

## **The Place of Questions**

By Jessica Nicoll

“Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up.”

--Pablo Picasso

Picasso’s familiar observation has a parallel in another arena. All children are questioners; the problem is how to remain questioners as we grow. This problem is particularly acute in education, where focus on “delivery of instruction” can work against the development of students’ questions. Citing studies on the dominance of teacher-initiated questions over student-initiated questions throughout K-12 education (Susskind, 1969), Seymour Sarason notes that a setting in which students’ questions are neither stimulated nor entertained demonstrates a “narrow conception of learning” in which “students are passive recipients of knowledge from teachers.” This concept, Sarason says, creates a context that works against productive learning (Sarason, 2004)<sup>1</sup>.

Questions—from both students and teachers—are central to developing productive learning within artistic processes. Though many in education emphasize the importance of teachers asking well-constructed questions (Wiggins & McTighe among many others), we have observed that (1) little focus is given to developing student-generated questions; (2) students are often tongue-tied when asked what questions they have; and (3) teachers’ questions are frequently poorly disguised statements or opinions. In developing our approach, we have increasingly focused on how to make space for students’ questions and how to re-ignite the question-asking that was natural to them in early childhood.

### *Making time.*

The pressure to provide prescribed content in limited time pushes teachers away from leaving space for students’ questions. How can students’ questions—many of which could lead wildly off-topic—fit in an already crammed lesson plan? This mind-set often leads to a standard response to raised hands: “Hold that question; we’ll try to get to it later.” Later rarely arrives. The pattern established here shapes both teachers and students: teachers forget that students may have questions worth asking and students cease to recognize what questions percolate inside them. The importance of students’ questions, and the damage done by overlooking them, should not be underestimated.

I felt the pull of time as I sat with 60 second-graders and their teachers at an elementary school in Brooklyn, New York. The students, members of two separate classes, had just participated in a “sharing”—presenting dances they had created in a 10-week dance residency—and were now reflecting on their process. A program evaluator had posed a question about the students’ experience in dance

outside of school. After several students answered in turn, Kristina said, “I have a question.” Feeling the urge to say, “That’s great, Kristina, but we’re *answering* a question now; we’ll try to get back to your question later,” I suddenly interrupted that thought and, instead, said, “What’s your question, Kristina?” The little girl looked across the circle and addressed a classmate. “Angela, you said that you and your sister put on all kinds of music at home and dance to it, right?” Angela nodded. “I want to know,” Kristina continued, “do you dance to African music?” Angela thought a moment and then said, “No. We don’t have any African music.”

I looked at Kristina and asked, “What are you thinking, Kristina?”

“My Dad’s African,” she answered.

“Do you have African music on CDs at home?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said.

At this point one of the two classroom teachers spoke up. “I’ll bet somebody here has some African music at home.” In an instant, hands flew upward and Ms. F. had proposed a dance party for both classes later in the week, with all kinds of music—including African—that the students would provide. The children cheered and Kristina and Angela both smiled broadly. “What do you think, Kristina?” I asked. “I think that’s great,” she said, still grinning.

The nearly missed opportunity presented by Kristina’s question has become a touchstone for us as we examine questioning and its importance in the development of artistry and productive learning. I had come very close to deflecting the question, as I had done before with students’ questions. Concerns about time, needs to accomplish specific goals, issues about classroom management (fear of losing power)—all work incessantly to override a student’s expression of interest and curiosity. The simplicity and personal urgency of this 7-year old’s question for a classmate had led unexpectedly into meaningful new territory. Ms. F. not only recognized the profundity of Kristina’s query, but immediately seized the opportunity to satisfy one child’s need while fostering deeper learning and understanding for the entire group. A child’s simple question was a gift that might never have been received.

To make use of this experience, we have continued to examine the structures of our classes and to identify where we can allow opportunities for the questions we cannot imagine: the questions that come from the students. We must also create an environment in which students will become aware that they *have* questions. To develop students’ questioning capabilities and allow time for such development to occur, we must address (1) our own planning process (and how students become part of it) and, (2) some conditions that foster students’ abilities to reconnect with their questioning natures.

*Planning for beginnings, middles, and endings.*

Because reflective practice and questioning are inextricably linked, many openings for students' questions occur during periods of reflection, whether at the beginning, the middle, or the end of a session. Having identified where we can build reflection into the class time, we are then able to anticipate the likely moments in which students' questions will arise. Even as we build openings for questions into our plan, we must also exhibit a willingness to interrupt the routine and to share leadership with our students. Part of the art of teaching is to sense the moments when interruptions and revised plans will be fruitful and when they distract from our larger goals. No formula can tell us which moment is which; we enter the unknown every time we teach. Experience and intuition guide us in making informed choices and taking risks to support our students' (and our own) growth in this area.

**Beginnings.** When students enter a studio, and before class has officially begun, we often ask them to reflect independently on the previous session's work: how did it begin? What was difficult or challenging? What was pleasurable? After they have called up the earlier experience, we may ask, "What questions occur to you as you reflect on the events of the last class?" After all students have entered and done a recollection, we may ask them to do a physical review or to document questions that came up for them—writing or drawing. Or we might ask them to share questions with one other person or in a whole group exchange. We take notes as we watch or listen and often use the questions to propel our ideas either for that day's class or for the next session. These introductory questions become stimuli to our thinking; the answers to them are explored through the action of the class itself.

By using reflection and inviting students to entertain their own questions at the *beginning* of a class, we kill two birds with one stone: (1) We make use of time that is often devoted to logistics of classroom management (taking roll, collecting or re-distributing assignments, organizing and setting up materials, etc.) and, therefore, do not "take away" from the bulk of what many call "instructional time" (although we question the concept of "instructional time" separate from productive learning in its many facets). A teacher who wishes to accomplish logistical tasks during an opening period of reflection can do so while students are engaged in their own focused reflective practice. (2) We create space in which students are not pressured to deliver "the right kinds of questions" publicly and yet they are encouraged to capture their underlying interests and queries and be prepared to share them with others. Such open, private opportunities establish conditions in which students are much more likely to develop their questioning skills and tap into their own interests. Though we cannot eliminate self-doubt when a

student is embarking on a new unknown (“What questions do I have? Do I even *have* any questions?”), we have removed public judgment from the equation, which tends to lessen feelings of fear and anxiety.

**Middles.** In the midst of class, when students are moving freely, their bodies and minds thoroughly engaged with the work, questions naturally arise. Though it can be difficult, risky—and sometimes undesirable—to invite spoken inquiry while in the flow of an active session, it can also be one of the most revealing and collaboration-building experiences for a group. Teachers learn about different students’ curiosities and students discover that their questions build a base for productive learning, not only for the one doing the asking but for the group as a whole. For when one student dares to pose a ticklish question—and when a teacher is willing to pursue it—the rest quickly realize that their interests and ideas have the power to shape the class in a productive way.

“Could we do it backwards?” Mark tentatively asked during the third class in a 25-week modern dance technique residency. The foot spring exercise was simple but rhythmically challenging and the 20 fourth graders had asked to repeat it after mastering it the previous week. “Sure,” I’d said. “Is there anything you would do differently this time?” Mark’s response was not at all what I expected. I had imagined someone might want to do it faster. But backwards? I thought to myself, “How would that work?” So I turned to Mark.

“All right,” I said. “How would that work?”

Here, too, I thought Mark might suggest the class turn to face upstage. But Mark gamely said, “Well, I guess we’d start with the last part” and he began to mark through the sequence in reverse as his classmates uttered “Oh!” with a mixture of fear and eagerness.

“OK, let’s give it a try,” I announced. “Now?” Mark said, eyes wide. “Right now?”

“Yes,” I said, “Right now.”

In the middle of a class such as this one, opening the floor to questions brings teachers face to face with their own fears and challenges. Among the unknowns: Would a student offer a productive idea; what would it be and where would it lead? What if the task was too difficult and frustrating for students? What if a student made a joke of the invitation; would that damage a teacher’s ability to control the class? If time is made for the request, might it significantly alter the flow of the class and prevent reaching important goals? These kinds of worries are real. In the moment, a teacher has to choose what path to follow.

Sometimes questions integrated into the middle of a class revitalize the proceedings, particularly when a teacher joins in the questioning. Answering Mark’s question with a question in this situation, I

made a collaborative shift: (a) I shared my uncertainty about his meaning, inquiring about his thinking rather than assuming I knew the answer; (b) by not demonstrating how to achieve what Mark proposed, my question—and subsequent invitation—encouraged the students to explore as a group how the new idea might play out. My impulse to ask a new question reflected my experience as well as my instincts; I understood that children were likely to be sparked by my acknowledgement that I neither knew nor anticipated “The” answer. And because we were in the midst of a class, I did not pause to analyze the task but, instead, suggested they give it a try. As the students, individually and collectively, began to respond physically to the silent, percolating new question—“How do we *do* this?”—they turned the physical pattern inside-out, as it were, and found, within their bodies, new possibilities—and, so, new questions—that continued to fuel that class and subsequent ones.

When new ideas and questions come up during a session with no time for an involved exploration, students might write their ideas in their own or the teacher’s notebook before class ends. In children’s classes I’ve typically kept a notebook on a chair in the corner of the studio, open to a page at the back of the book. At the top of the page I’ve written “*What about THIS?*” and left a pen beside the book so that students’ jotted down curiosities could prompt topics for future classes. By writing them (and my reading them), the students have become part of the planning. Encouraged to continue investigations outside of class, students learn to report back on their discoveries and to request opportunities to lead their peers during designated class time in subsequent weeks.

**Endings.** The end of class is often an ideal moment for a reflection, in which summaries of the experience and the sharing of thoughts create a satisfying conclusion. It can also be a fruitful opportunity for students’ questions. John Dewey notes that “action precedes thinking” and the final minutes of a class filled with action often overflow with questions—many of which will not be answered in the remaining time. Dewey also states that “there is no intellectual growth without some reconstruction, some remaking, of impulses and desires” and proposes that instead of relying entirely on external inhibition of impulses, teachers can encourage “inhibition through an individual’s own reflection and judgment” (Dewey, 1938)<sup>ii</sup>. If we make space for students to pose their questions at the end of an active class, they can become a springboard for thinking beyond one session and into the next. Such questions also inform the teacher about the different ways students are thinking about their work.

During one undergraduate improvisation course, I developed the practice of ending with students’ questions. I asked students to write questions in their books and address them in their own way

(e.g., physically, in oral conversation, in written form, with drawings, etc.) before the next class. Some of their questions follow.

Joyce: Should I be moving from my mind or moving from my body?

Meri: What's the relationship between motion and emotion; while I'm dancing, should I let my face move or should I control that?

Danielle: I noticed Alex's dance was done all with the face; can that be a dance?

Chris: Is it ok if I follow somebody else's pulse?

Megan: How can I structure an improvisation but not get 'locked in' to my idea?

Nick: Is there a difference between a pose and a shape?

Stephanie: Should I come up with something new every time I improvise or can I revisit the old?

The nature of these questions revealed that some students were still wondering what they "should" or "shouldn't" do during improvisation; some were identifying practical issues in the design of their own improvisational problems; some were meditating on definitions and how words influence our actions; and some were facing philosophical questions about mind and body. In response, I might bring readings or ideas for observation to individual students. At other times, I would use the questions as a stimulus for a class exploration. Nick's question about pose and shape, for example, triggered the beginning of the next session with an improvisation that led in surprising new directions.

In a choreography course, I also asked students to present questions at the end of a session and encouraged them to reflect on them outside of class, consider them while working with their dancers, and return with their observations. Some of the choreographers' questions follow:

Danielle: How do I find the words to tell my dancers what I'm looking for?

Graziella: How do I ask for the feedback that will be most useful for me?

Kurt: How do I know when to stop choreographing and trust that the piece is finished?

Yoko: I chose unique dancers because of their qualities. But when I want them in unison, it's difficult to get them in real unison. Should I give up on the unison I wanted, compromise on a clear unison, or try a different approach to get the unison tight?

Mary: I am curious about the relationship between my movement, my theme, and a "message" I want the audience to "get." How do I connect these things?

As with the improvisation students, I noted the differences in the students' questions. Some addressed practical issues around running a rehearsal; some were grappling with choreographic choices; and others were digging deeply into the artistic process in which issues of communication, form, and

content danced around one another and sometimes perplexed the dance-maker. Occasionally we would take up one or another question in a group discussion, with my voice but one in a collective exploration of ideas and experiences. Rather than try to find a “right” answer, I urged the choreographers to write these questions into their books and study them in relation to their own work. I wanted them to trust the power of their own and others’ questions to guide deeper reflection and to promote development of choreographic action.

*Creating conditions to support questioning.*

Many of the undergraduate and graduate students whom we teach express confusion when asked to form a question about their work. Often, the response to such a request is, “I don’t have a question.” The practice of examining one’s artwork and identifying one’s own questions seems to be foreign territory. Frequently the only questions offered are, “Do you like it?” “What do you think?” or “What should I do?” The setting in which they are invited to pose questions may contribute to students’ reticence; presenting choreography or other work for the first time, surrounded by peers as well as faculty, provides enough intimidation without having to consider what to say or ask about one’s work. In addition, being in school for 15 or 20 years has trained many students to expect teachers to ask the questions. The practice of developing and posing one’s own questions may be a dormant skill.

The choreographer Liz Lerman has developed a Critical Response Protocol for helping choreographers identify their questions and develop their work. We have used her protocol not only to look at choreography, but to help students and colleagues look at the art of teaching as well. Of her own experience, Lerman writes, “I discovered that the more I made public my own questions about the work, my work, the more eager I was to engage in a dialog about how to “fix” the problem. . . . I found that often, just talking about the messes that are an inevitable part of creating new work, talking about it out loud from my perspective, pointed a way out of the dilemma” (Lerman, 1993)<sup>iii</sup>.

Lerman’s experience as an artist—in which the increased motivation from making public “my own questions” and talking out loud “from my perspective” also helps her see possible solutions—pushes me to consider, “What should I be asking students; what questions will support the discovery of their *own* questions rather than reinforce *my* perspective?” I once described to a colleague, a Dean of Education at a public university, a question I had posed to an undergraduate choreographer: “Is the ending taking the time you want it to take?” My colleague was dismayed. “That’s not a good question,” she said. “It requires a yes or no answer and it doesn’t stimulate her thinking. You should ask her to

explain what she's doing. Maybe ask *why* the ending is taking that length of time or suggest she compare it with another work.”

“I disagree,” I said. “A ‘why’ question will keep her in her head. My goal is not to get her to explain something to me. My goal is to get her to look at her work. By asking her this ‘yes/no’ question, I am saying, ‘Study this. Is it doing what you want it to do?’ It is entirely up to her to address the question as she wants to.”

Framing questions around choreography is particularly tricky, as we try to build students’ developing artistic visions rather than build dependence on our assumed expertise. Having worked in choreographic process and taught longer than most of our students have, we and they are aware of the differences in our range of experiences. It would be disingenuous to deny that we have developed points of view that might help our students improve their work. We have written elsewhere of Roy Abrahamson, a visual artist and teacher, who writes that it is not “a matter of influencing or not influencing students. Rather, what should concern us is the kind of influence—where it leads” (Nicoll and Oreck, 2010)<sup>iv</sup>. By taking care with our questioning strategies we try to lead ourselves and our students continually back into the work in a process that uncovers interests and curiosities, reinforces the specifics of individuals’ artistic vision, and helps students identify the elements on which they need to work.

Our questions are not pre-determined, but emerge in the moment and in response to what we are seeing. When guiding our own observations of students’ work, we notice the questions we ask of ourselves (e.g., “What am I noticing? What questions do I have? Where is my eye going? What is the dancer looking at there? Where did I lose interest or get intrigued?”), and then bring those questions to the dance-maker. If, for example, a part of a dance seemed tedious, we can ask the student, “When you look at the work, is there any section you notice your eye skipping past, losing interest?” Or we might go in the opposite direction, asking what is exciting, challenging, delightful, or surprising in the work or asking what they want to revise and improve. Often, simply identifying one of our own questions—e.g., “What happened in that transition: where was your focus?”—serves as a key to unlock a place of confusion or an element with which the dancers/choreographers themselves may have been struggling without knowing why.

We have also looked with student teachers at video of classes they have taught, using similar questions, protocols, and structures to help them study their work and consider what intrigues them and sparks their interest in developing their teaching further. In other dance classes—technique or repertory,

for example—the specific questions may be oriented toward a dancer’s perspective rather than a choreographic or pedagogical vision (e.g., “In which section are you getting lost? How are you working on that balance moment?”), and yet the overarching purpose remains the same: using questions to pursue our essential goal of helping students sustain their own interests and curiosities in a context of productive learning.

The visual artist Robert Irwin, describing his ideal of teaching, says that people, “are really, in a sense, the question, . . . ultimately they *are* what it is they have to contribute.” Out of their questions, he proposes, students are able to create and define their own tasks and assignments. “Because,” Irwin says, “once you learn how to make your own assignments instead of relying on someone else, then you have learned the only thing you really need to get out of school, that is, you’ve learned how to learn” (Weschler, 1982)<sup>v</sup>.

Questions, in this way, truly become the core of what is called “the student-centered classroom.” The teacher-learner relationship in such a context becomes more open and respectful and less dependent on traditional ideas of power and control in classroom settings. This is an uncomfortable—even undesirable—place for many, especially those who fear losing the control that has been conferred upon them. To negotiate that unsettling territory, it is important to continually examine and improve the ways in which we invite questions to the table; to recognize and accept the authority of one’s position as a teacher, implementing clear, effective structures that establish contexts for productive learning; and to pause occasionally, making space for listening and for taking note of what we hear. If we cannot do this, we are sure to fall into the habit of dismissing students’ questions and arriving at the predictable conclusion that they have none. Encounters with students like the 7-year old Kristina can help shake us out of that habit, and *remembering* her can help us create new and better ones.

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<sup>i</sup> Sarason, S. *And What Do YOU Mean by Learning?* (Heinemann, 2004). Page 67.

<sup>ii</sup> Dewey, J. *Experience & Education*. (Collier, 1938). Page 64.

<sup>iii</sup> Lerman, L. *Toward a Process for Critical Response*. (High Performance, Winter 1993). Page 1.

<sup>iv</sup> Nicoll, J. & Oreck, B. *Dance Dialogues in Vygotsky and Creativity*. (edited by Connery, M.C., John-Steiner, V., and Marjanovic-Shane, A., Peter Lang, 2010). Page 117.

<sup>v</sup> Weschler, L. *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees*. (University of California Press, 1982). Page 120.