

Chapter 10 - Essential Questions

These are questions that touch our hearts and souls. They are central to our lives. They help to define what it means to be human. Most of the important thought we will conduct during our lives will center on such *essential questions*.

- What does it mean to be a good friend?
- What kind of friend shall I be?
- Who will I include in my circle of friends?
- How shall I treat my friends?
- How do I cope with the loss of a friend?
- What can I learn about friends and friendships from the novels we read in school?
- How can I be a better friend?

When we draw a cluster diagram of the *Questioning Toolkit* as we did in Chapter Four of this book, essential questions stand at the center of all the other types of questions. The other question types serve the purpose of “casting light upon” or illuminating one or more Essential Question.

The term was first introduced by Grant Wiggins and the Coalition of Essential Schools in the 1980s. (Cushman, 1989) Since that time, the term has spread widely into models for the design of curriculum and lessons.

Most essential questions are interdisciplinary in nature. They usually cut across lines created by schools and scholars to mark the terrain of departments and disciplines. Essential questions usually probe the deep and often confounding issues confronting us - complex and baffling matters that elude simple answers:

Life - Death - Marriage - Identity - Purpose - Betrayal - Honor - Integrity - Courage - Temptation - Faith - Leadership - Addiction - Invention - Inspiration.

They pass the test of “So what?”
They focus on matters of import.

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The greatest novels, the greatest plays, the greatest songs and the greatest paintings all explore essential questions in some manner. Essential questions are at the heart of a search for Truth.

Many of us believe that schools should devote more time to essential questions and less time to *Trivial Pursuit*.

What are the traits of an essential question?

- The question probes a matter of considerable importance.
- The question requires movement beyond understanding and studying - some kind of action or resolve - pointing toward the settlement of a challenge, the making of a choice or the forming of a decision.
- The question cannot be answered by a quick and simple “yes” or “no” answer.
- The question probably endures, shifts and evolves with time and changing conditions - offering a moving target in some respects.
- The question may be unanswerable in the ultimate sense.
- The question may frustrate the researcher, may prove arid rather than fertile and may evade the quest for clarity and understanding.

Unfortunately, the term is often bandied about with little rigor, definition or clarity so that many pedestrian and insignificant questions slip in under the term simply because they are large, sweeping and grand in some respects. Essential questions are not simply BIG questions covering lots of ground.

To trace the decline and fall of the Roman Empire is a grand task, an enormous task, but it hardly makes for an essential question because it lacks focus and fails to move past description to analysis, synthesis or evaluation.

If we were to ask instead how our modern state, be it Australia, the United States or Canada, might avoid a decline like the one experienced by the Roman Empire, we would convert mere collecting and description into a much more important and intriguing task.

It is not the sweep or the grandeur of the question that matters so much as the significance of the issues addressed. Matters of import are the crux of the matter.

Sven Birkerts identifies this challenge in a selection from his **Gutenberg Elegies** (1995):

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Resonance — there is no wisdom without it. Resonance is a natural phenomenon, the shadow of import alongside the body of fact, and it cannot flourish except in deep time.

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Essential questions explore matters of import. They are worthy of our time and are likely to spark interest and awaken curiosity. They require new thought rather than the mere collection of facts, second hand opinions or cut-and-paste thinking.

We can convert traditional school questions into essential questions using a strategy fully outlined in Chapter 22 of this book.

The chapter proposes ten question functions to focus the transformation process:

Build or Invent	Challenge or Destroy
Decide	Figure Out
Persuade or Convince	Wonder
Acquaint	Dismiss
Predict	Understand

For each of these question functions, the chapter defines the function and then provides examples of traditional school questions being upgraded to a higher level of significance.

In the case of the Understanding function, for example . . .

Understand

In popular terms, the goal of this questioning activity is to “get one’s head around” some topic, idea, challenge or proposal. By the end, one hopes to grasp key traits, elements and structures.

Traditional School Question

Go find out about Robert or Elizabeth Browning (or any other poet, general, prime minister, hero, character, celebrity, scoundrel or seer. What did he or she do?

Upgraded Version

What were the five most distinguishing characteristics of

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Browning and how did they contribute to her success of failure? What made her great or not so great? What are the two or three most important things you learned about her that might serve you well?

The chapter will serve as a valuable resource for any teacher wishing to reexamine and redesign classroom inquiry activities to require a higher level of thought.

Examples of Essential Questions

In schools, essential questions may offer the organizing focus for a single discussion, a month's unit of study or a whole year's exploration. Outside of school, of course, essential questions might challenge us for years. We may struggle with questions of a lifetime as well as questions of the day. We may have close and brief encounters with monumental issues or longstanding relationships with queries that dog us, defy us or delight us. We cannot nail down essential questions in simple time frames.

In this section we will look at school examples that work well at four age levels:

- Primary Grades - Students from the age of 4 to 8.
- Intermediate Grades - Students from the age of 9-12.
- Middle School - Students from the age of 13-15.
- High School - Students from the age of 16-18.

Primary Grades

Questions about traits are especially powerful for this age group as young ones try to understand the world around them.

- What are the traits of a good fast food restaurant?
- What makes a good friend?
- What makes a good town?
- What makes a good day?
- What makes a bad storm?
- How can we be safe?
- How can we eat well?
- What kind of TV programs are healthy for us?
- What kinds of cereals are healthy for us?

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Traits are at the heart of evaluation on **Bloom's Taxonomy** - the skill of making wise choices based on criteria and evidence. Traits are the basis for the values and criteria that drive choices.

Another major strategy to introduce young students to essential questions is to focus on questions requiring analysis. Such questions play to the natural curiosity and wonder of children seeking to figure things out and understand how things work.

- Why do you suppose the rain falls down?
- Why do you suppose some birds fly south in the winter?
- Why do you suppose the boy in this story cheated?
- Why do you suppose the girl in this story lied?
- Why do you suppose some people break their promises?

Primary students are also ready for flights of fancy, questions that invite them to speculate, predict, invent or imagine.

- What do suppose would happen if we took away all television?
- If it snows heavily this winter, how will that make life different?
- If you could change the town we live in, how would you make it better?
- If you were asked to design a new playground for the school, how would you do it?
- If you were the boy in this story, how would you handle the problem he faces?
- If you were the woman in this story, how would you change things to make them better?

Intermediate Grades

The types of questions mentioned above work well for this age group, but the complexity and depth may change to match the growing reasoning capacity of the students.

Traits remain a potent focus:

- What are the traits of a good ship captain?
- What are the traits of a good leader?
- What makes for a fair punishment?
- What makes one team better than another?
- What makes one writer more powerful than another?
- What makes one story more believable than another?

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- What makes one country more just than another?

Analysis questions are critically important as students will be called upon to figure things out and demonstrate inferential reasoning on increasingly difficult tests. Instead of finding answers, students must make answers, putting clues together to solve a mystery or build a case.

- Why do you suppose the character in this story decided to abandon his friend?
- Why do you suppose the gas in this experiment acted the way it did?
- Which behaviors shown by the main character were evidence of strong character and which ones showed weakness?

Upper elementary students also welcome questions that invite them to speculate, predict, invent or imagine.

- Are we at risk from earthquakes here?
- Is there anything our town should do to improve our readiness for natural disasters?
- Could a tsunami happen here? Are we ready? What should we do?
- How could you invent a better plan? a better city? a better ending? a better poem? a better song? a better logo? a better message? a better rule or law?

Middle School

Older students continue to work on understanding the characteristics or traits that set particular examples apart as distinguished and special.

- How do we know if a law is just?
- How do we know if a poet, a playwright or a novelist is promising?
- How is a hero different from a celebrity?
- What kinds of harm can be done by fame and fortune?

Older students can also handle complex choices which require the skill of evaluation on **Bloom's Taxonomy**.

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- Which of these three poets writes the most powerful and evocative poetry?
- If you were moving to China for two years, which of these six cities would you select?
- Which leader (prime minister, president, etc.) of the previous century did the most to advance the cause of civil rights and liberties?
- Which leader relied the most on propaganda, demagoguery and appeals to fear?

Understanding why life turns out the way it does is another major focus for essential questions at this age.

- Why do you suppose some people can handle being a celebrity without losing their sense of self while others slip into oblivion, drug use and other forms of self destruction?
- Why do some cities and states seem capable of overcoming terrible troubles and misfortune, rising to challenges with grace and courage while others surrender, collapse and give up the fight with a whimper?
- Why do some friends stick by you even during the worst of times while others are quick to flee at the first sign of trouble?

As with the younger students, invention and problem-solving can also inspire questioning and thinking at this middle level.

- What should be done to improve the effectiveness of the United Nations?
- How can our nation best handle the influx of immigrants?
- How can our nation best provide for security without undermining important civil liberties?
- How should the copyright laws be adjusted to take into account the impact of new technologies?
- What should be done about homelessness and poverty?
- What is the best way to balance the need for resource development with protection of the environment?
- How can the writing in this essay be improved?

High School

If students have enjoyed several years of working with challenging questions and issues prior to entering high school, the choice of

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essential questions will move toward depth and complexity, demanding more in the way of originality, perception and discovery.

If, on the other hand, students have had limited experience with such challenges, then many of the types of questions listed in earlier sections will be a good starting place.

At earlier grade levels it makes some sense to “chunk” the content, allowing students to wrestle with parts of much larger questions, in part because those questions might take months to explore with any degree of finality. In comparing a half dozen Chinese cities, for example, students might come away with a firm grasp of the comparative thought process by looking at nothing more than the weather, recognizing that climate is only one of a dozen or more major criteria worthy of research if one had the time.

As students reach high school, such chunking is replaced by more demanding investigations that might span weeks and even months. We expect students to experience the benefits of digging deeply. While it is easy to fall into the trap of assigning brief and superficial research projects, that practice does a disservice to the students, who should be emerging from high school with the capacity to conduct research into the most difficult of life’s issues.

Employing a curricular approach called “Science, Technology and Society, the teacher begins the unit with a slide show that illustrates the impact of chemistry on the landscape, a show that provokes strong reactions from the students and serves as a hook to capture their interest.

Within the next few days, the teacher shares sample questions and encourages students to generate their own.

- What is the price of progress?
- How can we enjoy the fruits of chemistry without spoiling our world?
- What are the best examples of responsible disposal practices?
- What should the government be doing to regulate the impact of chemicals on the farms, rivers and forests of our nation?
- What changes need to be made to the Super Fund clean-up program?
- What are the most dramatic contributions made to the quality of life by chemical products?
- What are the products with the most damaging impact?

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How Essential Questions Interact

Essential questions provide the impetus for investigations and research. Usually there is a single essential question that is center stage. This question fuels and directs the inquiry process. All of the other questioning types act in service to the essential question, contributing whatever they can to the resolution of whatever issue, quandary, challenge or problem is presented by the essential question.

If properly stated, the essential question has a dramatic impact, evoking a passionate level of interest as well as a firm commitment to persevere until a satisfying level of understanding is reached. A good essential question provokes a dynamic tension that should persist throughout the phases of research. At no time should the researcher lose sight of the goal at hand or become so immersed in the data collection that the primary issue and question is laid aside. Because data collection is meant to cast light on the question, the collection should be done with focus and purpose, the gathering restricted to that which is pertinent, promising or illuminating.

The essential question looms over the enterprise at all times like the sun or the moon or a morning star. The prominence of other question types may shift from phase to phase as utility and value change according to the task at hand, but the essential question will remain a guiding influence at all times.

This is easy to say and easy to write but not an easy habit of mind to develop in young ones who may have experienced years of the old fashioned kind of school report that required little more than gathering. The entire notion and value of cognitive dissonance is usually foreign to students until teachers have shown them how it operates to stimulate curiosity and drive inquiry.

The essential question is a thing of wonder. It probes some aspect of life so profound that the human spirit is captivated and cannot rest until the dissonance is reduced or settled, until there is some degree of resonance and understanding.

We expect the student to keep wondering throughout the research process, weighing the relevance of each new clue, each chunk of data and each discovery to the question at hand.

The essential question becomes a preoccupation as the researcher finds the questioning process almost continuous. Many times the thinking may continue more or less unconsciously as an incubation process operating behind the scenes, but all of a sudden a thought may surface in the middle of a run or a shower or a walk along the river.

