

# FOUR KEY QUESTIONS AND WHY THEY MATTER

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## The key questions

We invite you to start thinking about your students' learning with four key questions. Posing these questions as a series of inquiries can be a productive way for you to experience an inquiry mindset in action. Hundreds of educators have told us that they have made transformative shifts in their learning and teaching after exploring the experiences of the young people through posing and then reflecting on their responses to these questions.

These questions can seem deceptively simple. When applied on a regular basis, however, educators have found that they have a profound effect on shifting learning practices in a more self-regulated direction. The questions help move our thinking from a preoccupation with content coverage to a focus on what learners are actually experiencing with the learning we are designing for, or with, them. The four key questions are:

1. What are you learning?
2. Where are you going with your learning?
3. How are you going with your learning?
4. Where are you going next in your learning?

These four questions are critically important in determining the extent to which learners feel connected to the school and in charge of their own learning. We encourage you to explore the questions with your learners.

From our own teaching experiences and direct observations in schools, when educators work together to ensure that their learners can productively answer the four questions, learners are becoming more self-regulated. They can articulate the ways in which adults demonstrate their belief in their future success. They know why what they are learning matters, they know how their learning is going, and they know what to do to improve.

These questions aren't just for young learners. They also apply to us as adult learners. When was the last time you thought about the adults in your setting who believe that you can be a success as an educator? When did you express this belief to one of your colleagues? When did you give yourself the chance to reflect on where you are going with your own professional learning? How will you determine how you are doing with the new learning and new strategies you are exploring? And how will you work with your colleagues to get feedback and to determine your own next steps?

## WHAT ARE YOU LEARNING? WHERE ARE YOU GOING WITH YOUR LEARNING?

It is critical to ensure that each learner understands the purpose for his or her learning. There is a big difference between learners knowing **what** they are supposed to be doing and knowing **why** what they are learning is important. Just posing this second question starts to shift the focus from simply completing a task towards more purposeful learning.

Sharing the intentions for learning must be done in thoughtfully. It is critical for learners to know where they are going with their learning - and this cannot be done in a formulaic way. Posting learning intentions on an overhead or whiteboard simply as a tokenistic exercise is, according to Dylan William<sup>xi</sup>, a 'desultory approach.' It is not what is intended by the strategy of clarifying, sharing and understanding learning intentions.

Our experience is that learners are only able to answer this question when they are helped to find personal meaning in what they are learning. Without a clear sense of purpose, many learners become disengaged and lose their sense of curiosity even as they continue to jump through the hoops of schooling. For learning to be relevant and purposeful, young people need to be in an environment where clarity about the big learning intentions, the big ideas, the big learning goals or the big questions is evident.

Michael Absolum,<sup>xii</sup> is a New Zealand educator who has spent considerable time working with Canadian teachers in Manitoba. He has described the way in which one elementary teacher explained the importance of learning intentions to her class:

*When introducing learning intentions to my class, I realized I needed to do it in a way that made it simple and clear. I began by asking them to imagine a dark tunnel. We talked about what might happen if we tried to walk through the tunnel without a flashlight to guide our way. The students shared ideas such as: we might bang into the wall, or we could fall over, we could get lost or even start walking in the opposite direction without even realizing it.*

*I then explained that there have been times in my teaching when I have sent them into a dark tunnel because I haven't made it clear to them what it is I intended them to learn. I introduced the term learning intention here and explained that this was going to be the flashlight in my teaching and their learning. It would help us to know we are heading in the right direction, taking away some of the confusion and unnecessary obstacles that could slow their progress and understanding down.*

*Together we broke down what a learning intention was. Students suggested words such as our goal, aim or the learning we hoped would take place. We also looked into the dictionary and defined what learning was and what the word intention meant and put them together to gain a greater understanding of the term learning intention. I told them to tell me whenever they felt in the dark about what they were meant to be learning.*

Like this teacher, we all need to be able to step back from curriculum guides, lesson plans and polished units to think out loud with our colleagues about the big ideas in the areas we are teaching and why these concepts are genuinely important. This is not a place for solitary reflection. What is needed is an opportunity for professional dialogue, debate and decision-making. Reaching consensus about what is most important for young people to learn can be challenging. In some cases increased clarity about purpose and relevance may mean that we have to give up cherished units and popular projects or, at the very least, rethink why we are doing what we do.

An example of identifying the big ideas in the curriculum comes from the historical thinking community headed by Peter Seixas the current Canadian Research Chair in Education. Through a disciplined process of reflection, a community of teachers and academics, has identified six big concepts and six thematic critical questions that learners need to grapple with in depth if they are to develop historical consciousness.

Once teachers become aware of these concepts and questions, it becomes much easier to identify key learning intentions and to convey them to learners. Janet, a secondary teacher in a large Vancouver school, works within this framework as her Grade 11 students explore the following question: Does Canada deserve its reputation as a peace-loving nation? Her students investigate this question in depth as they examine a number of post World War Two events. Her Grade 9 students explore the process of classifying a series of causes of the North West Rebellion as they form views about causes and consequences.

Janet's colleague, Lawrence, is using lessons designed to generate learner understanding of the changes in Canada's record of racial tolerance over the period of a century. When students taught by Janet and Lawrence are asked to write and then provide a "ticket out the door" about what they are learning, they can provide clear evidence that they know what they are exploring and why it is important. They know why what they are learning matters.

Currently many jurisdictions are actively working to reduce the number of curriculum outcomes in order to encourage learning in greater depth. This increasing clarity about the big ideas and big learning intentions in each subject area will have a real payoff for learners and make teaching more enjoyable through the in-depth exploration of important ideas and concepts.

Today's learners need to know not only what they are learning, but also why it is important, and how it is connected to their lives outside of school. Regularly asking the question "Where are you going with your learning?" emphasizes the focus on the purpose and the direction of learning.

This question lets us know whether or not the learners really 'get' the importance of what they are learning. And, if they don't get it, then we need to figure out what are we going to do to make sure they do.

## HOW ARE YOU GOING WITH YOUR LEARNING?

“Not bad.” “I got 7/10.” “The test is next week.” “I’m not good at this.” “My teacher says I’m doing ok.” These are not the answers of intellectually engaged learners and they are not the answers we want to hear. What we do want to hear is evidence that learners have internalized clear criteria for what good work looks like. This knowledge allows them to reflect specifically on the successes they are experiencing, as well as some of the challenges they are facing. It is difficult for learners to provide thoughtful responses to this question if they have not been involved in creating or co-constructing criteria for success.

To construct criteria regarding the important features of learning requires that teachers know the subject area or discipline extremely well. Unpacking the learning progressions and then thinking with colleagues about the critical features to focus on, is a productive place to start. For example, discussions that lead to a shared understanding regarding the important features of persuasive writing or inferential reading will build clarity within learning and teaching practices – and increase the likelihood that learners will be able to internalize the criteria themselves.

At the same time, not all types of learning need extensive criteria for learners to understand the key features. In some cases a simple ‘pre-flight’ checklist is all that is required. What is critical is to make the expectations explicit and keep learner guesswork to a minimum.

Sometimes words can’t describe everything. One of the most useful ways of explaining what is to be learned is to provide concrete, visual examples. The teachers in one Vernon school who devised a “clothesline” with writing samples at various levels created a simple and effective way for learners to check the level of their own writing. They could see clearly what their next steps might be. The Nisga’a carving instructor who showed samples of paddles with varying degrees of quality, and the clothing teacher who provided a range of samples of shoddy and quality garments were helping their learners internalize criteria for successful learning and results.

Dani, an English teacher and new formal leader on Vancouver Island has been working with the learning questions for the past few years. She describes her approach as follows:

*In my English 8, 9, and 10 classes I have my students answer the three self-regulated questions (or some variation of them) at the end of each class. I keep a binder at the side of the classroom and the kids go and grab their sheet every day and fill it in. Each student has his/her own sheet in the binder; each sheet has about 20 rows (10 per side) where they respond (one row each day... they somehow manage to squeeze in their responses in a variety of different ways... vertical, horizontal, self-created*

columns... whatever works for them).

*It is hard to say exactly (quantitatively) the impact that this exercise has on student learning, but I know it keeps the purpose of each lesson "Where are you going with your learning" in the forefront of all of our minds. This is especially helpful to me, as it prevents me from going way off track and always keeps me checking back to the most significant outcomes.*

*I especially like reading the student responses to Question #3 "Where to next?" - or my slight re-phrasing - "What can I do to get better at this?" This always lets me know if I have communicated effectively either verbally or through written feedback in the margins of their work, or through the criteria sheets provided to the students. When they answer "IDK" (yes, it took me a while to figure out that that meant "I don't know"), then I know that I need to go back and try again.*

Debbie, a Grade 7 teacher in the Northwest has also been working with these questions to help learners take more ownership of their learning. Occasionally she rephrases the questions to help them focus on what is most important. So she asks: What do you want others to know about your learning? What are your successes and what is challenging you? She has observed that learners tend to interpret the questions "how are you going with your learning?" in two distinct ways. Some students interpret the question in a global way, evaluating themselves as learners, and others interpret the question within the boundaries of what is currently being taught in the classroom. She describes how two learners responded to her questions and her own reflections on their thinking:

*When I asked Dylan how his learning was going, he replied, "I've got the learning intention and criteria and I am figuring out what I don't know and I'm thinking about what to do about what I don't know " and then he kind of waved me off because I was interfering with his learning. And when I asked Mark how his learning was going, he answered very specifically regarding the Science task at hand. "I know that there is going to be a property change because we are learning about property changes right now, so I'm thinking about what has changed." And Mark purposefully stopped and referred to the board where the learning intention and task criteria were listed.*

*I notice that if I have been using performance standards within the context of the lesson, they will more readily answer with a reference to the performance standard, and this makes the task much easier for the students. Although Dylan's answer appears to be more vague than Mark's, I think it reflects a deeper level of understanding. Mark has good mechanics, and relies heavily on the criteria. Dylan's answer is within the criteria but he is stating that he is thinking about what he really doesn't know – moving his response into a more metacognitive level. Mark is using the criteria to shape his thinking and as a way to find a "right" answer.*

*When students cannot answer how the task is related to the learning intention, I know*

*that I am in trouble, and need to do some re-teaching.*

*I like asking my students how their learning is going because I get such unexpected answers. More often than not, it gives them a chance to reflect on how they are feeling about their learning – often the initial answer isn't directly connected to the criteria. It gives them a chance to think about whether they like what we are doing and if they find it interesting.*

*Once I have listened carefully, then I move them into using criteria to describe the learning. It has taken a few months to shift their reflections from “I got this right,” or “I’m not good at this,” to “I need to work on using more descriptive scientific words,” or, “the format of this paragraph could be improved by...”*

Teachers like Dani and Debbie are helping to shift their students to a much deeper sense of themselves as capable learners. In their classes, the answer “I don't know” to the question “How are you going with your learning?” is a starting point for changing our teacher practices.

## WHERE TO NEXT?

The ways in which teachers provide feedback to learners have a powerful impact both on their learning and on the development of a growth mindset. The impact of feedback is so important that we want to explore it further in this section.

In their original research paper, John Hattie and Helen Timperley proposed a model that described four different levels of feedback. The key point of their findings is that the level *at which the feedback is focused* influences its effectiveness:

1. Feedback about *the task* such as feedback about whether answers were right or wrong or directions to get more information.
2. Feedback about *the processing of the task* such as strategies used or strategies that could be used.
3. Feedback about *self-regulation* such as feedback about learner self-evaluation or self-confidence.
4. Feedback about *the learner as a person* such as statements that a learner is ‘good’ or ‘smart’.

For learners to have a clear idea of what the next step in their learning is, they need to have feedback about the qualities of their work (*task*), and feedback about the process or strategies that are most helpful.

Feedback that draws the attention of the learners to their self-regulation strategies, or their abilities as learners can be effective if students hear it in a way that makes them realize they will get the results they want if they expend effort and attention.

Personal comments (“wow – are you ever smart”) are not especially helpful in focusing on learning. These types of comments can unintentionally reinforce a fixed mindset rather than encourage a growth mindset.

We encourage you to think about the ways in which you provide feedback to your learners – and to use these questions as a starting point in determining the extent to which your learners feel connected and supported by the school community and in charge of their own learning.

The sinking of the Titanic intrigued Taylor<sup>xv</sup>, a boy in Grade 2. He couldn’t wait to learn more about why the huge ship sank. Building on Kieran Egan’s work on *Learning in Depth*, his teacher had introduced each learner to the opportunity to research in depth a topic of personal interest. Taylor was off and running – to the web, to the library, to the DVD collection. He prepared a PowerPoint of these findings to share with his classmates. He was excited that many of his classmates were really interested in what he was learning and their questions prompted him to think about where he planned to go next with his learning. He took their comments and their feedback as prompts to

find out more:

*What about early warning systems? How does radar work? How come the captain didn't know there was a large iceberg looming ahead? And then what about icebergs themselves? What impact is global warming having on icebergs today?*

The questions just kept coming – and he was deeply engaged in his learning.

Partly what inspired Taylor's enthusiasm for learning was the feedback that he received from his teacher, his classmates and his parents. He knew what he wanted to learn and why it was important. He had a clear internalized sense of quality criteria for presenting his ideas and for shaping his questions. Learners need to know the purpose and relevance of what they are learning. Taylor received coaching feedback from his teacher and from his peers that helped him to determine his next specific step. He was developing strong self-regulation and ownership of his learning.

Darren, along with his primary colleagues, was interested in the concept of providing learners with an individual topic during the first week of school. This would be a topic they would pursue independently and about which they would acquire expertise. He and his colleagues asked themselves: "Will students engage with the learning?" and "How do we best support their learning?"

In Darren's school, the four key questions are embedded in the way the teachers are approaching their inquiries about how best to make learning in depth productive for each learner. The relationships are in place, all learners have at least one or two adults directly supporting them and there is real clarity around the purpose of the approach to learning they are designing. All learners are coached to reflect on their own learning – and to design their own next steps.