Teaching students to ask their own questions creates a better democracy

Make Just One Change: Teach Students to Ask Their Own Questions
by Dan Rothstein and Luz Santana

As always, before beginning to discuss the details of a book, I’d like to introduce the authors, who represent a wonderful multicultural example at a time when our country seems desperately in need of such collaboration. Dan Rothstein has developed and implemented education programs in Israel, Massachusetts, and Kentucky as a community organizer and urban planner. He has a doctorate in education and social policy from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Luz Santana raised her family on welfare, working on the factory floor, and has been a housing services counselor and parent advocate who works with low-income communities around the country. She is a Community Fellow at MIT and holds a BA and master’s degree from the Springfield College of Human Services.

Over a twenty-year period they have worked together as the co-directors of The Right Question Institute, “a nonprofit organization that disseminates a strategy that makes it possible for all people, no matter their educational or literacy level, to learn to advocate for themselves and participate in decisions that affect them on all levels of democratic society.” (emphasis mine)

NSRF’s mission statement provides an obvious parallel: “to create meaningful learning experiences for all by collaborating effectively in reflective democratic communities that foster educational equity and social justice.”

With this alignment between our organizations in mind I want to direct readers to their concluding chapter, “Questions and Education, Questions and Democracy,” and their three concluding points:

- We can take action today to improve education in every classroom in every school by teaching all students how to ask their own questions.
- Teachers who teach their students how to ask their own questions will feel greater satisfaction and see better results.
- We will create a more well-informed citizenry and a stronger, more vibrant democratic society by teaching all students to ask their own questions. (emphasis mine)

Mini-protocol around the Right Question Institute “Question Formulation Technique” (QFT)

1. Create groups of 5-6. (2 min.)
2. Present each group with a large sheet of butcher paper, markers, and space to work. (2 min.)
3. Write the Q-focus statement in the middle of their papers. (1 min.)
4. Review the QFT Rules: Ask questions, no discussions, write down all questions, and change all statements into questions. (2 min.)
5. Participants write as many questions as they can think of around the Q-Focus statement. (6 min.)
6. Invite participants to classify all questions as “open” or “closed,” and then invert closed questions. Instruct them to take note of the process for later reflection. (5 min.)
7. Each group ranks their most powerful questions according to the NSRF descriptions and models for creating effective probing questions. (5 min.)
8. Share out to the larger group. (5 min.)
9. Debrief: What surprised you? How did the results of this protocol differ from other means of brainstorming questions? How might this protocol be helpful to you in your work? (10 min.)
On the last page of their book, Rothstein and Santana refer the reader to their website, www.right-question.org, and the concept of “microdemocracy,” which they define as “A new idea that ordinary encounters with public agencies are opportunities for individual citizens to ‘act democratically’ and participate effectively in decisions that affect them.” I feel strongly about what they’ve written on this page and quote it in some length as I believe their perspective speaks volumes to our current context and our contentious presidential primaries:

“A democracy needs citizens who can ask questions, participate in decisions and hold decision-makers accountable on any level of democracy. Indeed, we encourage people to ‘act democratically’ by writing letters to the editor or to a representative, attending public hearings, organizing, advocating and voting.

“But, what do we call it when people in low-income communities ask questions, participate in decisions and hold decision-makers accountable in their ordinary encounters with public and publicly funded institutions such as their children’s public school, the welfare office, job training program, Medicaid-funded health care service, and public housing? We have no ‘democratic’ name for actions at that level... As people learn to focus on decisions and ask their own questions, they begin to participate more effectively in decisions, partner with public servants, and hold decision-makers accountable. These are skills that the Right Question Strategy teaches as thinking and advocacy skills. But, they are also democratic skills and reflect democratic habits of mind. In a democracy, unlike in a dictatorship, citizens should be able to ask questions, participate in decisions that affect them, and hold decision-makers accountable.”

So what is the “Right Question Strategy?” More typically the authors refer to it as the “Question Formulation Technique” or simply “QFT.” It involves the following six steps:

1. Design a question focus, a resource that is not a question itself but which provokes and stimulates new lines of thinking (typically provided by the teacher)

2. Explain the “rules” to help students produce questions or brainstorm:
   - Ask as many questions as you can
   - Do not stop to discuss, judge, or answer any of the questions
   - Write down every question exactly as it was stated
   - Change any statements into questions

3. Improve the questions by first labeling each as closed-ended (answered with yes or no or with one word) or open-ended (require an explanation and cannot be answered with very short answers), and converting as many closed-questions to open ones as possible

4. Prioritize questions and select the top three that will be most useful to drive your planned actions

5. Teacher and student(s) plan next steps; how they will use the prioritized question(s)

6. Engage in a reflection activity for students to name what they learned using the process, how they learned it, and how they will use what they have learned in the future.

From here there are separate chapters on each of these six steps. Each has an extended description of the particular step of the QFT, several “case studies” of the use of each step, a trouble-shooting section, then a summary followed by conclusions and key points.

Chapter 6, “Students Prioritize the Questions” provides an excellent example of how RQI supplies protocol-like instructions to each of the key parts of the QFT. Working in small groups the students follow these steps:

1. Prioritize by choosing three questions from the list you just generated; choices should be based on criteria you have established, for example:
   - Choose the three most important questions
   - Choose the three questions that most interest you
   - Choose the three questions that will best help you design your research project
   - Choose the three questions that will move you toward the purpose of your original QFT

2. Choose three priority questions as follows:
   - First, review the list of questions and quickly discuss which ones to choose
   - Second, get to agreement; choose by consensus, voting, or any other strategy

3. In your small group, explain the reasons for choosing your three priority questions

4. Discuss the reasons in your small group and prepare to explain them to the large group

5. Small groups report their priority questions and their rationale for choosing them to the larger group

Rothstein and Santana point out, “because prioritization can be a...
challenging task, pushing students to analyze, assess, compare, contrast and, most of all, reach some kind of agreement on three priority questions, will be the most challenging part of the QFT to facilitate.” After expanding their protocol for refining prioritized questions, the authors present three Case Studies:

- A high school humanities class of seniors taught by Ling-Se Peet of the Urban and Sciences Academy (a Boston Public School)
- An advanced biology class of 12 students taught by Marcy Ostberg at Boston Day and Evening Academy (a public high school for students who have transferred from other schools or are over age or under-credited)
- A middle school geology class of 27 sixth graders in small groups of 4-5 taught by Hayley Dupuy at Stanford Middle School in Palo Alto, California.

Each of these are presented in some detail based on the recorded conversations of the students in these classes, thus showing just how such prioritization can proceed.

The authors have researched, developed and tested the Question Formulation Technique (QFT) for effective teaching of the skill of question formation to a wide range of audiences including residents in homeless shelters, patients in community health centers, participants in adult literacy classes, Harvard graduate students, and public and private students in grades kindergarten through high school. Additionally, rigorous research by outside agencies and institutions has been done, such as that of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). This was a randomized control trial of patients’ ability to participate in their own health care and partner more productively with professionals when they used the QFT to ask better questions. Teachers who have used the technique in primary, middle, and high school classrooms across all subject areas in a wide range of communities, have reported the development of these questioning skills and behaviors, enabling learners to conceptualize and express their convergent and divergent thinking without having to depend primarily on teacher questioning. In their concluding chapter, Rothstein and Santana point out:

“Even in our democratic society, we have not done a particularly good job of investing in developing our citizens’ ability to think independently and ask their own questions. We need to make a stronger more deliberate effort to build the capacity of all our citizens to think for themselves, weigh evidence, discern between fact and myth, discuss, debate, analyze, and prioritize. In twenty years of work with The Right Question Institute in a wide range of communities, we have seen how much can be accomplished when people who never before participated in decisions affecting them on any level begin to ask their own questions and acquire democratic habits of mind.”

I highly recommend Make Just One Change. There are tons of specifics, easy steps to follow, and clear examples of how teaching your students to ask questions can really work, both in their academic lives and beyond. I’m hopeful that this process will help lead the next generation to become truly active citizens of our democracy.