Collective Survival: Using Question Journals in the Classroom

The new education has its purpose in the development of a new kind of person, one who—as a result of internalizing a different set of concepts—is an actively inquiring, flexible, creative, innovative, tolerant, liberal personality who can face uncertainty and ambiguity without disorientation, who can formulate viable new meanings to meet changes in the environment which threaten individual and mutual survival.

from Teaching as a Subversive Activity

If we take into consideration how much time an educational system needs to effect fundamental change, the seventeen years since the publication of Teaching as a Subversive Activity seem no time at all. All great systems react slowly and conservatively, changing, for the most part, only in response to external demands made by those who have learned the hard lessons of patience. Stasis, not change, is the operating principle of systems as diverse as General Telephone and the human body, a principle we respect even as we resist it. Still, systems do change. They must in order to survive.

Can educational systems be the exception to the rule? While programs, personnel, pupils change from day to day and year to year, we inside such systems know that fundamental philosophical change, anything we could call true change, is unlikely, even over the course of a teaching lifetime. But time, as Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner warned, was even then, nearly two decades ago, a luxury we no longer had. If we were to achieve “individual and mutual survival,” we needed to find solutions for truly mindboggling problems, solutions that have not yet occurred to anyone, anywhere.

I do not know if we can create global solutions—if that is indeed how it’s done—or whether our educational system can help us find those solutions. I would like to have more faith than that. I would like to believe that together we do produce “actively inquiring, flexible, creative, innovative” high school and college graduates. Not one, or a few, but all we need.

My freshmen this year are not qualitatively different from those who walked (or skateboarded) in before them. Intelligent, healthy, tractable, they all have B plus manners, great teeth, and work extremely hard for their grades. According to statistics, they are among the nation’s brightest and best.

But they are not, nor should I probably expect them to be Postman and Weingartner’s “new people.” Some are creative, flexible; a few are, if hairstyles and attire are an indication, even innovative. But few seem “actively inquiring.”

That is not to dismiss what they do with their minds. Just like everyone else, they’re thinking all the time. They have to. They confront in their first weeks at college some of life’s most difficult problems—financial, logistical, emotional. Working one’s way through the financial aid system takes not a little intellectual flexibility, not to mention juggling four or five courses, strange roommates, coed bathrooms. Most survive. I doubt they would were they not only thinking but “actively inquiring.” Is it possible they practice a skill they then drop with their skateboards outside the classroom door?

The assignment was easy. A “warmup” I thought, simple. “Read the essay carefully,” I said. “Then make a list of at least ten questions you have about it.” At the following class meeting, only three students had the required ten questions (no one had eleven). Most had two or three. One, the most outspoken on the first day of class, an obviously motivated young man, had none.

In the not too distant past, my Mrs. Grundy would have taken right over. “Does that mean you understood everything in the reading?” Mrs. G would have smirked. “Then of course you will be our resident expert!” I did ask the young man if he’d read the essay. Looking miserable, he shook his head. “No, I mean yes!” he said. “Yes, I read it. I read it three times. I just couldn’t think of any questions.”

Over the years, I have been too unwilling to believe that students “couldn’t think” of questions. I would look behind

continued on next page
guileless, eager eyes into what I thought just might be crafty little hearts, and tell myself this year’s batch was “lazy.” I heard “couldn’t think” as “wouldn’t think.” They were behaving like high school students, I said. For every time I said that, I’d like to take it back. My students, most of them anyway, are not lazy or crafty. They simply, or not so simply, haven’t yet joined the academic community. They are stuck because they have not yet, in Bartholomae’s words, “invented the university,” have not yet learned “to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing ... that define the discourse of our community.” In some ways typical California high school graduates, they had shared classrooms and harried teachers with thirty to forty peers. If they were active inquirers, as most likely they were in their primary classrooms, by middle school they had found the more often rewarded path to academic success; they had learned to read minds. They knew exactly what their peers would say were they to raise a hand unnecessarily, knew what they’d be called. And, besides, teachers always gave you the answers if you waited long enough. My students had learned the discourse of a different community and had learned it very well.

Because I had begun to understand how stymied my students really were by my expectations for them—but not how to “unstymie” them—I decided to place myself, as far as possible, in their position. I decided to teach what I did not know.

For a number of what I considered good reasons, I had never read Lewis Thomas’s *The Lives of a Cell*. The title, for instance. But recently I happened across an excerpt from the book and was dazzled, if not by Thomas’ biological acumen, then by his dazzling, you could say joyful, facility with the language. Last spring at book order time, when hibiscus bloomed outside my office window and courage seemed the order of the season, I ordered *The Lives of a Cell* and promised myself I would not read my advance copy until the following fall. Further, I would read only what I assigned my students to read. We would throw ourselves headlong into the bracing sea of intellectual discourse, I told myself, and swim together. For an entirely blissful summer, I did not consider the other possibility.

This is what happened when I became “learner,” not “teacher.” One of the swimmers.

On the second day of class, halfway through an interminable hour, water began seeping in under the door. By the end of the hour, waves were hitting my knees and my students were drifting out to sea. Lewis Thomas had lost them midway through the first paragraph of Chapter One.

It is illusion to think there is anything fragile about the life of the earth; surely this is the toughest membrane imaginable in the universe, opaque to probability, impermeable to death. We are the delicate part, transient and vulnerable as cilia.

There was fear in their eyes, confusion, betrayal. (“This isn’t English, is it?”) But no one said a word. No one waved an arm or cried out. No one even asked a question. (A relevant question might have been, “Why are we doing this?”) To a student, they all assumed what seems to me now a heartbreaking responsibility for their own drowning. Bobbing somewhere between empathy and panic, I threw out question after question—lifelines, I thought—and answered them all myself.

Obviously, it was time to regroup, which meant, also obviously, taking control, reading the entire book and whatever criticism I could lay hands on, preparing carefully orchestrated lecture-discussions, and doing generally what the university thought I was doing all along. Instead, with more stubbornness than reason, I held on. And I began writing, paying particular attention to what was happening to me as a “learner,” recording the grapple and gain we all experience in the sometimes tedious, but (as we tell our students so confidently) always rewarding learning process. I had far more questions than answers:

*Is man really trying to detach himself from nature? Purposely?*

*How is the earth “opaque to probability”?*

“Our nonexistence as entities”?? Thomas says we don’t really exist?! I’m lost...

*I’m not sure I believe the earth is “impermeable to death.” We’re sure doing our best to destroy it. What can he mean by this?*

*Are viruses beneficial after all?*

Sharing the record of my progress through the unfamiliar territory of *The Lives of a Cell* with my students made a number of interesting things happen. Students who had found themselves lost and bewildered in the first chapter in which Thomas establishes his thesis and uses a large but necessary array of biological terms, found a kindred soul. When the going got tough, I reported, I, too, wanted to quit, read Borges, anything rather than the assignment. (“This was a dumb idea. Maybe it’s too late to change the syllabus.”) I had wanted to cheat (find the criticism, read ahead). Conversely, I had wanted to do the assignment so well that I would impress the students with my native intelligence. I wanted, by some sort of magic, not by hard work, to shine.
Because I had begun to understand how stymied my students really were by my expectations for them—but not how to "unstymie" them—I decided to place myself, as far as possible, in their position. I decided to teach what I did not know.

Halfway through Chapter Three, my journal says, I was certain that I had made a tragic mistake. No instructor in her right mind would do what I was doing. What would my students do with sentences that I, hired to teach them, had to read three and four times? I knew what they would do. They would give up and wait for me to fill in all the blanks. I became frustrated with Thomas, then with myself. I quickly tired of the physical task of thumbing through the dictionary and lost my place in the text and in my own train of bumbling thought as a result of having to do it. I told myself that it was all Thomas' fault that I couldn't understand. I told myself that it was all my fault that I couldn't understand. I would turn the book on its face and do something I was certain needed to be done right then. I ate and drank comforting things.

I also experienced an almost tangible delight when I found I could understand, after what seemed great effort, some of Thomas' fascinating concepts. I began to experience and to understand the recursive nature of my own ability to read and to understand. I began to create a personal relationship with the author, began to dialogue with him, argue with him, but realized none of this could be done until I, and of course my students, put in the effort to understand exactly what he was saying. I began to gather confidence. I began to get excited. I began to love the book.

The pages in my "question journal" began to fill with all kinds of questions, biological, personal, global. Questions I knew couldn't be answered but that I had to ask anyway. ("Did we really derive from a single cell?") Questions that were not questions at all but that I had to get down ("I don't like being compared to bacteria!") Questions that I sensed somehow were "great" questions—questions for which I really wanted answers.

This was not the case for my students, at least in the beginning, but they shared what they had and we began what became an ongoing discussion about the nature of questions (where they came from, why we needed them, what kinds there were, how we knew when we had a good one...). We chose the "best" question of the day, certainly an apt question, "How can I understand Lewis Thomas?" and shared some answers: read the assignment more than once, ask people who know more than you do, use your dictionary, believe in the power of your mind... I added that since writing is thinking, we would write. We would choose "good" questions and, by a process of faith, determination, error, luck, and the combined power of the multitrillion brain cells Thomas assured us we had, we would write our way into answers.

We had first to determine what the "good" questions were. Early on, we decided a "good" question was one that:

1. we all wanted the answer to.
2. we could answer today, now.
3. wasn't "boring."
4. wasn't too hard (some disagreement here).
5. would help us understand the whole chapter/book.
6. made us want to answer it.
7. couldn't be found in lit books at the end of the chapter.

The next day's collection of questions was less meager:

"Inviolable"? Does he think the earth can't be destroyed?
Why does Thomas use such big words?
Is everybody really obsessed with death?
So the rain contains Vitamin B12...?
Do we really fear new life?
Is there life on other planets?
Does Lewis Thomas believe in God?

Once again, we chose a question that fit our rules most closely, in this case the fifth one, and freewrote responses to it. Because we had agreed that no "good" question could be easily or finally answered, most students were willing to share what they had written. Each response added to our overall understanding of the reading.

Response Number One

I don't think we fear new life, or at least I don't. If I got the chance to ride a rocket to a new planet, I'd go in a minute and shake hands with everybody I found. I'm more afraid of life right here on the earth, rapers, muggers, stranglers. I hope this campus is safe at night. So far, most of the new people I've met seem nice. At least, I'm certainly not afraid of them. Well, not afraid in the real "fear" sense. Maybe Lewis doesn't mean that kind of fear, but the kind you feel when you meet somebody different, like a person of a different race or color. I guess we all feel a little fear about that...

Response Number Two

Thomas seems to be laughing at humans just a little because we fear things that are foreign to us. It's true that in the movies beings from other planets are seen as enemies that have to be blasted or zapped out of existence. But what about E.T. and Close Encounters of the Third Kind. I think we may be seeing things continued on next page
Collective Survival: Using Question Journals in the Classroom
continued from previous page

differently now. I guess we’ve always, since the cave times, feared people different from us. It’s instinct. Our instinct protects us from harm. Does Thomas think we should trust everybody in the world and in outer space too? That seems impractical to me.

Later, we updated our criteria and agreed that a “good” question, in addition to all that we decided before, was one that:

8. made us think.
9. couldn’t be answered easily or “forever.”
10. helped us learn/understand something about life that we didn’t know before.
11. made us ask more questions.
12. encouraged lots of answers.

We eliminated numbers 2 and 4 from our list.

As our criteria changed, so did our responses. Paragraphs became pages. Holding off an answer, playing with possibilities, taking detours, became far more exciting than making a beeline for what seemed the obvious answer. A writer would find, smack in the thick of things, that her question would change, become more specific, more relevant to her or to what she was pursuing. What seemed an obvious answer turned out not only to be “wrong,” but foolish and shortsighted. It became clear as we wrote that staying in the inquiry mode for as long as possible and returning to it again and again became the means by which greater discoveries and insights could be made. Turning a statement into a question whenever we became “stuck” generated more thought and, in turn, more questions. Had the student writer of Response Number One, for example, wanted to continue, she might have asked why “we all feel a little fear” about people “of a different race or color” and continued her quest.

My original assignment, ten “good” questions, became “a number of good questions and a response to the best one.” For The Lives of a Cell, questions ranged from the meaning of a particular sentence to the meaning of “consciousness.” When students applied themselves directly to working through the meaning of a difficult sentence or concept (“earth is... opaque to probability, impermeable to death...”), they gained confidence in their own ability to understand what they had first leapt over in hopes that it would somehow solve itself or disappear. They tackled the “impossible” with good natured enthusiasm, returning to the book whenever they needed support. They leapt into questions of personal significance and sometimes into questions of great significance to all living beings. Responses became “writer-based” drafts which then became, with focus and organization, “reader-based” and were shared with the class. I began to believe, when thoughtful intelligent essay drafts emerged, that I was the real beneficiary.

Teaching what we do not know is, admittedly, a radical approach to getting our students involved in their own education. But many teachers have taken the risk to some extent. A poetry professor from whom I have learned what little I know about teaching poetry always reads aloud to her class a poem with which she is entirely unfamiliar. Then she reads the poem again, voicing aloud all her questions, thoughts and hunches as she goes. And because she does not choose to be “resident poetry expert,” her students learn to trust their own abilities to read, to think, and to challenge. They look and sound and act like the experts they are learning to be.

A writer would find, smack in the thick of things, that her question would change, become more specific, more relevant to her or to what she was pursuing.

Shifting the balance of power in the classroom is not to abdicate for one moment our role as educators, or to diminish its importance. We do know more than our students, about literature and writing, about the processes of inquiry and analysis, and we owe them the benefit of that expertise. We also owe them a chance to become experts in their own right, to whatever extent they choose to do that.

This is the time to report that all my students enjoy the inquiry process, love Lewis Thomas, and have begun to solve problems of global significance. That is not, at least presently, the case. Some students report unabashedly that thinking is just “too hard.” They prefer to write to assigned topics, “like you do in other (real) English classes,” rather than write their way into their own. It is “just too confusing” they tell me and, besides, there are too many questions that will never be answered. Though they never say so, at least to me, I expect more than a few feel that I am not somehow doing my job. Of course there are the others, too. The converts who use their question journals in other classes, and who say they just might begin to ask some of their questions “out loud.” In a Political Science class of 800 students, I’d call that real courage. In any case, it’s a beginning.

Valerie Hobbs is a Teacher Consultant with the South Coast Writing Project and a lecturer in the Writing Program at the University of California, Santa Barbara.