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Asking and Understanding Questions: An Inquiry-Based Framework for Writing Teacher Development

Cover Page Footnote

[This article is in MLA format]. I am thankful for the feedback Shari Stenberg provided on earlier versions of this article. Most recently, the reviewers and Jonathan Bush provided valuable feedback. I am also deeply grateful for the many formal and informal conversations about teaching and writing that I have been privileged to engage in with my teaching colleagues and faculty mentors at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

As a teacher for English Education students and a mentor for graduate teaching assistants, I have become increasingly invested in attending to the connection between teacher inquiry and teacher development. Teachers, of course, naturally range in their ability and willingness to question their work as teachers—as well as their purposes for raising questions. Some teachers, often those early in their careers or study, are mostly invested in evaluative questions; they want to know the “best” aim or approach for a given situation. Such questions may seek “perfect” classroom practices or methods. I also encounter teachers who are primarily invested in procedural questions; they want to know how to best accomplish a goal they’ve already established. Other times, teachers raise explanatory questions, wanting to better understand phenomena occurring in their classrooms. Searching for answers to any of these kinds of questions offers opportunity to learn and grow. Questions such as these may prompt a range of activities—learning about our students’ or colleagues’ experiences, reading scholarship, developing new curricular materials, conducting research projects, or engaging in self-reflection. As writing teacher educators (WTEs), though, we know questions provide more than an opportunity to search. Our questions also reveal what we notice in teaching/learning moments and the theories informing how we process these moments. Questions help make our pedagogical beliefs visible and available for critical reflection and revision¹.

While searching for answers to questions and critically examining questions both offer opportunities for teacher development², a tension can emerge when a writing teacher seeks answers to her questions and a WTE finds it important or necessary to push a teacher to critically examine the questions. As a WTE, I have begun to name this tension by distinguishing

¹ The literature on teacher development has consistently shown it is necessary for teachers to see their pedagogical beliefs as constructed (Ritchie and Wilson; Peterson; White).

² Scholars in Composition and Rhetoric and English Education have well established that teachers of writing develop when they inquire into their beliefs and practices (Anson; Gallagher; Kameen; Lee; Stenberg; Thaiss and Zawacki). One cannot develop simply from taking a seminar, participating in a workshop series, or applying advice from an “expert.” Development, in other words, does not result from an outward source that defines “good teaching.” Others are needed to initiate inquiry, but a teacher must pose and pursue her own questions about teaching.

these two purposes for questioning: a question which seeks to pursue answers and a question which seeks to pursue critical reflection. *Asking a question*, as I define it, aims to address or solve a specific teaching situation. For instance, asking “What should I do or think about X?” attends to the immediate situation the teacher confronts. *Understanding a question*, though, helps a teacher uncover how and why this question was important to pose in the first place. For example, a composition instructor may ask how to design a rubric that will prompt students to achieve her expectations for writing. Understanding this question, though, might challenge the teacher to examine *why* she believes an assessment tool prompts student learning. Why, in other words, does she pose this question and not another one?

Promoting both uses of a question is especially important in our climate of standards-based education. In both secondary and post-secondary contexts, the emphasis on standards-based education prioritizes the production of texts above all else. Writing becomes a set of measurable skills, rather than a complex social practice. With such logic operating in many institutions, writing teachers may feel that a critical examination of their questions is (at best) a luxury or (at worst) a distraction to work they need to accomplish. As a result, WTEs may find it increasingly hard to help teachers ask and understand their questions. Here, I illustrate how distinguishing between *asking* and *understanding* questions is a useful framework for helping WTEs attend to teachers’ immediate concerns *and* foster long-term development. In arguing for this framework as a pedagogical tool, I first describe the scholarship that shapes my conception of inquiry. I then explore two contexts in which a WTE can use the framework to foster teacher development.

Cultivating a Developmental Stance toward Inquiry

Inquiry is more than simply wondering about something or raising a question; for me, inquiry involves seeing a situation and identifying something problematic in that situation. This conception of inquiry is rooted in Dewey’s explanation of inquiry. Dewey asserts inquiry involves two related processes: clarifying a problem and proposing possible solutions (112). Dewey reminds us that to *do* inquiry, we need to search

for possible solutions to the problematic situation *and* account for the way we have defined the situation. These two processes work together to transform “an indeterminate situation into a determinately unified one;” they work, in other words, to resolve the situation (Dewey 117). While teachers of writing often pose questions without an expectation or desire to find a definite answer, the movement between looking for solutions and clarifying the problem is central to the activity of inquiry.

While the process Dewey explains applies to all kinds of inquiries, I am most interested in inquiries that hold potential for teacher development. These inquiries, I believe, are grounded in teaching situations (Fortune et al.; Weinbaum et al.). Because the problems that drive pedagogical inquiry emerge from or in relation to the activity of teaching, our ability to initiate and engage in these inquiries is supported by experience and practice. Brenda Miller Power provides a good example of this process in *Long Roads, Short Distances: Teaching Writing and Writing Teachers*. She tells us that “[l]earning to teach was a process of learning to see” (52). When she began teaching and observing teachers, she “had no focus for seeing or explaining what was going on” (52). Over time, Power could better see complexities in teaching/learning moments and, consequently, create richer questions.

While practice in both teaching and inquiring may strengthen our ability to clarify problems and propose possible solutions, experience may not lead to a developmental stance toward inquiry. Teachers may instead hold a negative view toward their inquiries. They may believe, for example, that having questions is a sign of ineffectiveness. Before Power became a WTE, she initially held a negative view of inquiry: She explains that in her first teaching position she was “too embarrassed to admit the depth of [her] problems with those students and [her] inability to make these ‘foolproof’ methods work” (6). We can see further examples of the notion that teaching is or should be self-evident at all educational levels. For example, Mary Kennedy’s study, *Learning to Teach Writing: Does Teacher Education Make a Difference?*, shows pre-service teachers’ belief in the self-evident nature of teaching. When presented with hypothetical educational situations, the pre-service teachers provided answers, rather

than reflection. Comparing these education students to medical students, Kennedy writes:

It is hard to imagine novice physicians offering detailed responses to hypothetical medical situations. They would be more likely to say something like, “I don’t know how I would handle that situation; I have not yet completed my medical education.” Yet only rarely did the teachers in this study resist answering our questions. They readily commented on the texts we showed them and readily announced how they would respond to student authors. They rarely indicated that they were considering two or more alternative ideas or that the situation presented certain ambiguities to them. Even before they had studied teacher education, teachers were sure of their responses to most of the situations we presented to them. (172-173)

While we might expect pre-service teachers to hold a limited view of inquiry—possibly even arguing that it’s our job to expand this view through teacher education—Laura Davis illustrates how the institutional structure of promotion in collegiate contexts can also foster a tentative stance toward inquiry. She tells us:

When I made the shift from adjunct to tenure-track, did I suddenly become a better teacher, researcher, or thinker? Probably not. After all, neither my education nor my experience changed from that one year to the next, when I was given a different title. Yet it seemed to me that I was suddenly expected to know not only the academic traditions that constitute our long-lived and multi-faceted discipline, but also how to integrate myself into the intricacies of an academic department, exactly how, when, and where to publish (and to do so immediately), and how to translate concepts and difficult texts into classroom practice. Even worse, there seemed to be no system to help me acquire this knowledge, but perhaps there was even an unspoken stigma against admitting that I did not know everything and that I might want some assistance. (Daniell 455)

Because the notion that teaching should get less “problematic” — at least in as much as it might initiate fewer questions— is prevalent, WTEs need ways to cultivate a developmental stance toward inquiry, a stance that sees questions as ripe with possibility for “reflexive” thinking (Qualley). As Shari Stenberg argues, we need to help teachers “gain comfort with discomfort—to see their questions not as a sign of a deficit, but as a strength” (99). The asking/understanding framework provides language to make this possibility more explicit and accessible. The framework can help us acknowledge that it is important to look for possible solutions to our questions and examine the ways we’ve constructed the questions. “The way in which the problem is conceived decides what specific suggestions are entertained and which are dismissed; what data are selected and which rejected; it is the criterion for relevancy and irrelevancy of hypotheses and conceptual structures” (Dewey108). The framework I propose can help us articulate how critically examining our questions contributes to rather than detracts from inquiry. In the sections that follow, I illustrate how the framework can support teacher development in two contexts that are commonly implemented to foster teacher development: teaching observations and professional conversations.

Observing Teaching/Learning Moments in the Classroom

Classroom visits are one way that programs (both education and composition) and school districts aim to monitor and support teacher development. Within this context, teachers’ questions are a primary way programs and districts focus on teacher development. Programs, such as the one I have served as a mentor for graduate teaching assistants, center class visits on the questions or concerns generated by the teacher being observed. In my program, teachers identify their questions or concerns by providing brief written responses to the following questions prior to the class visit:

- What context is important for you to provide the visiting teacher? What concepts or practices are you and your students currently engaging? What texts/activities have led to this moment? What will follow it?

- What is going well in your course? What are the challenges?
- How would you like to focus your visit? To what in your classroom would you like the visiting teacher to pay particular attention? Please provide several questions for the visitor to keep in mind.

Teachers may also provide handouts or assignments that provide relevant context prior to the visit. As an observer, the visiting teacher aims to help a teacher consider the questions or concerns that are most pressing to her in verbal and written feedback. The written feedback addresses the following questions:

- What did you learn from your visit? What is going well in the course?
- How would you respond to the teacher's particular questions?
- What questions emerged as you observed the course?

While the first and last question provide some space to talk about matters that may not necessarily be addressed in the teacher's pre-writing, the visit is structured to focus primarily on teachers' self-identified questions or concerns.

In my experience, many graduate teaching assistants use their pre-observation writing to pose questions that in some way relate to class discussion. Many teachers are interested in learning what the observer sees when paying attention to their engagement with students and students' engagement with each other. Often, I encounter this question when teachers feel students are not providing the amount or kind of engagement they desire. As teachers pose these questions, I witness them entering the inquiry from both parts of the process. One teacher, for example, recently asked me to focus on finding possible solutions to limited class discussion. In the pre-observation writing, he asked for suggestions about encouraging participation from everyone. A teacher in another cohort also asked for help considering class discussion by asking me to help her better see the classroom situation. She shared that it is challenging for her to read her students, and she hopes to generate solutions by clarifying the problem.

In both situations, the teachers would like to see improved class discussion, and both ways into the inquiry are valuable. As an observer in

the first classroom, for example, I have the opportunity to see the situation and offer suggestions as he has requested. When I visited the class, I witnessed students working to engage a complicated discussion about race relations in the United States. The teacher shared in his pre-writing that students were prepared to talk about overt racism, but they were having trouble talking about other forms of racism. I learned too that this discussion, prompted by a reading of an anthologized essay, was one part in a larger unit on culture. As an observer, I was pleased to see one of my colleagues taking on such an important concept, and I wondered how he was helping students make connections between racism and culture and how those conversations support students' writing projects in the course. Sitting in the classroom, I wondered if shifting the questions from the content of the essay to the rhetorical choices made by the writer of the essay might open up more conversation and support student work too. In the asking process, I can share these observations and questions with the teacher. We can discuss how this conversation compares to conversations about other topics. I can ask this teacher what he thinks students need in order to participate in a class discussion. Are these skills that may be supported by more explicit instruction or class structures? Collaborating with teachers around questions such as these allows us to participate in the asking process: We can work to clarify our knowledge about the kinds of class discussion, components of class discussion, and purposes for class discussion; and we can propose solutions based upon our responses.

The understanding process, though, can help us turn "back to discover, examine, and critique [our] claims and assumptions" (Qualley 3). Based upon the question this teacher posed, the concept of class discussion is the most obvious concept available for critical examination. The understanding process would press both of us to name our definitions of discussion and participation. Is all participation the same? Is listening, for example, a form of participation? Are some forms of participation better than others in particular moments? We would also be pressed to consider the historical and cultural influences shaping these definitions. We might wonder, "How have we arrived at these definitions, and how do they shape what we expect to see?" We would also have the opportunity to consider our assumptions about our

students. How do we imagine students encounter these conversations? Where might our experiences converge and diverge? How do we arrive at these ideas and what do we still need to learn? Conversations around any of these questions contribute to the inquiry process, but they also open up opportunity to generate new questions, questions that help us uncover how we have constructed our ideas about teaching and learning.

While the second teacher's question prompted me to enter the inquiry a different way, moving between asking and understanding can similarly work to foster teacher development. Her question aimed at clarifying the problem, and when I visited her classroom I worked to pay attention to the class dynamics. As an observer, I saw that her questions were posed in an easy-to-understand manner and she often rephrased or restructured questions, making them relatable to students. I also noticed that she built questions from the textual observations students shared and helped students engage each others' observations of the text. I wondered, then, if part of the problem the teacher noticed could be located in students' level of class preparation. While I observed a few students providing detailed responses to the discussion questions—questions often rooted in the experience of reading the assigned article—I also heard instances of students struggling to answer knowledge-level questions about the reading. If I approach my class visit feedback with the asking process, I will focus most of my feedback on these observations. Through our conversation, I would aim to determine if my observations resonate with her experience as the teacher and propose possible solutions based upon our dialogue. Moving to the understanding process, though, opens up the possibility for seeing how our expectations for reading classroom interactions are shaped. We could try to name what we believe is important or possible for a teacher to notice in minute-by-minute classroom interactions. What is a teacher responsible for seeing? How are these ideas informed by our own experiences as students and teachers, our participation in our local institution, or our espoused pedagogical beliefs?

Classroom visits are an important context for teacher development because they prompt dialogue about teaching that is grounded in the activity of teaching. The asking/understanding framework can help us

make the most of these moments by reminding teachers and WTEs that we can work with our questions on multiple levels. While some coaching or mentoring approaches aim to help teachers better recognize how they are reflecting, this framework helps teachers simultaneously critique why they are reflecting in particular ways. Moving between asking and understanding processes can also create a culture of collaboration. While the asking process focuses primarily on the observed teacher's classroom and inquiry, the understanding process opens up a space for both the observed teacher and observing teacher to engage in reflexive thinking. When mentors model and participate in reflexive thinking, class visits move from teacher-centered to learner-centered experiences (Minter). Experiences such as these can also work to create a culture where teaching is defined as a "learning-centered enterprise" (Stenberg 149).

Facilitating Conversation among Teachers

Discussion with colleagues is another institutional structure that programs (i.e. mentor groups for graduate teaching assistants or class discussion for pre-service teachers) and districts (i.e. professional learning communities) find important for teacher development. These contexts purposefully exist to attend to teachers' questions and are often centered on questions shared by community members. As many WTEs have no doubt experienced, though, conversations among teachers are not automatically developmental conversations. In my attempts to foster developmental conversations, I have experienced the challenging nature of facilitating reflexive thinking among teachers. One week, as an experiment in my mentor group's weekly meeting, I asked each teacher to pose only questions (rather than "solutions") when someone raised a concern or question. As a group, I wanted us to wonder together, rather than just share our advice. We quickly learned, though, that we could just as easily offer advice in the form of a question. For example, if someone shared a concern about students not providing drafts to writing group members on time, another teacher could ask, "Have you thought about requiring that they turn the drafts in to you first?"

Perhaps I set up the conversation poorly, not really explaining what I hoped we would be able to generate collectively, but it was an

important experiment, as it showed just how powerful the impulse is for teachers to share advice with one another. These advice-giving moments occur in my pre-service courses too. In these moments, students—who are making the transition from student to teacher—often draw from their experiences as students. A student may offer, for example, that his high school English teacher required students to workshop their writing in pairs and this practice motivated students. Despite the specific context, these advice-giving moments can be troubling for WTEs because they focus on what teachers already seem to know rather than what teachers want to learn or explore.

Stephen North's work on lore provides helpful language for why these moments can be troubling. North outlines three motivations for inquiry: "either a new problem will be matched with some old solution; an old problem will need a new solution; or a new problem will require a new solution" (43). He further argues that the most common inquiry is the first because "[p]ractitioners will do whatever they can to stay within the bounds of the known. Even when what is clearly a problem demanding inquiry is forced upon them, they will try to handle it by turning to the same sources that inform their routine practice" (43). North acknowledges that challenging teaching conditions are part of the reason why teachers try to process problems in familiar ways; teachers need to make their work manageable. However, contexts designed to facilitate teacher development need complexity. Advice-giving moments often flatten situations, making them more known and less complex, and staying within the bounds of the known is not conducive to development. For both the teacher getting and the teacher giving advice, developmental potential may be missed when we focus on addressing the problem or remain only in the asking process.

A question I commonly encounter when facilitating conversation among graduate teaching assistants and pre-service teachers is one about what to value when responding to student work. The question shows up in a myriad of forms, but often teachers want to know if they are making ethical decisions when responding to student work. The asking process allows a group of teachers to look for possible solutions (i.e. look only for ideas in draft one, development in draft two, and grammar in draft three)

or clearly define the situation (i.e. students need someone enjoy reading their work). In each instance teachers may share their advice or lore. The understanding process, though, helps us move beyond advice-giving. We can consider, for example, the origin of the question. What is prompting a teacher or group of teachers to name what they value in writing? Is there conflict between a teacher's values and her institution's values? Are there values a teacher believes she should value but feels unprepared to address? Considering the source(s) of the question is one way to uncover a teacher's relationship to a question. Reflexive thinking can further help a teacher uncover how influences such as our past experiences, our identities, and our conception of our work are shaping our inquiry and teaching life.

As a facilitator, the asking/understanding framework (one I didn't yet have in the opening scene) allows me to help us, as a group, collaborate because the context of the conversation provides additional texts or experiences to provoke reflexive thinking. As the opening scene indicates, it may not be productive to try to stop or avoid advice-sharing. Sharing lore can help teachers begin to participate in the asking process. Instead, WTEs can use the framework to explain the need to extend the inquiry through the process of understanding a question.

Conclusion: Modeling a Process for Long-Term Teacher Development

In "The Dynamics of Teacher Development: Negotiating Where We Stand" Dana Kinzy and Deborah Minter share that in their "experiences with teacher development, tensions frequently emerge between teachers who expect the teacher development moment to help them better perform a teacher identity of mastery, for example, versus those who expect a teacher development that helps them to problematize and extensively inquire into their teaching" (488). While teachers, as agents of their own development process, bring varying expectations to contexts designed to foster teacher development, a Deweyian approach to inquiry helps us see how goals such as mastering and problematizing can work together. As a pedagogical tool, the asking/understanding framework offers WTEs language for helping teachers practice generating and addressing reflexive questions.

Further, in contexts such as classrooms or workshops, WTEs can model their own movement between asking and understanding, showing teachers how inquiries grow deeper and richer over time and with experience. Some modeling moments are organic, occasions when we are able or willing to share some of the most important influences and moments that have shaped our current questions about teaching and learning. Other times, though, we can design modeling moments into our courses. In my course for pre-service English teachers, I participate alongside my students in a research process that accompanies one of the culminating course projects. As I share my observations from studying new texts or reconsidering texts I have previously read, I model how inquiry disrupts my thinking by sharing the reflexive questions that emerge for me in the process. Much like the way writing teachers sharing their own messy drafting process with writing students, WTEs are in a position to model how teacher development is an ongoing process driven by questions emerging from a teacher's movement between theory and practice; assisted by experience; and tolerant of ambivalence.

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