



# Questions: Why Do They Matter?



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In his *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rainer Maria Rilke urged the younger correspondent to learn to love questions, even those that were unanswered. This admonition has stuck with me for several decades, especially in times when I am seeking answers to seemingly tough questions. In thinking about actually loving questions, I contemplated my own relationship with them, and I realized that asking questions is one of a teacher's most essential responsibilities. The act of posing a query is one of the characteristics that actually sets this profession apart. Reflecting on this epiphany, I wondered if and how exactly I pose evocative and powerful questions. I decided that there are several opportunities to place a well-developed inquiry, and I wanted to share those. The "Who are you?" questions are ones we direct to ourselves; the "What are you thinking?" questions are ones we need to ask our students; and the "So what?" questions are for students to ask themselves—with a little prompting from us, naturally.

## **The most important questions: Who are you?**

So much of teaching centers around the relationships we develop with our students. We start with our content; it's our reason for being. We teach because we want to grow the next cadre of scientists, teachers, lawyers, engineers, and doctors. What we teach is incredibly critical, but I sometimes wonder if we are focused enough on *who* we teach. Here are a few questions I have thought about in my own contemplation of students and my relationships with them: To what degree do we see our students as unique individuals? How do we invest time in seeking to know them and understand a bit about their lives, beliefs, and aspirations? How do we ask, "Who are you?" How important is asking to our profession? How important is it to our students? How do we convey that we are invested in them as the next generation of torchbearers for our work? How do we witness their struggles without fixing their problems? How do we get to know them?

## **The probing questions: What are you thinking?**

Getting to know our students serves many purposes; one of the most powerful is laying the foundation for questions that center on how our students are making sense of the content we share.

When I have a message, understanding who our students are, we can incorporate that understanding

as we pose questions that probe their relationship with what they are learning. By looking, in part, through their lens, we can pose additional questions designed to deepen their understanding and thinking about the topic. Some examples of these questions might be: How does this make sense to you? What is your understanding of the content? How would you describe this to another person? Why are we studying this content? What is the logical next step? How would you compare this topic to a topic you know well? How is this similar to what we talked about earlier? How is it different? How satisfied are you with your assignments, workload, experiment results, and so on?

### **The personal relevancy questions: So what?**

Delving deeply with our students to ascertain their understanding of course content leads to the final type of questions—those that aim to assist students in taking the next giant step. This next step moves them from what they have learned into what they do with what they have learned. So much of the time, our heads are filled with content knowledge and skills. How we make sense of this knowledge and apply it determines the degree to which that content takes on new life of its own. The question “So what?” begs to be answered, as it prods the learner to think about the following: What am I going to do with this? How does it change my life? What difference will it make in the way I see the world? What difference will it make in the way I approach the world? What will I do differently? How does this change or affirm who I am? How will I move forward? What will be my next steps? What shifts in my life are occurring because of my shifts in thinking? Who am I now?

### **Final thoughts**

Teaching offers countless opportunities for us to ask, inquire, probe, delve, dig, and uncover. But there are just as many opportunities for us to tell, recite, inform, lecture, share, and elucidate. In writing this, I am challenging myself and my colleagues to think about all those questions that are waiting to be posed. They are questions that can be loved, but not unless they are asked.

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