

Question starters (compiled by Michael Bunting 2006)

My attempts to understand and use the Mantle of the Expert approach to teaching and learning have made me realise just how important language can be in weaving a web of engagement, commitment, trust and respect in the classroom. The words we use have enormous potential as tools for empowerment, unity and inclusion; or as weapons of restriction, isolation and diktat.

As teachers, the nature of the questions we ask signal to our children what we value. Personally speaking, I want every word, every gesture, every glance to convey my belief that they matter as individuals; their opinions matter; their home experiences matter; and as a class, we can, and will, call upon these personal resources to collectively shape our learning.

I found that traditional questioning approaches immediately distanced me from the children; I was structuring my classroom environment to create a feeling of community and respect, but my questioning style was practically Gestapo-esque! Something had to change and, thanks to a great deal of reading and the opportunities to work with some leading Mantle of the Expert practitioners, I think I'm beginning to get there.

The question starters in this booklet have been collected from a variety of sources. They are not the only ways of structuring questions, but perhaps they are a useful collection to dip into for people, like me, who feel that their questioning could improve. At first viewing, their structure may seem to fly in the face of orthodoxy: there are few, if any, whys, wheres or whos included. All I would say is, give some of them a go and see what happens.

I've heard that Dorothy Heathcote believes a question to be any utterance that provokes a verbal response. Perhaps like some people reading this, I was sceptical to begin with. But now....

Activating and transforming knowledge / understanding

- Do we know much about...?
- I don't know what it says in the books about...?
- Does anyone know...?
- Is it true that...?
- Because...?
- Is there any reason...?
- Is there a way to...?
- I've never understood...
- I've often wondered why...
- I just can't imagine...

Considering another point of view / injecting new information

- They do say that...
- Some people think...
- It's common for people to...
- I've heard that...
- Had anyone thought that...?
- There might be others who think...

Bringing attention to, studying, analysing

- It's odd that you don't seem to see / hear about...
- It does seem strange that...
- Did it seem that...?

- Did anybody notice...?
- Can you make out that word / symbol?
- Isn't there a...?
- Are you noticing anything about...?
- I think he might be trying to tell us something.
- Could you tell whether...?
- I don't know about you, but it's making me think that...
- You'd think that...
- You'd guess that...

Considering implications

- I don't know. Do you think it would really help?
- Surely, we couldn't...
- That must mean that...
- So, perhaps we need to...
- There must be a reason for...
- So, there might be...
- What might it mean?
- Will this mean...?
- Will this affect...?
- Have we thought about the consequences of that?
- Does that allow us to...?
- People usually do things for a reason...
- I guess it's possible that...
- Does it make you feel / think that...?
- We don't want to.....or do we?
- If we're going to... I guess we'd need to...

Deepening / connecting / reflecting

- Just think, we're not the only ones who've...
- I wonder whether other people have been faced with this same problem?
- It makes you think that problems like this have troubled people in many different places and times.
- I guess it's a bit like...
- So kind of like when...
- That makes me think of the time when...
- Do we feel differently about that now?
- Did it make you think that...?
- Did it seem to you...?
- Do you get the feeling that...?

Hypothesising

- Now, supposing...
- Suppose that...
- If people would let us...
- It could be that...
- I would guess that if....
- If we could...
- Maybe...

- Perhaps...
- It makes me think what would happen if...
- I mean, if it were true that...
- Would it be good if...?
- Are you guys happy to go along with this and see where it leads?

Offering choices

- Which...?
- We'll need to choose whether...
- It seems, from what you're saying, that...
- Do you want to... or ...?
- Given the situation, we could ... or ...
- Is there an argument for doing one of these tasks before the others?

Acknowledging / summarising

- It's clear that...
- I can see that...
- Like you, I think that...
- After all of our efforts, we've...
- So, we're saying that...
- Shall we remind ourselves...?
- It seems that we've decided...
- You seem to be saying...
- We seem to have achieved...?

Seeking agreement

- For now / for a bit, can we agree that...?
- Is it possible for us to...?
- Do you think we could...?
- Can we do a ...?
- Do you mind if...?
- For a while, could we...?
- At the moment, can we agree to...?
- Can we live with that?

Directing

- We're going to need to have...
- We'll / we'd need to...
- Would you like to see...?
- Should there be...?
- Had we better...?
- If we're going to... I guess we'd need to...
- Perhaps, we might need to...
- Can we, just for a moment...
- Let's see if we could...
- Just have a little look...
- Just go over there for a moment and...

- We'll have to make sure...
- Might we be able...?
- We can look now at...
- Would you give a bit of time to...?
- Shall I/we...?
- There must be time for us to...
- Can we work in such a way...?
- No doubt, there'll come a time when...

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