

# Teaching Children to Question the Answers

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Is remembering the correct answers to questions what learning is all about? Don't children also have to learn to think of answers themselves? And don't they also have to learn to question the answers they are given? How will they be able to think for themselves in the future?

Recently, I was trying to convince a group of teachers that History exams for children in Class VI could include questions that require the students to do a certain amount of critical thinking - in other words that they can do much more than just memorise answers that the teachers have made them copy from the board.

The teachers insisted that the students' English was not good enough for them to formulate their own sentences (this was an English medium school for Hindi/Punjabi speakers), and they would not be able to answer questions that they had not been previously exposed to, etc.

I tried very hard to convince the teachers that the students will never learn English unless they are given a chance to formulate their own sentences in English, that they should be given a chance to demonstrate their abilities in History separately from their abilities in English, that memorisation does not prove that a student has understanding, that students need to learn how to apply knowledge, and use knowledge to form their own opinions and find creative solutions to problems, etc.

I prepared some sample questions that I thought might be good alternatives to the usual Questions and Answers to memorise. Here are the first three questions, I wrote down:

- (1) What if people were covered with thick fur like some other animals? How would this have changed history?
- (2) Why is the stone age called the stone age?
- (3) Still today there are some tribes of people who live separately and do not interact with the rest of civilisation, and they do not farm. How do they live? Why do you think they don't farm?

Seeing as the teachers had never told the students the answers to these questions, the teachers objected that the students would certainly not be able to write the answers on their own. However, the students had been having a lesson on stone-age people, so I felt that they should be knowing enough about primitive people, modern society, and the general progression of history to be able to answer these questions.

All my theoretical arguments did not seem to be making any impact. So, in exasperation, I finally said, okay, tell me who, in your opinion, are the very worst students in all of Class VI - I'll go find them and see if they can answer these questions. All the teachers immediately knew exactly who the worst students were. They gave me two names. One was absent.

I called the other worst student out of the class. He came out trembling, not knowing who I was, or why I had called him. He must have been afraid that he was being punished for some offence, and he was trying to figure out which offence it could be this time.

So I began by explaining to him that some other teachers had told me that students in Class VI were not smart enough to answer some questions I had written, but that I was sure that they **were** smart enough, and I wanted to prove to the teachers how smart the students are. I told him in no uncertain terms that I was absolutely sure that he could answer the questions I had.

I gave him the paper on which the questions were written, and asked him to read the questions and write the answers on the back of the paper. (To tell the truth, I did not have half as much faith in the student as I was making out to have, and I was trying not to think about how I would save my face if the student proved to be totally incapable.)

After some hesitation, but without any help from anyone, here are the answers the student proceeded to write:

- (1) If people have fur on their skin today there will be no clothes in this world and they want to some places like Greenland where they have ice and ice.
- (2) These are called stone age because they have no clothes and many things which are today.
- (3) The are living seprately because they do not know about the languages. They live without farming they kill the animals to eat them

When I read these answers, I was floored. The 'worst' student in the class had just answered all these difficult questions in a way which no one could deny was at least half correct! (Actually, if I had to assign marks, I would certainly give well over 50% marks for these answers.)

Not only that, but he had, all by himself, thought up some ideas which hadn't even occurred to me, but which I found interesting and stimulating. For the first question, I would have answered something about the clothing industry, and maybe thought of some off-beat ideas about how fashion shapes society, etc., but I probably wouldn't have thought about the possibility that people with fur would have tended to settle in places like Greenland. I also find it very interesting that this child has seen **language** as being a factor that determines how and where people live - this is a fairly advanced level of thinking, if you ask me.

I told the student how happy I was with his answers. I told him that I knew he could do it, and he **did** do it. I asked him if someone had ever told him the answers to these questions. He said no. I asked him how he knew the answers. He said he just thought of them. I asked him if he was one of the best students in the class. He replied, quite modestly, that, yes he was. Then he ran back to his class, obviously feeling better about himself than he had in a long time.

It was true that this student had made a number of mistakes in spelling and grammar, but these did not interfere with his ability to communicate his ideas. In fact I rather liked his use of Indian English in phrases like 'ice and ice'. I'm sure the history teachers would have covered his answers with red marks and corrections ('and ice' would surely have been marked out - perhaps decreasing the chances of producing another famous writer with a creative new style like Salmon Rushdie?).

But wouldn't all those red marks have been terribly discouraging - especially if every paper the student ever gets back is covered in red? If a teacher's aim is to help a student improve, and red marks haven't been helping, how about trying a little encouragement instead? Why should students

whose only problem is in English get penalised for history, geography, science, and mathematics just because of their difficulties with the language?

Unfortunately, this was not the end of the story. After the other teachers had seen the answers supplied by the Worst Student in Class VI, I asked them if now they would consider using such questions in their exams. They replied that no, they still did not think that all the students would be capable of answering these kind of questions without first being told the answers. Maybe that particular student hadn't completely failed, but what about the rest? Maybe I had actually helped that student. The parents will complain if we don't give the Questions and Answers for memorisation. And besides, his answer was not correct because he should have said . . . I guess the words that had excited me did not have the same effect on the others. Maybe we have different ways of evaluating students' work.