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The Key to Discovery: Pose the Right Questions

By Bruce Janz
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Good teachers like to tell themselves and others that there are no dumb questions. Whether they actually believe that is another question, but even if it is true, it is also the case that there are better and worse questions, both in the classroom and in life.

I often tell students that there are three components to writing a successful paper – a topic, a question and a thesis. They have usually been conditioned to focus on the last of these. Having a good thesis is important, but it is only the answer to a well-asked question. The real goal of good writing, and good thinking, is to have a well-asked question. Once that is in place, the rest follows.

When I wrote my dissertation, a book-length research manuscript, I knew my topic. It took a full year, though, to figure out what my central question was. Once I had it, the rest flowed easily. I wrote 100 pages over the next month, because it was clear what it would take to answer the question.

But until I knew what that question was, the best I could do was to write things that I hoped might be relevant.

Why did it take so long to figure out the question? Because for any topic there are a lot of possible questions, which can take you in a hundred different directions.

Let's suppose that you witness a car accident. A police officer comes over and asks, "What happened here?"

How do you answer? Well, there are many kinds of answers you might give. You could describe the physics of the interaction of the metals coming together in a collision path, and describe the resultant trajectories of the fragments. You could talk about the legal questions – one car ran a red light. You could talk about the "human" questions, that is, what might have motivated the actions of the drivers. Maybe you saw a driver waving wildly in the car, and thought that maybe there was a bee or wasp in the car distracting him. Maybe you have a theory about divine justice, and think that God struck down one of the drivers for his sin.

Some of these answers would be seen as unproblematic by the officer, and some would make you look a bit crazy. Why? Because the officer's question, "What happened here?"

is much more than those three words suggest on the surface. It's an officer asking, and so some kinds of answers matter while others don't.

There is a certain desired outcome – the officer wants to determine legal liability and, if necessary, lay charges. Stories about physics don't help much with that – except, of course, if you are talking to a forensics expert.

The point is that even seemingly straightforward questions come with a load of assumptions, possible outcomes, and people who are affected by answers. Asking better questions means being aware of all those things.

I am struck by how questions are asked in the political sphere. So often we see people responding to complex situations with easy answers: If only we would just do X, problems would be solved. Jobs are disappearing? Immigrants are the problem. Easy. People can't live on their salaries? Raise the minimum wage. Problem solved. This, to me, is evidence of inadequately asked questions. The world is rarely that simple.

Does everything you think seamlessly support everything else you think? You might not be asking the best questions, but instead asking the convenient questions.

Do your questions ever lead you into troubling areas of thought, ones which unsettle beliefs and ideas that you thought were long settled? If that never happens, you might not be asking probing enough questions.

Do the media sources you follow claim to give you answers to all the problems of the world, but rarely investigate the questions that lead to those answers? It might be time to write down the questions they purport to answer, and ask yourself how good they are.

Do you find yourself pathologizing people who don't agree with you? By that, I mean that you assume that they have some deficiency of reason, have a mental illness, or harbor some self-interested motive. These are all ways of not having to ask a better question – if it's someone else's problem, it's not your problem, is it?

How do you ask better questions?

There's only one way I know: Work at identifying what question(s) you are currently acting on, and try to rethink them. Reword them. Define the words you take for granted.

Do you have a commitment to freedom, or equality, or truth? Great – but what do those mean? What connotations do they have? What are the critiques of those words by those who don't agree with you? How would those people phrase your question? What kinds of resources are necessary to answer your question? Have you asked a question assuming that you are going to use particular kinds of resources? To a hammer, everything is a nail.

My questions about questions are necessarily abstract because they are meant to apply to all sorts of situations, ranging from personal, to technical, to social and political. In

each case, what holds us back may well be our own lack of imagination in the questions we ask about the situation.

You can start with what's in front of you: What questions are your ideas or beliefs a response to?

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