



Best Practices Series

Could the Questions be the Answer?

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What is the answer?.. In that case, what is the question?

Gertrude Stein

I nstead of having students in my History and Afro-American Studies undergraduate seminars answer my questions, together we try to answer theirs. Two days before the meeting of the seminar, students are required to turn in two written questions on the readings for the week. I try to make it clear that these are not to be questions, such as "What did McLoughlin mean on page 89?", but are, instead, to show that the students have not only read, but reflected on the material. For that matter the questions need not be questions at all, but may be comments, responses, or observations the learned authors of the assigned materials might find downright insulting. While the questions are not graded, I read them out loud in seminar and give the name of the student who wrote them.

The questions are used to structure our discussions, and form the backbone of the issues we explore. In reading over the questions in preparation for the seminar I sometimes find that a number of students are interested in a particular issue. Often the idea around which their interest coalesces is totally unanticipated by their instructor, but so much the better. These fresh student perspectives give me new vantage points on debates that are overly familiar - if not pretty boring - and frequently send me back to re-read an assignment. When there is such shared interest, I may read three or four related questions together saying, for example, "Sarah read Puckrein's ideas on the link between racism and imperialism, and she thinks...but David thought that...and Kwame wants to

know how Puckrein could have possibly concluded..." At times I will point out what these comments have in common, raise a more general question derived from them, or emphasize an underlying criticism that may not be obvious. But where there is no shared interest, and only one student has raised a particular issue, I will just read that student's comment. I do not manufacture disagreements among students for the sake of stimulating discussion, but neither do I attempt to paper over differences. I confess to sometimes exaggerating differences to spark discussion and to draw more students into it.

As the semester progresses, the undergraduates get more familiar with the material, more comfortable with one another, and with me, so the questions get longer. Students make reference to earlier readings and to issues raised in other courses. This means that I am often unable to read out their entire comments - some run to two or three pages - but make it clear when I am leaving out part of a question. The students are, of course, present, so if they dislike my oral editing they are free to speak up and denounce it. They often do, but usually couch their objections diplomatically.

Students benefit from the questions in five ways. First, they tell me in their course critiques, it forces them to focus their reading. Knowing that they have to come up with a written interpretation of what they read, they aggressively look for themes, agreements, and disagreements in their assignments. Second, this leads them to approach the readings at a number of different levels as they examine the facts, scrutinize arguments, and look for theoretical assumptions. As the assignments are not limited to works by historians but are sometimes written by anthropologists, archaeologists, literary scholars, and (even) sociologists, some of the best questions I've had over the years come from undergraduates interested in methodology who want to examine the link between what has been found and the techniques used to find it. Students are also good at calling attention to disciplinary blind spots. Third, the questions enable students to examine the relationship between the readings and comments made by seminar members. I encourage them to take notes on who said what in seminar. They do, and sometimes cite one another in their questions. Fourth, as the course examinations are take-home, the written questions prepare them for writing about the ideas and themes of the course, by giving undergraduates the opportunity to think about what they have read, and to write about it, weeks before the first examination is distributed. Finally, as the discussions are organized around their questions, the seminar is driven by their ideas. I provide the material; students determine the direction our discussions take.

The benefits to me are obvious. First, as I have already indicated, I get a new perspective on the assigned readings almost every week, as ignorant of disciplinary protocols; undergraduates approach them from novel vantage points. I can and do incorporate these insights into later seminar discussions. I also get to learn what students think about the assignments as they are reading them. Each week I learn which readings engage them and which do not. The departmental questionnaires required by both the History Department and the Afro-American Studies Program encourage students to comment on the readings, but these end of the term evaluations are much less useful, I have found, than the weekly voting undergraduates do with their comments. The questions also encourage dialogue among students as they come to class prepared to talk about the ideas about which they have written and to listen to the ideas of others. This makes running a seminar a lot easier.

The questions have proved useful to me in two other ways. First, I am able to early identify writing problems and see that students get help for them. Second, the questions give me a take on those students who, for whatever reason, are shy in class. Their written observations give me some idea whether they are following the material, even if they have little to say in seminar, rather than having to wait for the mid-term. I admit to stacking the deck. All things being equal, I read their questions rather than those of more outspoken students, as a way of drawing them into the discussion. Sometimes this works.

As discussions are driven by student ideas, the seminars generally get high marks for encouraging participation, examining issues, and for allowing students the opportunity to express their ideas. But some students want more structure and continuity than this approach provides. I am still smarting from an evaluation two years ago in which a student wrote that my "seminar was totally disorganized and was the worst course I have ever taken at Brown!" The questions are obviously not the answer for everyone.