

Asking powerful questions

Overview

The detailed suggestions that follow assist students in learning to identify the criteria for effective questions, and then to frame questions that meet these criteria. In preparation for a visit by a classroom guest, students complete this process, and then use these criteria to assess questions they generate. Each student selects a powerful question to ask of the guest.

Preplanning

Build background knowledge

- In the days and weeks leading up to a visit by a guest, build students' background knowledge about the topic that will be the focus of the guest's visit. This may mean reading a stories or sharing pictures.

Session One

Introduce the upcoming guest

- Explain that a guest will be coming in the near future to talk about a topic that the class has been studying. Provide background information about the guest and invite students to consider what they would like to learn from him or her (e.g., "What would be a really good question—a really powerful question—to ask?").

Discuss concept of criteria

- If the class has not previously worked with the notion of criteria, provide a definition (e.g., criteria are how we recognize whether something is what we say it is) and invite students to provide examples of criteria for familiar things (e.g., What does a nice person look like? Do? Sound like? What would a nasty person look like? Do? Sound like?).

Explore criteria for powerful questions

- As a class, brainstorm criteria for the critical task.

What makes a powerful question?

Ask the class to select up to five criteria that they think are most important in recognizing a powerful question. You may wish to cluster similar criteria into a more encompassing term.

Criteria for powerful questions

- give you lots of information
- are specific to the person or situation
- are open-ended—cannot be answered by yes or no
- may be unexpected
- are usually not easy to answer

This list of criteria was generated by a multiaged class of K–3 students at Charles Dickens Annex in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Brainstorm possible questions

- Ask students to think of one or two questions that they would like to ask of the guest. Encourage students to use the criteria in formulating their questions. Ask students to write out their question(s) or, if they are not able to do so, have a friend or the teacher do it for them.

Identify powerful questions

- Ask students (in pairs or as an entire class) to assess the quality of each others' question(s), using the criteria as a guide. Encourage students to discuss how to make their questions more powerful. Ask each student to make note of or write out a powerful question that they would like to ask of their guest. (Make it clear that students will **not** be required to ask their question if they do not wish to do so.)

Session two

- On the day of the visit by a guest, invite all students who so wish to ask the question they have prepared.

Powerful questions asked of a World War II veteran

- Why did you fight in the war?
- Do you remember some of your friends from the war?
- Which countries did you fight over?
- Where did you live during the war?
- Were there any women in World War II? If so, what were their jobs?
- What started the fighting?
- Why was Canada involved?
- What was your safe place?

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Debrief the visit

- After the guest has gone, discuss what students learned from him or her. Invite students to identify the questions that they thought generated the most interesting responses. Revisit the previously developed list of criteria, adding or modifying items to reflect the lessons learned from determining what makes a powerful question. Post the revised list in the classroom for future reference.

Evaluation

Assess quality of student questions

- Assess how well the first draft and final questions meet the criteria for powerful questions generated by the class.

Assess understanding of criteria

- Assess students' understanding of the notion of criteria by asking each student to use pictures or words to record three criteria for a good pet.

Extension

Apply the procedure in other contexts

- Repeat this activity from time to time as other guests visit the class, or when students are framing questions that they would like to pursue when studying a topic.