

The Question Formulation Technique: 6 Steps to Help Students Ask Better Questions

[Sherrelle Walker, M.A.](#), November 29, 2011

The ability to ask questions is the genesis – the “big bang” – where learning really starts. It is that moment where information that has entered the brain mixes with other ideas and begins to synthesize new ideas. Questions demonstrate curiosity. Questions represent the beginning of discovery and innovation. The first step of the scientific method itself is the careful formulation of a question.

But how often do we focus on teaching our students how to formulate good, well-considered questions? Dan Rothstein and Luz Santana have focused their work on exactly this skill, developing an approach they call the Question Formulation Technique (QFT). The two are co-directors of The Right Question Institute (RQI), a non-profit organization that focuses on helping people learn to better advocate for themselves and participate more in decision-making processes by teaching them how to ask questions. While the RQI applies their techniques across health care, community service, public agencies and community-based organizations, their ideas represent an excellent tool that we can use in our classrooms every day.

Recently published in the Harvard Education Letter, their article “[Teaching Students to Ask Their Own Questions](#),” describes the Question Formulation Technique, a way for educators to present material in ways that encourage students to take a more active ownership role in their learning. There are six steps to the technique, as follows:

1. **Find a focus** - The “QFocus,” as it is called by Rothstein and Santana, is a prompt that serves to focus student questions so they can explore more expansive ideas. The authors offer an example presented by a teacher after covering the causes of the 1804 Haitian revolution: “Once we were slaves. Now we are free,” With a clear, direct thought like this to focus their thinking, the students begin formulating and posing questions around this idea.
2. **Brainstorm** - Constrained by a few simple rules to help people stay focused, students formulate as many questions as possible. At this point, they are asked not to judge the quality of the questions, nor pursue any answers. This is much like the classic “brainstorming” process, where ideas are generated in a free, uninterrupted flow.
3. **Refine** - The students work with the questions they have created, reformulating them as open- and closed-ended questions. They categorize them and make them clearer, more focused and more apt to yield the desired answers.
4. **Prioritize** - Using lesson plans and teaching goals, the teacher helps students select their top three questions and use them to zero in on the most important aspects of the material.

5. **Determine next steps** - Students and teachers together review the priority questions and make decisions about how best to use them for learning. The questions can be used to drive experimentation, further reading, research and/or discussion.

6. **Reflect** - The teacher and students review their questions in the context of the six steps they have worked through to produce them. According to Rothstein and Santana, “Making the QFT completely transparent helps students see what they have done and how it contributed to their thinking and learning. They can internalize the process and then apply it in many other settings.”

Note the key word in that last sentence – internalize. Through this process, students add question formulation to their cognitive toolbox, making it a part of how they address information and problem-solving going forward. The authors note a number of benefits to the QFT, including increased group participation and better classroom management. But more importantly, they found that students were more apt to delve deeply into topics on their own, posing well-considered, critical questions that not only help direct their learning, but allow them to take more effective ownership of that learning as well.

As a “habit of mind,” the Question Formulation Technique demonstrates beautifully how the brain is built for pattern recognition. It also represents research that holds great promise for helping students form thinking patterns early on that will yield lifelong benefits.

SOURCE:

Walker, S. (29, November, 2011). Science of Learning Blog. Downloaded from <http://www.scilearn.com/blog/archive/2011/november2011.php>