Can Cinderella's Slipper Be Gold Instead Of Glass?

The Role of Questions in Quality Intellectual Work

CASE IN POINT

Jenny, a newly certified third-grade teacher, had been advised she needed to work on using questions and conversations. She agreed to have me come in to do a storytelling, followed by a discussion; still she was skeptical that anything could change the way her inner-city students were always more than ready to talk to each other but only mumbled a word or two when asked about school work, including read-alouds.

Since it was around the Chinese New Year, I decided to tell *Yeh-Shen*. Like so many of its story cousins, the Chinese version of *Cinderella* features an abused child, whose loving mother has died, and whose father unwisely marries a cruel woman with her own daughters.[i] Yeh-Shen finds refuge in a magic fish and later a tree who replaces Disney's fairy godmother. Thanks to its magic, the girl is able to go to an important festival, dressed in magnificent clothes, including golden slippers. Afraid of discovery as the evening ends, the beautiful girl runs off, frantic to return her finery. In this case, Yeh-Shen loses one golden slipper as she dashes along the twisted, rocky mountain path,

but doesn't recognize the loss until too late. Eventually, of course, the lost slipper leads to her discovery and marriage to the local prince.

When I asked for questions and comments, several made observations about similarities with Disney's *Cinderella.* Then Antoine, who had a reputation as a troublemaker, challenged me, "You said this was a *Cinderella* story. So how come you said she had a golden slipper? Cinderella has a glass slipper."

He listened skeptically as I explained how this was a kind of "story cousin" to the *Cinderella* we knew best and that some details were different. I pointed out that gold was precious and in China they may have thought gold slippers made the clothes seem very special.

There were other questions as the discussion ranged back and forth. I could see that Antoine was carrying on sidebar conversation with the child next to him, but I didn't comment since they were being quiet. Just as we were winding up, he raised his hand to announce, "I know why you said this Cinderella didn't have a glass slipper." He reminded us that in this story the girl was running along a rocky mountain path; that meant, if the slipper had come off, it would have broken on the rocks and there would be no slipper left for the prince to match. Since she just kept running, the slipper couldn't have been made of glass; it made more sense for it to be gold. The child he had consulted with chimed in, "Yeah, and her foot would have been all bloody!" I joined the rest of the class in marveling at what a good explanation he'd come up with.

When I discussed the session with Jenny later, she admitted she had used my visit to take care of some paperwork ; still, she had noticed all the discussion; she'd been surprised by Antoine's participation, confiding, "He hardly ever answers. Sometimes I

call on him deliberately to see if he's been paying attention; I'm lucky to get a 'yes' or 'no'!"

As she hustled the children off to lunch, I left a little frustrated myself. Jenny hadn't registered what made the discussion take off; she certainly hadn't seen that it was Antoine's *own question* that got him talking. In fact, Antoine is one of the most striking examples of what I have seen happen again and again: All it takes to get a good discussion going is to start by asking what questions and comments the children have. Almost always, that gives me a better understanding of how the story is being processed—and I get new insights. Though I have told this story dozens of times, I had never thought or been asked about Antoine's point. I got another insight into why it's worth returning again and again and again to good story—each new encounter can lead to a new or deeper understanding.

HOW DO THE QUESTIONS WE ASK INFLUENCE THE ANSWERS WE GET?

Jenny's focus on paperwork and logistics, rather than with what or how her students were learning is typical of the teacher-training factory she had attended. She had been conditioned to focus on managing a textbook-driven curriculum, where assessment is equated with standardized test scores. No one had asked her to consider how focusing on achievement overrides paying attention to evidence that the children are actually learning. She thought reciting equaled understanding; she had no idea that disposition was an important factor in learning.

What Kind of Questions Can Be Asked?

When Jenny was asked to work on her questions and conversations, she clearly didn't understand that there are quite *different kinds of questions*—and that each type sets different expectations about what a "good answer" will look like.

Open-and-shut closed questions call for a yes or no or can be answered with a single word or phrase. Unfortunately, the majority of questions asked in traditional classrooms and on many standardized tests fall into this category. After reading or telling *Yeh-Shen*, one asks: "What was Yeh-Shen's slipper made out of?"The only acceptable answer is "gold." Saying "glass" means the child was not paying attention to the way this story was different from the Disney *Cinderella*.

"Unlocked" closed questions and leading questions call for an answer that gives some explanation or support. However, while responses may be expressed quite differently, they should all reflect a correct answer that can be traced back to the text. "Describe something cruel the stepmother did to Yeh-Shen" could be answered by expanding on any one of three or four incidents from the story. Answering "Why did Yeh-Shen get chosen as the bride instead of her stepsisters?" calls for inference or deeper thinking but responses should indicate that Yeh-Shen (like other Cinderellas from around the world), was good-hearted, while the stepsisters were mean and selfish.

Open questions call for evaluation and synthesizing—that is, for constructing a network of connections that lead to a new understanding. More than one response is possible, but all must include explanations or support. Antoine's question—"You said this was a *Cinderella* story. So how come you said she had a golden slipper?"—is a striking example of how children's

questions often are open—they are also authentic in that they express something that the questioner really wants to know.[ii]

Is "Getting It Right" the Same as "Making Sense"?

Questions are crucial tools for teachers. Furthermore, the type that gets used most often tells us much about the core beliefs about teaching and learning in a classroom.

1. *Teaching for achievement/mastery*: This approach emphasizes *direct instruction;* it depends on closed and leading questions to assess whether the students know the "right" answers; that is, have they mastered the basic skills and information they have been fed? This perspective tends to privilege rote learning and reinforce what Dweck (2007) calls a *fixed mindset*.

2. *Teaching for understanding/learning*: Open-ended questions are used to trigger inquiry. In classrooms that emphasize process over final product, the concern is to develop the learners' deeper understanding of specific information as well as connections between that information and the conceptual frameworks and "big ideas" of a discipline.

What Problems Might Be Created by Teaching Reading with a Focus on Right Answers?

The way that Jenny registered the fact that for once Antoine had something to say but failed to understand how or why that had happened is consistent with the teaching-for mastery-training she received. Another incident involving Antoine and Jenny suggests the problems that come when the learner's instinct to make meaning is suppressed.

Several weeks before the *Yeh-Shen* storytelling, I had stopped by Jenny's classroom for a consultation during prep time. Antoine should have been in gym. Instead, he was sprawled across the desk, laboriously copying a letter that announced to his family that once again he had been "bad."

Jenny pointed to Antoine as a primary example of what she found discouraging. "This is the third time he's had to write the letter and I don't see any change. I don't know what to do with him. It's hopeless!"

Antoine seemed glum rather than hostile when Jenny agreed to let me talk with him. He readily admitted that he hadn't been doing his work. When asked to read aloud the letter he was copying, Antoine stumbled through all the multisyllable words (*responsibility, disruption, misbehaving*). It was painfully clear that he was decoding but not making any sense of what he was reading or writing down.

When asked if he could tell me in his own words what the letter meant, Antoine looked blank until Jenny commanded, "Tell her why you are being punished!" Again he freely confessed that he had been playing around instead of doing a vocabulary comprehension activity called Stars. When asked if he thought playing around was being bad, he shrugged.

"I wonder if the Stars activity was hard for you?" I commented casually.

"Yeah, sort of," he muttered.

"Is there anything in reading that you are good at?" I wondered aloud.

Antoine brightened a bit and said, "I can sound out real good!"

He demonstrated with a few familiar words from the word wall. However, when I pointed to *opinion* he very slowly called out "up . . . in . . . yon." Despite the laborious and accurate

decoding, he was unable to blend the syllables or recognize the word, even when I did the blending—though he did know what an *opinio*n was once I said the word.

Jenny had to go pick up the rest of class. As I walked out with her, she shook her head. "You can see how poor Antoine's skills are—and no matter what I try, he plays around, instead of getting his work done—I've pretty much given up on him. I'm just going to concentrate on those kids who do want to learn."

Jenny clearly did not see Antoine's consistently inattentive behavior as a signal that he was as deeply frustrated as she was. The impasse between them comes down to her implicit belief that there was a fixed path to reading, and if you didn't or couldn't follow it, you didn't want to learn.

She was reflecting the *Basic Skills approach* that sees alphabet knowledge, phonics, and other decoding skills as building blocks that must be firmly cemented in place; once these skills have been drilled and mastered, readers can advance to establishing literal comprehension by giving correct answers about elements of a narrative such as sequence, identity of characters, and setting, or by providing vocabulary definitions. As children approach "fluency" in the mechanics of reading, the number of questions that call for inference increase, though the majority of them are phrased as closed or leading questions. It is always the teacher who "owns" both the questions and the answers.

In this approach, only accomplished readers are permitted to indulge in the intriguing kind of meaning making that happens with leading or open-ended questions—conversations that are about genuine meaning making. By second or third grade, a typically performing child will have at least some regular opportunities to explore themes, motivation, or imagery or to make personal connections.

Poor readers like Antoine continue to be subjected to a disparate array of skill-based drills, sometimes all the way through elementary and even high school. This flies in the face of evidence from brain research that indicates many individuals are neurologically wired in ways that cripple their ability to learn to read using an isolated skills approach. They are never allowed to use the significant problem-solving skills that tend to accompany what Davis and Braun (2010) call the *Gift of Dyslexia* (see also Risley & Hart &, 2003; Miller & Almon, 2009).

It is hardly surprising that Antoine regularly preferred the immediate gratification of joking with a friend to the humiliation of struggling with a task that has no interest and at which he's very likely to fail. As indicated in Chapter 1, his reaction comes down to biochemical forces. The repeated messages from Jenny leave Antoine feeling under attack and incompetent, setting off negative feelings fired by cortisol; his "fooling around" can be seen as an attempt to get at least a small taste of the pleasure-giving dopamines and endorphins (Sousa, 2009, Washburn, 2010).

Over time, the constant reinforcement of negative feelings associated with school means the disposition to learning is eroded. Children are battered into accepting Dweck's fixed mindset that labels them as "bad," beginning with being "bad at schoolwork." The tragedy is that he and the legion of children like him will be dropouts, if not tomorrow's prison inmates.[iii]

As Reyhner (2008) points out, the conflict between those who teach for achievement and those who teach for understanding, has been raging for more than half a century.[iv] However, the crisis has deepened in the decade since teaching for mastery became a national policy under the mandates of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The federal *Reading First* program committed over $6 billion to literacy programs such as *Open Court* that emphasized direct instruction in basic skills. A study for the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) at the U.S. Department of Education showed that decoding skills did improve but that early mastery does not correlate with long-term

student achievement. In fact, *Reading First* students failed to show improvement over children in other programs in terms of comprehension—acknowledged to be the most important of Reading First's five goals[v]

WHAT IS THE CONNECTION BETWEEN LEARNING TO READ AND LEARNING TO THINK?

Fortunately for the Antoines of the world, the Balanced Literacy approach has emerged as middle ground between those who teach for mastery and those who teach for understanding. It calls for a strategic approach to literacy instruction, using skills of decoding and comprehension as needed.

- On one hand, there is a need for explicit instruction to help emerging readers master the basic skills of using alphabet and phonic knowledge to decode, as well as developing vocabulary and using language arts conventions. A given skill may be targeted for mini-lessons using direct instruction; still, children are encouraged to develop a menu of approaches that they pick from strategically.

- On the other hand, comprehension is also understood to be a basic skill that should be developed from the earliest stages. Emerging readers need explicit guidance in how to discover the complex web of connections that give meaning to a text as well as many opportunities to struggle and to experience the feelings of competence that come once they have broken the code .

- The goal of instruction is to get children to the point where all of the discrete skills have been mastered sufficiently so that the reader can call on them strategically. Thus "good

readers" are engaged in problem solving about the best mix of decoding and context clues that will allow them to understand a tricky passage.

What Kind of Connections Are Worth Thinking About?

The Public Education and Business Coalition (PEBC) in Denver has been especially influential in spelling out specific strategies that teachers can model and use to develop such comprehension skills. Keene and Zimmerman's (1987/2007) *Mosaic of Thought* was among the first to discuss intentionally using open-ended questions before, during, and after the reading. Routman (1999) as well as associates of PEBC, including Harvey and Goudvis (2000/2007), Miller (2002), and Buhrow and Garcia (2006), have provided further discussion of comprehension strategies, based on their own rich practices and reflections. In recent years, Boushey and Moser's (2006, 2009) Daily Five approach has become popular. While they do not ignore the role played by mechanical features of literacy such as decoding and spelling, all these experts see mastery over these skills as being in service to the essential heart of literacy: meaning making.

Moreover, they recognize that meaning making calls for engaging the learners/readers in significant problem solving in order to make connections between their own experience and prior knowledge and what is happening in the text or story. They speak of modeling and teaching young readers how to *activate schema,* that is, to become conscious of four different kinds of connections:

- *Text-to-self*—links between what is happening in the story and the reader's own experiences or emotions. When I tell a *Cinderella* story, especially in an inner-city school, both boys and girls will make comments about how they have felt the painful loss

of a parent's protection; others talk about how it feels to be left out from a party or special event that everyone else is excited about.

☐ *Text-to-text*—comparisons between stories or texts that have similar plots, themes, or character types. Antoine's question about the material the slipper was made of is representative of how natural this kind of question is when children are exposed to variants of popular stories. At the same time, those who have a *habit of inquiry* find connections between stories that are quite unrelated on the literal level. Many stories offer evidence that it takes courage to persevere when others are being cruel or threatening, but that in the end, persistence and goodness are likely to prevail. Cinderellas have that kind of courage, as do many other fairy tale heroes and heroines; but Charlotte and Wilbur in *Charlotte's Web* do also. In fact, there are many real-life people such as Martin Luther King and the child Ruby Bridges whose stories bring the same lesson to life. In effect, text-to-text connections can extend the text-to-self connections into an ever-widening web of meaning.

☐ *Text-to-world*—complex relationships between what is said or happens in the text and the reader's prior knowledge or understanding associated with a discipline. For example, Antoine's solution to the slipper problem indicates understanding of the relative properties of glass and of gold.

☐ *Text-to-graphics*—connections between the text and illustrations or the reader's visualizations. Read-alouds, oral storytelling, and texts without illustrations invite mental pictures and images which draw on personal experience as well as learned prior knowledge. Antoine's reference to the rocky, twisted path clearly indicated that he was visualizing and that doing so was key to his problem solving. In Chapter 5, I look more

closely at the importance of graphics in making meaning in picture books, including

informational texts.

What's the Connection Between Literacy and Literary Understanding?

Generally speaking, *literacy development* is understood as a finite goal—once the level of

proficiency known as fluency is reached, instruction in the mechanics of reading stops (though

conventions of spelling, punctuation, and grammar may continue to be taught for writing).

Beginning with middle and upper elementary classes and on through the highest academic levels,

the emphasis tends to shift to understanding and expressing *literary* appreciation. As Antoine's

experience shows, poor readers are often barred from engaging in this much more interesting

discussion and meaning making.

There is another complication that goes back to the tension between direct instruction and

constructivist approaches to learning. As Sipe points out in *Storytime* (2007, pp. 36-81), there is

a spectrum of beliefs as to what it means to be an expert reader in literary terms. At one end,

there are those who believe that authors embed a "true" meaning in the text that the good readers

will recognize by putting together what the literal level of the text says with what can be inferred.

Such discussions rely heavily on leading questions, yet they do allow for some problem solving

as readers follow different paths to the "right" answer. At the other extreme, structuralists argue

that the author's intended meaning is of less importance than the reader's

"construction/deconstruction" of personal understanding.[vi]

Sipe (2007) argues for a middle ground: *a balanced approach to literary understanding.* Like

Keene and Zimmerman (1987/ 2007), Harvey and Goudvis (2000/2007), and Miller (2002), he

argues that good readers are constantly connecting the text to their own experience and prior

knowledge—ultimately, the greatest reward of reading is finding important meaning in the books and stories we willingly consume.

Sipes's (2007) research shows that at all levels of literacy skills development readers can and should be encouraged to develop *literary understanding.* Even young children at the pre-emergent stage of literacy can make sense of the stories they read or have read to them. The more opportunities learners have to explore and discuss books and stories, the more motivated they are to "break the code" of basic skills. Conversely, the more children like Antoine are restricted to basic skills, the less likely they are to see reading and writing as anything but an onerous chore.

What's the Connection Between Classroom Climate and Thinking?

My interactions with Jenny's classroom came though my involvement with Erikson Institute's New Schools Project. I was one of several consultants investigating whether (a) increasing student engagement and (b) strengthening the classroom climate would have a positive impact on learning.[vii]

For several years I focused on how engagement and climate might correlate with the distribution and the quality of classroom conversations. I collected data, using a modification of CLASS: Classroom Assessment Scoring System (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2007). The descriptors provided for "Instructional Support" were particularly useful in identifying what teachers and students were doing to enhance or to stifle concept development, quality of feedback, and language modeling. In effect, I was looking to see if the classroom climate was more likely to support a "growth" or a "fixed" mindset, as defined by Dweck (2007).

The data included what kinds of questions were asked (closed, leading, open); who asked and who answered questions; and the degree to which discussions were sustained with feedback loops. In classrooms like Jenny's results like the following were obtained :

- *Open-and-shut closed questions* about the literal level of lot of plot vocabulary predominated.

- The few *open-ended questions* used were phrased in very general or abstract terms that left the children confused. Rephrasing to clarify the question seldom took place.

- Little *wait time* was allowed for children to ponder or to formulate their thoughts. Most often, teachers labeled answers as "right" or "wrong" and moved on, in a kind of verbal ping-pong.

- There were few or no *feedback loops* that moved the interchange from teacher question/student answer to a sustained discussion involving several participants.

- Both questions and answers were almost always *controlled or owned* by the teacher.

However, in other classrooms (including one down the hall from Jenny's) where open-ended questions were common, children could support their answers, share questions and observations, and pose clarifying questions and comments. Instead of constant restless, disruptive behavior and classroom management problems, children and teachers alike in these well-functioning classrooms were interested in learning—and their overall achievement was higher. The conclusion is obvious: *The degree to which children show evidence of learning and of constructing understanding directly correlates to the degree to which children are engaged in thinking and authentic problem solving.*

WHY IS CRITICAL THINKING SO CRITICAL?

Any discussion of the relationship between learning, thinking, and child development must consider Bloom's *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (1956). It was issued just about the time that the Russian launching of Sputnik raised questions about the quality of American education; not only was there a strong push to improve science instruction, but there also was a move to be *more scientific about education*—as the very use of the word *taxonomy* might indicate. Just as life forms are classified from paramecia to primate—from the least to the most complex.

loom identified six levels of thinking that he saw as having a hierarchical order. His descriptions follow the same trajectory Piaget (Piaget & Inholder, 2000) and Vygotsky (1978) first identified as characteristic of learning/meaning making as the child grows to maturity. We begin with the *concrete*; from hands-on understanding we progress through the *pictorial* stage in which the understanding translates to processing mental images; eventually we are capable of highly *symbolic* and abstract concepts. As Bloom himself and many others since have noted, this trajectory fits nicely with the progression from *closed* through *leading* to truly *open-ended* questions.

But what about "Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny*"*?—the phrase from high school biology that has always delighted me—does it hold true for thinking? Does every lofty thought develop in the same way: beginning from a concrete perception and slowly complicating itself into a highly abstract construct? If we consider the course of rich classroom conversations, the evidence is actually against such a locked hierarchy.

The etymology of the word *conversation* offers us a rich image of what is involved: the prefix *con* comes from the Latin for "with"; the root word is the Latin *versare* meaning "to turn."

So a good conversation is a kind of wandering as we *turn back and forth* with the thought expressed by one leading to a response that triggers yet another rejoinder.

And, as any good knight errant knows, wandering is not purposeless; it is an attempt to find a path that will lead us to our goal—for the knights, to do one good deed and then another and thus continually prove themselves; for the learners, to arrive at a deeper understanding of something and then something else again. In the *Mathematics in the City* project, Fosnot and her colleagues have replaced the traditional linear model of the learning trajectory with one they call the "landscape of learning" (Fosnot & Dolk, 2001).

> When we are moving across a landscape toward a horizon, the horizon seems clear. Yet we never actually reach it. New objects—new landmarks—come into view. So it is with learning. One question seemingly answered raises others. Children seem to resolve one struggle only to grapple with another. It helps to have horizons in mind when we plan activities, when we interact, question, and facilitate discussion. But horizons are not fixed points in the landscape; they are constantly shifting. (p. 18)

Suggesting that *Yeh-Shen* was a story cousin of one the children knew well set a horizon; Antoine's concern about the glass versus golden slipper led the discussion into a previously uncharted but very productive path—one that gave Antoine a rare experience of competence. Inviting this "usual suspect" student to wonder gave us all something to ponder at a quite high level of thinking.

Table 3.1 summarizes key characteristics of the landscape through which thinkers wander as they wonder. Bloom's six stages have been combined into three levels of inquiry [viii]; developmental considerations about the movement from concrete to pictorial/ abstract/symbolic thinking are also indicated.

Table 3.1. The Ladder of Inquiry

Level	Level of Inquiry	Developmental Trajectory
3	**Evaluating/ Synthesizing inquiry** —explores fully open-ended questions • Emphasis on why questions, questions that make text to self, text to text, text to world connections • No single right answer; in fact, responses are often varied and may lead to a new direction • A good response will be supported with examples and connections • Response involves discussion/ conversation as the responder expresses, clarifies, and extends thinking • Calls for active listening and facilitating on questioner's part; questions may need to be rephrased or prompts given	**Abstract Symbolic Thinking** • At all stages of development, this kind of inquiry tends to elicit high engagement and satisfaction because the responder 'owns' the discussion and is constructing personal understanding. Such inquiry typically goes beyond the classroom and may be seen in children's play. • The '5 to 7' shift marks the transition from early to mid-childhood. In this period, children gradually increase their ability to abstract and to reason. • Before, and in the early part of this stage, children's evaluative statements tend to be based on a specific/concrete factor. • In the next 4-5 years, between 7 and 12, children's ability to generalize and engage in abstract thought goes through another significant development.
2	**Analyzing/ Applying inquiry** —explores leading to open ended questions • Emphasis on how, why, some what questions; includes comparison/ contrast, categorizing • No single right answer but a 'good' answer may need to include a certain amount of information/facts in support (leading questions) • Response involves discussion/ conversation as the responder expresses, clarifies, and extends thinking • Calls for active listening and facilitating on questione's part—questions may need to be rephrased or prompts given	**Pictorial** • This is a transitional point between concrete and the abstract thinking and understanding. At this stage, there is some generalization in terms of developing schema or frameworks. However, the analysis or application is based on concrete idea or ideas. • While young children in the concrete stage of development are very capable of analyzing/applying, their explanations tend to reflect direct experience or literal details rather than abstractions. • As children reach the end of the 5-7 shift, their ability to generalize increases and they are able to make more complex inferences about character motivation, cause and effect, etc.
1	**Knowledge and Comprehension inquiry** —tends to use closed questions • Emphasis on what, when, where, when questions that can be supported by direct reference to the text. • At lowest level, open-and-shut closed questions be call for yes/no or single word responses & are asked; test memory for attention. • Level 1 questions can be **unlocked closed questions** that such questions call on respondent to visualize, recall, describe, sequence. • Level 2 and 3 inquiries require basic comprehension and knowledge as part of checking facts, building support for an idea, clarifying, & creating connections. • In a conversation/discussion, this level inquiry involves active listening and facilitating —questions may need to be rephrased or prompts given.	**Concrete** All learning/thinking begins with the concrete. • Young children who are still at the concrete level developmentally need extensive opportunities to explain and 'unpack' the literal level of meaning. • Novice learners at all stages of development need time to make sense on the concrete and pictorial levels as a foundation to strong conceptual understanding at the symbolic level. • Fully mature learners often move quite quickly from this stage to the symbolic in areas of expertise. • At all stages of development when the focus is exclusively or extensively on the literal, participants' sense of inquiry or ownership can be lost and learning inhibited by anxiety and poor disposition.

What's the Difference Between a Hierarchy and a Ladder?

Table 3.1 is not meant to represent a hierarchy—with the implication that authentic quality learning only takes place at the highest level. The problem with Level 1 inquiries arises when an assumption is made that (a) this level doesn't call for real thinking; (b) this level is as much as

young children can handle; and (c) inquiries about hows, whys, and wherefores can only be permitted after proficiency at this level is established.

Rather the image of a ladder is meant to convey that good thinking and rich discussions range and move about in the same way that a builder moves up and down a ladder, fetching materials from below to put in place above. Quality intellectual work means that (a) there is no single path to a right answer and many problems have no single solution; (b) support for the highest order of thinking involves examples, clarifications, and connections that use evidence from Levels 2 and 1; and (c) for young children and novice learners, it is essential to establish a strong understanding at the literal comprehension level; doing so can call for complex thinking and problem solving.

What Kinds Of Questions Move Us Up And Down The Ladder Of Inquiry?

Three questions that we often addressed in my many years of classroom conversations about *Cinderella* stories might demonstrate how rich *literary* conversations range up and down the ladder of inquiry.

Is This Story True? **This question is often the first to be asked after a powerful myth or a tale like *Cinderella*.**

□ Unquestionably, evaluating whether or not a story that has mythic dimensions is "true" is a Level 3 inquiry. It involves profoundly abstract considerations about the nature of truth, as well as about deeply held beliefs and values. Children –like Antoine--who find hope or resilience in the way a character responds to a challenging situation they identify with are especially concerned that this story be "true."

- The younger the child, or the more novice the learner, the more time it is likely to take for the Level 1 thinking. Well into the first grade, much of the discussion of folk and fairy tales is spent differentiating between those things that happened in the story that are or are not "true" in the sense that they "can"or "cannot" happen in our everyday world.[ix]

- For novice learners at any stage, being able to visualize what happened or what is being described calls for Level 1 thinking/problem solving. Antoine, for example, arrived at his conclusions by visualizing what would happen to a glass slipper on a rocky path. He was asking a more complex Level 2 question when he demanded whether a "true" Cinderella could have something other than a glass slipper.

- With experience in literary discussions, the group can move rather quickly to text-to-self connections as they consider what might be "true" about the ways in which the characters in a story *feel* or the motives they have; often this discussion is at Level 2, as group members analyze and compare their own experiences with what happened in the story or with what a character felt.

- As children become more capable of abstract reasoning, they tend to move from seeing a Level 2 point of comparison to Level 3 probing of why bad things happen or people act as they do. Such text-to-self connections can be quite intense. They may move away from the story to generalizations about human nature or to deepening self-understanding.[x]

- Text- to-world connections also can come up in discussions of how elements or details in a story from another time or culture might reflect realities of that setting. When those points need clarification, the discussion might well be at Level 1 comprehension/ information or Level 2 comparison. However, these discussions also can move up into Level 3; for example, considering the Cinderella figure as an abused child or exploring

the source of her resilience are issues that are at the heart of human experience whatever the historical or cultural context.

How Do We Know This Is a Story Cousin of *Cinderella*?

Immediately after a telling of *Yeh-Shen*, *The Rough-Faced Girl* (Algonquin), *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* (African), *The Talking Eggs* (Cajun), or any other variant of the *Cinderella* story, there is an animated discussion of what elements of the story made the listeners realize that this was a "story cousin." Observations are recorded on a graphic organizer such as a Venn diagram or chart. This is a text-to-text discussion that fits solidly in the Level 2 Inquiry category, as it calls for comparison/contrast and analytical thinking. Students can support their answers with a wide variety of evidence:

- Younger children tend to rely heavily on *Level 1 knowledge* as evidence, saying such things as "Both stories have the mean stepsisters and stepmother" or "Both have slippers at the end but in *Cinderella* it's glass and in *Yeh-Shen* it's gold." However, even Level 1 evidence can have complexity; for example, children have noted that one group of stories follow the general outline of Disney's *Cinderella*; but there is another set of stories in which the Cinderella figure succeeds in a series of tests that the stepsister(s) fail, including *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughter, Talking Eggs*, and *The Rough-Faced Girl.*
- As the children's ability to generalize increases, the evidence they give to explain similarities and differences moves to Level 2 as they analyze and consider character motivation and point of view.

☐ Very often, that discussion leads into Level 3, evaluating and synthesizing, as the children begin to explore themes or to explain why they think that the Cinderella(s) deserve to triumph at the end.

What Picture from the Story Comes Into Your Mind When You Shut Your Eyes?

This strategy has proven to be a very effective open-ended question after finishing a powerful story, such as one of the *Cinderellas*. After a minute or so, I call on volunteers to share their mental pictures. On the board, I draw a "story line" with beginning, middle, and end, and we make a notation, indicating where each picture would fit.

☐ This is very much a Level 1 comprehension activity that exercises the children's ability to visualize and sequence. Some children will picture a tiny detail while others concentrate on a major event or character. Inevitably these pictures depict the entire story line. Furthermore, the sequencing can be deeply engaging and call for serious thinking and problem solving. Thus it's usually easy to say whether a picture shows something from the beginning, the middle, or the end; but children will debate fine-tuning whether a picture belongs right before or right after another.

☐ At the same time, the mental image reflects a significant text-to-self connection for each listener that can easily reflect Level 2 or 3 thinking. As teachers who adopt this strategy say, it guarantees that there will be no wrong answers: Every child's response is valid, has deep meaning for this child, and is richly unique.

☐ Furthermore, the conversations in which these images are shared often act as the seeds for a deeper level of discussion that quickly moves up into Level 2 or 3 inquiries as meaning is co-constructed through a conversation between the children, the teacher, and the text.

As we have seen, focusing on meaning is dynamic. However often a rich story is revisited, the conversation keeps on going, digging deeper or wandering into new territory. Good teachers guide these conversations so that the emphasis is on what happens in the children's minds and hearts, rather than on what happens in the story, while fully recognizing that *what happens in the children is mediated by what happens in the story.* The desired outcome is not a right answer but an answer that the learners have constructed as the result of a disciplined inquiry and that they can defend as making sense.

What Happens When Teachers Give Up Absolute Control of Questions and Answers?

We might say that teachers like Jenny fail precisely because they are so focused on control and on the logistical business of their job. In contrast, teachers/learners with a growth mindset measure their success by how effectively they set into motion the gradual release of responsibility from teacher to learner(s).[xi]

Imagine what engineers would call a fulcrum and children wouldterms a seesaw. The teacher is perched at one end; the learners at the other. At first, everything is being done on the ground by the teacher—the learners, up in the air, observe. To use Barbara Rogoff's (2003) wonderful phrase, the learners are paying "keen attention" to exactly what it is that an expert reader/writer does. The teacher might be using a think-aloud to scaffold them, sharing a text-to-self connection she noticed between *Yeh-Shen* and how bad she felt about not being invited to a party as a child.

Gradually, the teacher invites the learners to share their own thoughts and connections. The balance of the seesaw begins to shift and move toward equilibrium as the children "pitch in" (Rogoff's phrase again). Increasingly the responsibility for the questions and the responses shifts to the learners, with the teacher acting as a facilitator or monitor. Eventually, it is the teacher

who is in the air, keenly observing the learners doing their quality intellectual work—engaged in explorations that will result in discussions, products, or performances that have meaning beyond the classroom.

Just as those on the seesaw rejoice in the constant shift in the balance, so do engaged teachers and learners repeat the process again and again, as new strategies are introduced and new texts are encountered. As I show in Part II, the *Gradual Release of Responsibility* (GRR) model provides an effective structure for explicit instruction in skills and strategies within and across the disciplines.

However, well before Pearson and Gallagher (1983) formulated the GRR, there was a strong tradition of belief that effective learning and teaching follows this kind of trajectory. That same tradition does not see learning and teaching as limited to the classroom, but as something that goes on in homes and workplaces throughout a lifetime. The apprenticeship system that informed the development of craftsmen in the Middle Ages—and that Halpern (2008) argues should become a model for twenty-first-century secondary education—uses this trajectory.

How Might Guided Participation Be Seen as a Way of Releasing Responsibility?

In fact, it goes back even further. As Barbara Rogoff's studies illuminate, this model is at the heart of the teaching/learning dynamic that has gone on since work began. Rogoff (1991, 2001) uses the term *guided participation* in her sensitive analysis of what can happen with participation in a learning community. When Mayan women weave as they interact with their children tumbling about nearby, they are engaged in a learning/teaching dynamic related to what happens as middle-class parents join their children in building Legos, or as university professors involve graduate students in their research. The key elements are closely related to those we have been looking at as characteristic of quality intellectual work:

 Authentic work must be involved; the outcome must have value beyond skill

development. More than that, the outcome must be a product, performance, or discussion

that furthers one's needs and goals.

 Teacher and learner alike must be engaged; both have a stake in the learner's developing

expertise.

 Teacher and learner alike explore through a guided inquiry: At the modeling stage, the

expert does the work as the learner observes; slowly the learner joins in; the initial careful

monitoring gradually diminishes until everyone is satisfied that the learner is capable of

doing the work competently and independently.

 There must be a constant evaluation by both parties as to exactly where the learner is in

the movement toward competency and what the next step should be. This evaluation is

grounded in mutual respect and does not imply that the learner is deficient but rather is

engaged in the process of becoming competent. Furthermore, in this model, even the

greatest experts are in the process of getting better.

Why Should We Keep Questioning and Conversing?

In my 30 years of oral storytelling, I saw myself as a member of these classroom learning

communities; the stories were tools the children and I used to carry on an extended conversation

about topics and issues that we all found meaningful. We all were engaged in quality intellectual

work; inevitably I went away with a new insight—often enough with one as striking as

Antoine's.

However, in order for this important work to take place, adults and children must be

regularly engaged in rich inquiries and conversations that emphasize good questions rather than

right answers. If we want to keep the Antoines of the world in school and doing quality intellectual work, two things should happen when finishing a good story:

- Our first question should always be: What questions or thoughts do you have?
- Our first response must be to listen with keen attention and to converse about their thinking.

TRY AND APPLY

Journal on reflections to the following eloquent example of the teaching/learning dynamic as guided participation from *The Quilters: Women and Domestic Art: An Oral History* (Cooper & Buferd 1978, reissued by Cooper & Allen, 1999).

> I'm eighty-three and I've done a heap of quilts, girl. But I remember, like it was yesterday, my first quilt. Mama had one of them frames that swung over the bed and there was always a quilt in it. She quilted for the public, to help pay our way. Now, we might take one out late one night when it was finished and wait till mornin' to put the next one in. But that was as long as it ever was.
>
> Mama was a beautiful quilter. She done the best work in the county. Everybody knew it. She never let nobody else touch her quilts; and sometimes when she was through quiltin' for the day on a job that she liked a lot herself, she would pin a cloth over the top of the quilt so nobody could look at it till she was done.
>
> I always longed to work with her and I can tell you how plain I recall the day she said, "Sarah, you come quilt with me now if you want to."
>
> I was too short to sit in a chair and reach it, so I got my needle and thread and stood beside her. I put that needle through and pulled it back up again, then down, and

my stitches were about three inches long. Papa come in about that time, he

stepped back and said, "Florence, that child is flat ruinin' your quilt."

Mama said, "She's doin' no kind of thing. She's quiltin' her first quilt."

He said, "Well, you're jest goin' to have to rip it all out tonight."

Mama smiled at me and said, "Them stitches is going to be in that quilt when it wears

out."

All the time they was talkin' my stitches was gettin' shorter.

That was my first quilt. I have it to still look at sometimes. (page 52-3)

1. Think about ways in which the quilting Sarah and her mother might

   ☐ Meet the criteria for authentic work?

   ☐ Illustrate the gradual release of responsibility from modeled to shared to independent?

2.   Read a version of the *Cinderella* tale or reflect on the story as you remember it; come up with 5–10 points that you wonder about. Don't limit yourself to what is in the text but feel free to go from trivial to profound. Review your questions to see where they might fall on the Inquiry Ladder. 3.   Choose one inquiry that you find especially compelling and find some people to discuss the question with you. Take time at the end to consider what kind of thinking went on during your conversation and how your understanding might have changed as a result of it.

Chapter 3

[i] Virtually every culture where tales have been collected include at least one that folklorists

would classify as a "Cinderella" type—to be exact, one that conforms to Aarne and Thompson

types 510A, 510B, or 511 (Sierra, 1992, p. 162). For many, Disney's version, with its passive

heroine, is seen as the "true" story. However, in most of the over 500 variants , the motherless

child prevails because of the way she acts. The glass slipper in Disney seems to go back to a

mistranslation from the French original, which says the slipper was made of *vair,* an old term for

a "precious deerskin leather," but the word sounds the same as the much more common French word *verre,* which means "glass."

[ii] *Children's Questions: A Mechanism for Cognitive Development* by M. Chouinard (2009) is an excellent study of how important it is for children to be able to ask questions and engage in conversations about the answers. See also Small (2010) who discusses how important it is to go beyond one right answer.

[iii] While it may be a myth that states use third-grade reading scores to predict how many prison beds they will need, there is no question that prison inmates do show a disproportionately high number of illiterates or those with low literacy skills.

[iv] Reyhner (2008) provides a full review of the conflict between the behaviorist approach of those who emphasize direct instruction phonics in reading instruction and the more constructivist approach of the Whole Language movement. The actual strategies and philosophy advocated by the Whole Language gurus, such as Goodman (1987), are very compatible with the Balanced Literacy approach.

[v] From *Crisis in the Kindergarten* by Miller and Almon (2009, p. 45). Indications are that the research supporting phonics instruction reflects the demands of high-stakes testing. It should be noted that isolated decoding skills are easier to drill and to measure than are more complex, holistic features of literacy such as comprehension (Gamse, Bloom, Kemple, & Jacob, 2008, p. 72; Manzo, 2008). These findings validate criticisms raised by Goodman (2006) about the usefulness of the DIBELS test that was mandated to be the primary assessment for NCLB standards, as well as the reliability of the research on which it is based.

[vi] Opponents of the Whole Language movement accuse this approach of using such an "anything goes" attitude that it results in no standards being applied and, they say, little student achievement.

[vii] As a team member of Erikson's New Schools Project from 2005 to 2009, I worked with pre-K–3 classrooms in selected Chicago Public Schools. The project shared beliefs and incorporated strategies highly compatible with the Responsive Classroom (Northeast Foundation for Children), the Developmental Studies Center, and others who endorse functioning as a learning community and emphasis on a positive climate as critical factors in achievement.

[viii] Bloom's taxonomy identifies six levels of thinking, ranging from the lowest one of recall information to the highest level of evaluative thinking, while Gallagher and Ascher (1963) identify 4 corresponding levels of questions. Vogler (2008) provides an excellent discussion of Bloom and Gallagher and Ascher in his study of the kind of questions used by teachers. I have combined several of categories, resulting in three levels of inquiry. My modification of Bloom and the discussion is compatible with the beliefs about teaching/learning found in Marzano & Kendall , *The New Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (2006).

[ix] It is important to recognize that many 5- and 6-year-olds are still very concrete in their understanding; developmentally, they have trouble distinguishing between fantasy and everyday reality; furthermore, they are not bothered by contradictions between them. They will quickly agree that in our everyday world, fairy godmothers don't produce fancy dresses with a flick of the wand. However, in their minds, they may well believe that in the world of the story this kind of magic is commonplace—that what happened in the story truly happened.

[x] I remember a fifth grader who angrily demanded to know why the father in *The Korean Cinderella* didn't do something to protect his daughter from the stepmother. She got more and

more incensed, insisting, "It's not right that you ignore your own flesh and blood for someone you picked up on the street!" Clearly, her anger was rooted in the painful realities of her own life. Classmates tried to calm her down, reminding her that we were talking about the father in the story, not her father. She grew less angry as she conceded that point. Her response is a good example of how stories can have a biblio-therapeutic dimension, without crossing the boundaries into therapy.

[xi] The shift in the balance of learning was first formulated by Pearson and Gallagher (1983) since then, as each of these exponents have shared their valuable practices, they have offered their own representations of how the shift works; See Fisher and Frey (2008); Routman (1999), Harvey and Goudvis (2007), Miller (2002), Boushey and Moser (2006), Weaver (2002).