

Questioning Questioning: Essential Questions in English Classrooms

Essential Questions provide frameworks for collaborative team curriculum creation; yet, controversy around such questions arises because of several factors. This author suggests five paths to responsible, English-friendly use of Essential Questions.

Let me ask you,” interjected my colleague at a recent meeting, “are Essential Questions truly so *essential* in English class? Our texts are rich with inherent arguments, controversy, insight, and beauty—I want my students to encounter it all! Honestly, now, doesn’t inquiry actually *limit* us and our students?”

Essential Questions (EQs) are familiar landmarks in the national teaching landscape, applied across varied disciplines and diverse classrooms. Over time our familiarity with their form has grown (see Figure 1). Yet, as raised by my colleague above, there seem to be some lingering questions about their presumed central location in middle school and high school English classrooms. It is clear that many English teachers have seen profound benefits to introducing inquiry into their classrooms, but as adoption of EQs has proceeded, frustrations, roadblocks, and uncertainties have appeared along the way. (Coincidentally, these issues often appear as

essential questions, too.) Here are some questions I have heard:

- Are EQs too limiting for our students when they encounter text? Do they unduly limit
 - student responsibility for initiating inquiry?
 - appreciation of artistry in writing?
 - the search for meaning to one angle in a work?
 - transfer of skills in essay assessment (by favoring the unit-long question)?
- Do EQs unduly limit teachers’ ability to innovate?
- Do they become staid and boring via repetition throughout a unit or semester?

These questions, uncovered in subsequent discussions and reflections with teachers, represent a practical analysis of theory in practice. They reveal the rough edges of implementation but are far from a reason to abandon their use. By considering the issues raised above in light of our desired discipline outcomes, a way forward appears for each. As a result, I propose five recommendations for fine-tuning our Essential Questions to remove some of the friction that English teachers uniquely feel upon integrating such questions into our discipline.

Content and Skills Interplay

The first recommendation is based on a recognition that English students find themselves at a convergence of two important competing forces: a skills focus (inspired most recently by the CCSS) and a

FIGURE 1. McTighe and Wiggins’s Characteristics of Essential Questions (3)

1. Open ended
2. Thought provoking and intellectually engaging
3. Demand higher order thinking
4. Highlight important transferable ideas
5. Raise additional questions
6. Require support for answers
7. Recur over time

content focus (drawn from a tradition of literary artistry and thematic commentary). These forces compete because evidence shows that students learn best when metacognitively aware of their skills learning targets (Marzano), but motivation can be limited when skills become the headlining focus of lessons. Students need to see classroom connection to their lives and interests, and while some of our students are deeply motivated by skills inquiry, many others feel skills are fatally tainted by practicality and challenge. In their book, *Uncommon Core: Where the Authors of the Standards Go Wrong about Instruction—and How You Can Get It Right*, Michael W. Smith, Deborah Appleman, and Jeffrey D. Wilhelm contend, “No kid was ever motivated to read by the *cr-* blend or was motivated to read by a focus on inferencing” (14). This is when we need to look to the citizenship and passion inherent in content-centered questions to compensate and balance focus.

Here is an example of such an evolution: students studying *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* might see it framed within two EQs such as those suggested by Jay McTighe and Grant P. Wiggins: “How do effective writers hook and hold their readers?” (4) or “How do authors use different story elements to establish mood?” (Wiggins and McTighe 115). This is clearly a positive set of questions, but to replace one with a content question such as “Should America be ‘unconscious’ of race?” provides a different sort of appeal—one rooted in the world, a school, a peer group, or a curious mind. Twenty years of teaching English and a multitude of classroom observations convince me that students lean into the inquiry mindset more with this combination than by skills alone.

When surveying the Web for examples of EQs, I find that many district sites are dominated by English-focus examples of skill-based questions or of content-based questions, but the deliberate combination is underrepresented. This leads to my first recommendation for English teachers implementing EQs: *Consciously intertwine both EQ strands: content and skills.*

How Often and How Long?

To build off of the intertwining of content and skills, an additional benefit is that skills-focus questions can more easily recur throughout the year, so the

skill question “How to best hook an audience?” can recur and provide multiple perspectives as students encounter different tasks and models. Likewise, many content-based questions hold potential for reprisal, albeit not with the clear rhythm that comes from the regularity of recurring skills standards. A reappearance of “Should America be ‘unconscious’ of race?” would be difficult to avoid in most American Literature-based courses—but more importantly, to avoid it would rob students of awareness that such big ideas flow across time and culture. A question’s appearance in one unit should not discourage it (or more likely a derivative of it) from a meaningful reappearance during subsequent studies. If the “unconscious of race” question is deeply studied in *Huckleberry Finn*, but not given some limited treatment while reading *The Merchant of Venice*, opportunities for critical thinking and contextual awareness risk being lost. Our kids don’t need to encounter any more isolated strands of knowledge. Let’s weave a context with them. Recommendation two: *Revisit EQs in both planned and “teachable moment” contexts.*

Overly Focused?

In theory, committing to a single, driving question that weaves throughout all activity and assessment of a given unit provides clear and purposeful focus for the students and teachers of a course. Benefits flow out from that central organization, such as professional dialogue and learning from teachers working collaboratively around the same learning targets. Furthermore, programmatic student inquiry is gained via such a focus, with all students of a given course benefiting from more equitable exposure to all that EQs offer (see Figure 2). Yet,

FIGURE 2. Benefits of Essential Questions According to McTighe and Wiggins (17)

- Make unit plans more likely to yield focused and thoughtful learning and learners.
- Signal that inquiry is a key goal of education.
- Make it more likely the unit will be intellectually engaging.
- Help to clarify and prioritize standards for teachers.
- Provide transparency for students.
- Encourage and model metacognition for students.
- Provide opportunities for intra- and interdisciplinary connections.
- Support meaningful differentiation.

do these benefits come at too steep a “limitations cost”? With so many kids and teachers herded down a single pathway, is some magic lost in the name of equity? Such a concern has been raised by some of our collaborative teams, and so we seek to reap benefits while avoiding a narrowed experience.

While the current curriculum unit template at my school asks for a single unit EQ, that is putting *a lot* of pressure on one question. Ultimately, it seems too much when many benefits can be had or even intensified when classroom inquiry honors principles of real-world inquiry. Teacher teams periodically report that some students (and teachers!) tire of the single “almighty” question. This is hardly surprising since supporting student reading of a complex text or a unit of inquiry may take multiple weeks—and sustained inquiry is a learned skill for many students. Since a primary purpose of EQs is to hook and hold sometimes-fragile student engagement and focus, we need to avoid oversimplifying for school what is beautiful and alluring in human nature: curiosity.

I deliberately teach students during the research process that inquiry must grow and adapt by spawning sub-questions in response to our learning. This progression of the inquiry provides a sense of accomplishment in addition to their growing understanding of their topics. Why alter this model for the classroom or course team? As teachers or in teams we should create units that deliberately support dynamic EQs via sub-questions and EQ evolution. Recommendation three: *Plan to explore sub-questions and to model Essential Question evolution.*

Assessment and Learning Transfer with EQs

By the end of each unit, many teachers and teams follow the philosophy that students should interact with the EQ as their final assessment—often a summative paper. It removes guesswork for students over what concepts are valued during a unit if they know the final assessment question from the start and also allows teachers to model inquiry elements. However, some educators also worry that such unwavering focus creates an incentive for students to be answer-seekers throughout the unit, as opposed to investigators. If students are learning the mindset and skills of inquiry, why not provide

a new question as a final written assessment? Such a final task mimics authentic research. When students learn early in a unit that the final essay/project question will fall under the umbrella question, but that it will represent an inquiry evolution of the class (as described above), they will learn to participate in and track the inquiry.

The path forward in the face of this “focus vs. transfer” tension logically lies in a planned, gradual release of inquiry initiative to students. Our senior AP Themes students should not be interacting with inquiry the same way that our regular level ninth graders do. While the value of firmly teacher-guided modeling around inquiry makes sense for a ninth-grade student, when there has been development of so many skills of analysis and critical thinking in our advanced seniors, we would be robbing them of their opportunity to encounter literature absolutely authentically. In fact, is there not an inherent “universal” EQ set for the most advanced, motivated readers? Questions that do put students squarely in the driver’s seat should be an ultimate goal. For instance: “What generates this work’s beauty and meaning?” or “What are the limitations of this work?”

Transfer of skills is a primary goal of the CCSS and our ultimate goal. The introduction of the ELA Standards deliberately and repeatedly argues that students perform “without significant scaffolding” to “demonstrate independence” (7). As responsible educators we should guide students toward independence. Students who are led and inspired into productive study and skill development by EQs should use them—those who aren’t, shouldn’t be fed an exclusive EQ diet. Recommendation four: *Assess for EQs and for transfer of inquiry thinking.*

Inquiry Ownership

Related to this concept is concern that content EQs unduly narrow student focus and appreciation of literature to fit a question, regardless of its merit. For students who are given a question such as “What is a good parent?” a conception of what *To Kill a Mockingbird* represents is misshapen. While avoiding the notion that all messages of a masterwork must be “covered” for students, we know great authors invariably interweave multiple themes. I once had a colleague ask me, “Why would we ever

want to supplant their questions with our own? Why . . . *tell* students the questions books will be posing before they actually discover them on their own?” Only a deliberate path, cognizant of students’ skill and motivation, will balance our priorities. The reality is that many students *do not* successfully “discover” their own questions readily enough to avoid frustration in a text, resulting in an overreliance on classmates/teachers; yet, great texts do hold artistically portrayed themes and questions embedded in them.


Therefore our discipline must continue in the shift from focusing students only on teacher-provided questions, study guides, or tedious annotating instructions (such as “circle vocabulary words you do not know” or “mark four key ideas per page”). Such minutia crowds out habits of mind that lead to critical thinking and deeper engagement. Consciously increasing student responsibility for creation of their own bigger EQ-style questions as they read should again lead students over their careers to awareness of the multiple layers and messages great works contain. If students grasp that a key aim of reading literature is the construction of personally meaningful inquiry about the messages and methods of the author, we will have succeeded. Recommendation five: *Students must learn to value and properly pursue their own inquiries.*

EQs can provide key tools for students, teachers, and teacher teams to build a comprehensive curriculum. While we recognize the merits and depth of classic works, if Jenny does not sense a connection to her worldview, we risk losing her. As with any other tool, there needs to be consistency and balance in their use to enrich student experiences and avoid limiting student curiosity, expertise, or self-efficacy. While some teachers feel comfortable using the questions comprehensively and some

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FIGURE 3. The Five EQ Recommendations

1. Consciously intertwine both EQ strands: content and skills.
2. Revisit EQs in planned and “teachable moment” contexts.
3. Plan to explore sub-questions and to model EQ evolution.
4. Assess for both EQs and for transfer of inquiry thinking.
5. Students must learn to value and properly pursue their own inquiries.

prefer moderate use, we are all obliged to consistently provide the benefits of such questions to our students—and the five recommendations, recapped in Figure 3, will help teaching professionals, collaborative teams, and departments to grow thoughtfully in that direction. 

The reality is that many students *do not* successfully “discover” their own questions readily enough to avoid frustration in a text, resulting in an overreliance on classmates/teachers.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

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A main goal of educators today is to teach students the skills they need to be critical thinkers. Instead of simply memorizing facts and ideas, children need to engage in higher levels of thinking to reach their fullest potential. Practicing higher order thinking (HOT) skills outside of school will give kids and teens the tools that they need to understand, infer, connect, categorize, synthesize, evaluate, and apply the information they know to find solutions to new and existing problems. Read more in this ReadWriteThink.org Tip & How To. <http://bit.ly/N6t1U9>