

Who is entitled to ask questions in class?

Excerpted from *A More Beautiful Question* by Warren Berger

The issue of “who gets to ask the questions in class” is one that touches on matters of purpose, power, control, and, arguably, even race and social class.

Dennie Palmer Wolf, a professor of education at Brown University, examined the role of questioning in schools for her academic paper “The Art of Questioning,” and found that teachers tended “to monopolize the right to question” in classrooms. (To the extent that students shared in that privilege, Wolf cited research showing that it was “the private preserve of the few—the bright, the male, the English-speaking.”). Moreover, Wolf’s research found that questions were often used by teachers primarily to check up on students, rather than to try to spark interest; such questions were apt to leave a student feeling “exposed,” rather than inspired.

John Seely Brown points out that questioning by students can easily come to be seen as a threat by some teachers. “If you come from the belief that teachers are meant to be authoritative, then teachers are going to tend to want to cut off questioning that might reveal what they don’t know.”

The school reform pioneer Deborah Meier thinks the desire to control students and maintain order isn’t necessarily just coming from teachers. At one point in my talk with her, I mentioned that today’s business culture—with its ad messages promoting “break the rules” and “think different” messages—seems to embrace the same independent-thinking ethos that Meier tried to instill in the grade-schoolers in Harlem several decades ago. But when I suggested to Meier that perhaps the establishment had caught up with her ideals—that, with our new hunger for innovation, we might be more willing today to tolerate, and possibly even teach, questioning, she had her doubts.

She believes we continue to live in a society that wants questions to be asked by some, but not others. “Yes, we want a Silicon Valley,” she said, “but do we really want 300 million people who actually think for themselves?”

When Meier started teaching in urban schools, she was dismayed to find that low-income children, in particular, “were trained *not* to ask questions in school,” and she doesn’t think that has changed much in the ensuing years. The discouraging may not be deliberate in most cases. Teachers under pressure to cover more material, and particularly those in under-funded, over-crowded urban schools, can face formidable challenges in trying to

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38 manage large classrooms. The imperative to maintain order and “just get
39 through the lesson” can be at odds with allowing kids to question.

40 But there may be other subtle forces conspiring against student questioning.
41 For instance, children may be self-censoring their questions due to cultural
42 pressures. Joshua Aronson of New York University has made a study of some
43 of the difficulties that low-income minority students face, such as the
44 disproportionate tendency of schools to suspend African-American boys. But
45 Aronson also has conducted interesting research on what he calls “the
46 stereotype threat.” It zeroes in on the psychology of stigma, and in particular,
47 “the way human beings respond to negative stereotypes about their racial or
48 gender group.” Aronson studied standardized test performances among black,
49 Latino, and female college students and his findings suggest that when a
50 person perceives him/herself as being the target of a well-known stereotype
51 (e.g., “girls aren’t good at math”), it can have an adverse effect on
52 performance in school.

53 Would students who are battling against stereotypes be less inclined to
54 interrupt lessons by asking questions, revealing to the rest of the class that
55 they don’t know something? “Absolutely,” Aronson said. “Fear is the enemy
56 of curiosity. Unfortunately, if you’re in that situation, you may feel pressure to
57 look a certain way to others.” That can cause students to act as if they already
58 know or just don’t care. “You’re inclined to play it safe,” Aronson says, rather
59 than risk the possibility of confirming the stereotype.

60 Parents, too, undoubtedly play a role in determining which kids ask questions
61 in school. A recent study of fourth and fifth-grade students by Indiana
62 University sociologist Jessica McCrory Calarco found that the students from
63 families with higher incomes were more likely to be encouraged by their
64 parents to ask questions at school, whereas children from modest
65 backgrounds were encouraged by their parents to be more deferential to
66 authority—and to try to figure things out for themselves, instead of asking for
67 help. “Even very shy middle-class children learned to feel comfortable
68 approaching teachers with questions, and recognized the benefits of doing
69 so,” Calarco reports. “Working-class children instead worried about making
70 teachers angry if they asked for help at the wrong time or in the wrong way,
71 and also felt others would judge them as not smart if they asked for help.”
72 These differences, Calarco found, stemmed directly from what “children learn
73 from their parents at home.”

74 Deborah Meier, however, bristled at those findings. “The study makes it
75 sound as if those lower-income parents are wrong, but they’re *not* wrong,”
76 she said. “They know that if their kids ask questions, they might get in trouble.
77 They’re telling their children to be careful in school.” The middle-class kids are

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78 in a different situation, Meier notes. “They go to school feeling safe.” And
79 because they feel safe, they can take the risk of raising their hands.

80 But even the “safe” middle-class student who has been encouraged by
81 parents to question still may find that the typical classroom environment just
82 doesn’t stimulate curiosity or inspire inquiry. One of the “master questioners”
83 I interviewed was then-15-year-old high school student Jack Andraka, who,
84 through his own remarkable journey of inquiry, was able to develop a new,
85 highly-effective and inexpensive way to screen for certain types of cancer I
86 was curious whether someone like Andraka, who clearly is very inclined to
87 question, learned to do so in school and whether he tended to ask a lot of
88 questions there.

89 He made it clear that his parents were the ones who taught him to question.
90 “They would ask me questions, and they would get me to ask them
91 questions—but then they would never answer the questions they guided me
92 to,” Andraka told me. “They would instead have me go and explore through
93 experiments or personal experience and make a hypothesis.”

94 At school—which Andraka described as “your ordinary public high school,”
95 located in Maryland—“we really do not have students ask enough questions
96 and do enough exploration by themselves. The teacher tells you what to do
97 and you do it. You’re really restricted with these tight guidelines. In my
98 opinion, that’s not the best way to learn.”

99 I asked Andraka whether his classmates asked a lot of questions. “In my high
100 school, to be quote unquote cool, you’re typically very quiet and sit in the
101 corner and you might snicker among your friends every now and then. So
102 that, to me, is pretty boring.” As for himself, Andraka said, “either I’m
103 extremely quiet and working on something else like trying to find a new way
104 to test pancreatic cancer, for example, or I’m basically answering every single
105 question. But I don’t ask questions like, ‘What would happen if this happens?’
106 I do that on my own—I do all of my exploring outside of school. Because in
107 school it’s not allowed and that just... really sucks.”

108 If even a born-and-bred questioner like Andraka isn’t asking questions in
109 school, it suggests a fundamental problem. Dan Rothstein and Luz Santana of
110 the Right Question Institute say it’s no mystery what’s going on: Even in the
111 most progressive schools, questioning is still primarily the domain of the
112 teacher. “Questions are used a lot in the classroom but it’s mostly one way,”
113 says Rothstein. “It’s not about the student asking, it’s about the teacher
114 prompting the student by using questions that the teacher has formulated.”
115 By taking this approach, Rothstein says, teachers “have inadvertently
116 contributed to the professionalization of asking questions—to the idea that
117 only the people who know more are allowed to ask.”

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