

A Question of Questions

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ABSTRACT

It is easy—instantive even—for course content to dominate the trajectory of a curriculum, a syllabus, a lesson plan, an assignment, a discussion. In this essay, I propose an alternative. Pushing aside course content, I look to the questions teachers ask of students in order to imagine a classroom built around what students do in their learning. I want to turn to the nitty-gritty, to the sentence-level of teaching, to the questions asked within the classroom and what those questions ask students to do. What cognitive demands do a What, Who, Where, When, Why, or How make of students? In answering each, what will students do?

Unless a fundamental question is being seen freshly it isn't being seen as a question at all.

William E. Coles, Jr.

The Plural I—and After

(1988, p. 2)

In *Writing/Teaching: Essays Toward a Rhetoric of Pedagogy*, Paul Kameen (2000) offers a tripart schema of knowledge. Knowledge-as-information asks, “What do we want students to demonstrably ‘know’ about ‘our’ ‘subject?’” (p. 186). This question, according to Kameen, prizes the expertise of the teacher by emphasizing course content. Knowledge-as-skill asks, “What do we want our students to be able to do?” (p. 186). Kameen sees this question as one of “practical terms,” one focused on “master[y] at the level of technique or method,” that mastery hopefully transferrable to a career (p. 186). Knowledge-as-value asks, “What do we want students to think?” (p. 186). Kameen believes

knowledge-as-value the most contentious of the three for it touches on questions of character and the goals of education. I would add that, of the three, it would seem that knowledge-as-information dominates the trajectory of many a curriculum, syllabus, lesson plan, assignment, and discussion, the classroom lopsided in favor of course content. Biases against certain kinds of knowledge could be a contributing factor, the academy favoring information over skill perhaps because of a pejorative association between skill and manual labor, the academy steering away from knowledge-as-value for fear of the difficult ethical questions raised when the classroom is understood as a place (as it always has been, though not always acknowledged) of character formation.

Pushing against what could become a too-easy dichotomy between information and skill by adding a third term to the discussion, these “modes of knowledge” are helpful in thinking through the work of the classroom (Kameen,

2000, p. 186). I would note, though, that Kameen is hesitant to even offer his taxonomy, for “it becomes tempting to assume that—or just fall into a way of talking as if—these aspects are fully distinct and separable from one another, can be analyzed or addressed in part, or, worse, *as parts*” (p. 187, emphasis in original). I do not want, here, to try to balance the three, or to argue in favor of one over the others, or to fall into the trap of addressing one at the expense of the others. But I do want to think a moment about how knowledge-as-skill might become an avenue into knowledge-as-information and, ultimately, knowledge-as-value.

I am thinking of knowledge-as-skill not necessarily as a technical skill, but in terms of the actions performed within the classroom, and what I propose is beginning the work of teaching with this question: “What will students do?” The primary concern within this framework is not what texts will be taught, or what background information students need to know, or what material will be on the final. No, this question asks how students will approach the subject at hand and what they will do with it. These pedagogical concerns are questions of method; they are questions that prompt an interrogation into what students do within the classroom, why they do it, how they do it, and to what end. I want to turn to the nitty-gritty, to the sentence-level of teaching, to the questions asked within the classroom and what those questions ask students to do. What cognitive demands do a What, Who, Where, When, Why, or How make of students? In answering each, what will students do?

Consider the What. Richard Miller (2005) offers one: “Aside from gathering and organizing information, aside from generalizing critiques and analyzes that forever fall on deaf ears, what might the literate arts be said to be good for?” (p. 6). With a pair of asides, Miller cordons off two possible responses before asking his What, a What seeking a description of the value of the literate arts, an articulation of their worth. The

difficulty of this question resides not only in its pressing content, but more so with the task it asks of its readers. This is a question asking for identification, a question asking for something to be named, a question asking for precision, for the articulate pinpointing of an object. That is hard to do; naming is never easy. Consider, for example, the following from Mariolina Salvatori and Patricia Donahue’s *The Elements (and Pleasures) of Difficulty* (2005), coming within a reflection assignment: “What has changed in the moves you make as a reader, writer, and thinker?” (p. 33). Salvatori and Donahue’s What asks for identification, for definition, for naming, the student needing to review her work in the course thus far and describe the changes in her processes of reading, writing, and thinking. Though Salvatori and Donahue’s question may not appear as intimidating as Miller’s, their What places the same job before students as do all Whats (even the seemingly simple “What is that?”)—that of finding the language to name the as-of-yet unnamed.

The Who works in the same way, engendering a similar thought process as the What by asking for identification. In *The Plural I—and After*, William Coles (1988) recounts a freshman composition course he taught at Case Institute of Technology in the 1960s. Each chapter includes a writing assignment, student papers (usually two or three), and Coles’ account of the classroom discussion of those papers. From the final assignment of the course:

Look back over the assignments given you this term, the papers you have written addressing yourself to them, and the papers mimeographed for discussion in class. Recall any conversation you may have had about the course, either in class or out of it.

Where did you start this term? Where do you seem to come out? ...

Perhaps a convenient place for you to begin would be with the paper you wrote on the first day of class which has just been returned to you. ... To judge from what you

said about yourself in that paper, who were you? Who are you now? (Coles, 1988, p. 258, emphasis in original).

I want to table, momentarily, Coles' Wheres to note how his "Who were you? Who are you now?" ask for the same sort of description, identification, and naming that the What asks for. This Who is more difficult to answer than "Who wrote *Moby-Dick*?" as it requires an analysis of the self, but even a question asking for Melville as its answer still asks for description, identification, and naming—albeit on a less abstract level than that required by Coles' Who.

Coles's Wheres make a markedly different demand of his students. These are questions of location, Coles asking his students to situate themselves in relation to the course, its work, and the semester. It is a locative question not unlike the first assignment from his course:

Here is a statement:

A professional, whether paid or unpaid, is the man that counts. An amateur is a clumsy bastard.

Stanley Woodward, *Paper Tiger*

Where do you stand on this issue?

Begin your paper by explaining what you understand to be meant by the terms "professional" and "amateur." Do you respect one more than you do the other? (Coles, 1988, p. 16, emphasis in original).

The question of location runs throughout many of Coles' assignments, and his use of Where has nuance. To answer "Where do you stand on this issue?" a student must map the terrain, discern its key markers, and then stake a claim somewhere amid that field. This is a stationary Where. To answer "Where did you start this term? Where do you seem to come out?" the student must chart a course. Again, the student must map a terrain and discern its

key markers, but the student, rather than staking a claim, is progressing through that territory. This is a Where of movement though its cognitive demands are not too far removed from the stationary Where. Both ask that the student orient herself within some discursive (and disciplinary) field, either iteration of Where a question of location.

So too is the When. I return to Salvatori and Donahue (2005), to an assignment preparing students for a personal essay by asking them to reflect upon previous writing experiences: "When did you write a personal essay? In which context or class?" (p. 85). This question asks for contextualization, for the student to locate an experience in time. It is a When necessitating that the student attend to the particular Wheres of a previous writing experience (which context or class) in order to answer. Another When, from a reflection prompt again from Salvatori and Donahue: "When do you find yourself thinking most intensely—when you read or when you write?" (2005, p. 51). This When too asks for contextualization, as do Coles' Wheres above; both the When and the Where ask the student to place something and/or someone within time and/or space, to contextualize, to see the ways in which an object sits in relation to others.

The What and the Who concern identification, the When and the Where concern context, and the Why and the How concern method. In the apparatus to *Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers*, David Bartholomae, Anthony Petrosky, and Stacey Waite (2014) offer the following assignment on Brian Doyle's "Joyas Voladoras":

As you reread, pay attention to the ways you are addressed in this essay, the ways you are invited (or pulled) into the text. How does Doyle do this? Why does he do this? Could the essay have been written otherwise? (Could you rewrite a paragraph to show a different style of address?) Does it work for you? (p. 149-150).

There is a progression in these questions, a progression that is also recursive, a progression that has questions embedded within questions. The first—a How—pushes the student back into Doyle’s essay to consider the means by which Doyle’s prose affects its readers. The next question—a Why—steps back from the text to consider Doyle’s motivations as a writer. But to be able to answer this How and, after that, this Why, the student must do the work of naming. First and foremost the student must identify and describe what Doyle’s prose does. There is a What lurking within this How and Why. The next two questions—a pair of Could—invite speculation. After the student has done the work of description, after the student has considered Doyle’s methods and motivations, the student begins experimenting with Doyle’s text. The student is invited to use Doyle’s moves herself, visualizing a rhetorical context—a Where and a When—in which this Why and How could be applicable. The final question is evaluative, and answering that question would not be possible had the student not done the work of the questions preceding it, the questions of description, identification, method, and motivation.

I wager that the questions Miller, Salvatori and Donahue, Coles, and Bartholomae, Petrosky, and Waite ask are familiar to many readers, despite curricular or disciplinary differences. These are run-of-the-mill questions. (I’ve unknowingly asked variations of them many times myself.) There is nothing particularly special about any of them, but their value comes in what they illustrate: when a teacher asks a question, that question becomes a means of coming at course content, the content itself secondary, in a way, to the method proposed by the question. The What, Who, Where, When, Why, and How of the classroom—these are the sites where learning takes place, for it is through these questions that students learn a method, a way of thinking, a means to engage material.

Where does this leave teachers? For course planning, it means not beginning with content and asking, “What do students need to know about this?” Rather, it means beginning with the question “What will students do?” and working backward from there to the materials needed in order to facilitate that doing, a doing that will, eventually, get at a particular content. This is a reversal of the classroom, one that privileges an experiential, active learning, one wherein students are the primary agents of the classroom by virtue of the things they do there. For example, in a recent first-year composition course, in my preparations I answered “What will students do?” with “Students will move past their faith in the five-paragraph essay as the sole method of organizing a paper.” But that question prompted another “What will students do?” as I needed to figure out how students would explore other ways of structuring an essay. My answer: “Students will read texts that abandon the five-paragraph form, Students will pick apart those texts, Students will imitate those texts, and Students will reflect on the affordances and risks of moving away from the five-paragraph form.” These answers then lead to what texts would be fruitful in unsettling students’ reliance on the five-paragraph essay, which lead me to a handful of essays that then became a course reading list, a reading list that then became a course schedule defined by sequenced assignments of reading, analysis, imitation, and reflection. Our class meetings were built around many Whats asking that the students describe the rhetorical moves of an essay, many Wheres and Whens to contextualize those moves within the argument, and many Whys to think through what options such moves open up.

Whether a What, Who, Where, When, Why, or How, a teacher’s questions show forth a method of approaching course content, and in so doing, a pedagogy is enacted. Questions are hardly inconsequential, for what happens at the sentence-level of

teaching reflects the pedagogy informing a classroom. The pedagogical possibilities of a classroom oriented around “What will students do?” rest on a belief that not only do these questions matter, but also that the text a student reads, the content a student learns, the material on the final exam, all this is meaningless without attention to what students will do with that information. Will students describe? Identify? Name? Work through the difficulty of naming a What or a Who? Or will students place ideas amid disciplinary fields, both spatially and temporally, discerning Where and When to locate course content and discerning too where they locate themselves in relation to it? Or will students consider method, the motivations and means at work within course

content, students thinking through How something occurred and Why, its causes and its effects? It is through this doing (knowledge-as-skill) that students come to learn course content (knowledge-as-information), and it is through that doing and learning that students come into being (knowledge-as-value). For, as Aristotle reminds us in *Nicomachean Ethics*, “Men become builders by building houses, and harpists by playing the harp. Similarly, we become just by the practice of just actions, self-controlled by exercising self-control, and courageous by performing acts of courage” (trans. 1999, 2.1)—that is, we become what we are and we learn what we know by what we do.

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