether it was possible to capture photographs on our handphones?” I emphasised, trying to convince Josh about the importance of asking questions.

To my family’s surprise one week later, Josh’s science tuition teacher commented that she was very pleased that Josh had asked her a few questions in class.

I may sound like a pushy sister, insisting that Josh should ask questions in class but I have read enough and I have done some research on the importance of question asking to insist that children and of course adults continue to ask questions in life.

What if your children ask you difficult questions? Should you address them? If so, how should you address them?

Yes, you must address the questions that your children ask. Remember to be the *guide by the side* by attempting to look for answers with your children as best as you can because if you don’t, they will get the answers from their peers, who may be misinformed. Children may also construct their knowledge through what they see on media which may be incongruent with your values. And the media values may not be regulated nor verified.

My brother, who is fond of asking questions just before his bedtime recently asked me these questions: “Do you know what is AIDS?”, “Do you know what is a condom?”, “Do people die in their sleep?”, “What if God takes me away while I am sleeping?”, “What is a brain tumour?” just to mention a few!

It is easy to switch on the defensive thinking cap and to say, “I never asked those questions when I was little, so why are you asking these questions?” or “That is a taboo question, don’t talk about it” or “Just concentrate on your studies. Don’t ask these types of questions! It’s a waste of time!”

Yes, I took a deep breath before answering these tough questions and yes, I muttered a quick invocation for divine wisdom to answer these BIG questions – they were after all, mind boggling questions for even adults like us.

Just to illustrate how I approached my brother’s question about God *taking* people’s lives in their sleep, my answer was this: “Well, Josh, remember this priest who died in his sleep? He died in his sleep peacefully on a Sunday. Some people suffer a great deal before they die due to cancer and other kinds of sicknesses. This priest didn’t have to suffer much when compared to those people.”

In the process of sense making, Josh replied in earnest: “But, che (sister), I still have an exam to sit for and there are still so many things I haven’t done!” Gulp! Yes, I saw Josh’s point. I chuckled because right before me was a young man with a BIG question. A brilliant question about life. I finally said, “Just commit your life to God, ok, Josh? God will take care of you. I love you. Now go to sleep. It’s your bedtime.”

If you ever get big questions from your students, children, nieces or nephews, don’t be afraid to address them. Seize the opportunity to instill in these kids the right values that you truly believe in. We should help them address their curiosities and anxieties about knowledge and life. If you don’t have the answers immediately, then make it a project that both of you can pursue together.

Remember, educating, upbringing and parenting do not always have a *reverse gear* or a *rewind button* for lost opportunities. Encourage question asking in children!

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