Asking Powerful Questions

This modelling the tools is incorporated into critical challenges at Kindergarten and grades 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 12, however, it can be adapted for use at all grade levels.

Overview

This *Modelling the Tools* resource provides an instructional sequence designed to help students learn to frame effective, powerful questions. Within the context of preparing for a visit by a classroom guest, an interview, or a field trip, students brainstorm criteria for a powerful question and then use these criteria to evaluate the effectiveness of the generated questions. This whole-class experience prepares students for the task of independently generating questions.

This resource also models an assessment process for using formative assessment (assessment *for* learning) to support student learning and prepares students for success with summative assessment (assessment *of* learning). Sample feedback tools (See **Sample #1** Student Self-Assessment Checklist: How powerful are my questions? and **Sample #2** Student Self-Assessment Checklist: How powerful are my questions?) demonstrate how students might use the tools to clarify their thinking. These samples can be shared with students as exemplars to help them understand what is expected.

Assessment *for* learning takes place as students use the criteria to judge the effectiveness of their own questions on their own, with a peer and/or with teacher guidance. A **Student Self-Assessment Checklist** can be used to support students in working through the feedback process.

Following the feedback and revision stage, each student selects the two most powerful questions and provides the rationale for his or her choice. This can be used as **assessment *of* learning**. A **Teacher Rubric** can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the questions and student rationale.

Preplanning

Build background knowledge.

- In the days and weeks leading up to an interview, build students' background knowledge about the topic that will be the focus of the interview. Build knowledge by sharing pictures and film clips and by reading news articles, short biographies and factual representations.

Session One

Introduce the interview.

- Explain that a guest will be meeting with the students in the near future to talk about a topic that the class has been studying. Alternatively you could adapt the activity by

connecting with an expert using technology applications, such as e-mail, a blog or video conferencing.
- Provide background about the interviewee and invite students to consider what questions would help them learn more about the topic. Ask students to think about what would be a really good question—a really powerful question—to ask. Primary students may require some coaching to understand the difference between a question and a statement.
- Provide examples of both powerful and not powerful questions.

Powerful Questions	**Not Powerful Questions**
How did you decide that you wanted to do this job?	What is your job?
What is the hardest part about your job?	What is your favourite hobby?
What is the most interesting thing you do at work?	How long have you been working at your job?
Would you recommend that young people consider doing this job when they are adults?	How much money do you make?

Note: These are sample generic questions that could be used to develop the concept of powerful questions. They do not necessarily need to relate to the topic of study.

Explore the concept of criteria.

- If the class has not previously worked with the concept of criteria, provide a definition (e.g., the basis for making reasoned judgement) and invite students to provide examples of criteria for familiar things; e.g., What does a respectful person look like? do? sound like? What would a disrespectful person look like? do? sound like?

Determine criteria for a powerful question.

- Invite the students to examine the examples of powerful and not powerful questions and brainstorm the characteristics (or criteria) of powerful questions.
- From the brainstormed list, ask students to select up to five criteria that they think are most important in recognizing a powerful question. You may want to cluster similar criteria into a more encompassing term.
- While it is important to honour student contributions during a brainstorming session, teachers also have an opportunity to invite a deeper response from students. For example, it is possible to ask a question that meets all of the criteria, and yet is a trivial question. Help students consider other criteria such as relevance to the topic, clarity and focus, and the potential for the question to generate unique and interesting information.
- This list of sample criteria is provided as teacher background information. It may also be shared with students as a sample of what another group of students decided.

Sample Criteria for Powerful Questions

This list of criteria was generated by a multi-aged class of K to 3 students at Charles Dickens Annex in Vancouver, British Columbia.

- give you lots of information
- are specific to the person or situation
- are open-ended; i.e., can't be answered by yes or no
- may be unexpected
- are usually not easy to answer.

Generate possible questions.

- Ask students to think of questions they would like to ask of the guest. Encourage students to consider the criteria in formulating their questions. Record questions generated during the class brainstorming.
- This list of sample questions is provided as teacher background information. It may also be shared as a sample of what other students decided. Note that not all of the questions in this sample meet the criteria for powerful questions.

Sample Questions Prepared for a World War II Veteran's Visit

These questions were generated by a multi-aged class of K to 3 students at Charles Dickens Annex in Vancouver, British Columbia.

- *Why did you fight in the war?*
- *Do you remember some of your friends from the war?*
- *Which countries did you fight over?*
- *Where did you live during the war?*
- Were there any women in World War II? If so, what were their jobs?
- *What started the fighting?*
- *Why was Canada involved?*
- *What was your safe place?*

Apply criteria for powerful questions.

- Model how to use the **Student Self-Assessment Checklist** to evaluate the quality of the questions provided during the brainstorming. You may wish to use **Sample #1** Student Self-Assessment Checklist: How powerful are my questions and **Sample #2** Student Self-Assessment Checklist: How powerful are my questions to model student responses in both the Yes and Not Yet categories.

- Adjust the criteria in the LH column of the Student Checklist as needed to align with the criteria generated by the class. Use questions generated by the class to replace the questions in the samples (i.e., Why did you fight in the war? Do you remember some of your friends from the war?), if desired.
- Involve the students in providing evidence of how each question either meets the criteria for a powerful question or needs to be revised to meet the criteria.
- Involve the students in providing suggestions for improving questions that do not yet meet the criteria for a powerful question.
- This tool is a place for students to explore their thinking. The metacognitive process is an important step in learning to think critically. As such, this checklist is intended to be used as a formative tool (assessment *for* learning) and not to generate a mark. The process of identifying when revisions need to be made and then making improvements is a significant step in learning to think critically.
- Involve students working in pairs to use the Student Self-Assessment Checklist to evaluate the quality of the remaining questions.
- Check for understanding by having students share examples of their powerful questions with the class.

Session Two

Assign individual student assessment task.

- Ask each student to write up to four powerful questions they would like to ask of their guest. Make it clear that students will NOT be required to ask their questions orally if they do not wish to do so.
- Alternatively, you may wish to have the students independently brainstorm to create a list of possible questions then select the most powerful question from the list to evaluate, using the criteria.

Provide opportunities for formative assessment.

- Involve the students in self reflection or peer coaching using the Student Checklist to evaluate the quality of their questions. Encourage students to make adjustments to their questions based on the evidence identified in the checklist.
- Emphasize that part of the skill in learning to ask powerful questions is in being able to identify when a question could become more powerful and then making the change.

Session 3

Conduct the interview.

- On the day of the interview, invite students to ask one of their questions, if they wish to do so. If more questions are desired than are volunteered orally by the students, the teacher could make the questions available to the guest in print form.

Debrief the interview.

- After the interview is finished, discuss what students learned. Ask students which questions they thought generated the most interesting responses.
- Revisit the previously developed list of criteria, adding or modifying items to reflect the lessons learned from this experience. Post the revised list of criteria for powerful questions in the classroom for future reference.

Assign individual summative assessment task.

- Ask students individually to identify their two most powerful questions from the list originally generated. Ask students to provide a rationale for their choice. The student could provide this information by using the **Student Self-Assessment Checklist** or through a personal conversation with the teacher. Individual student work can be evaluated using the **Teacher Rubric.**
- The actual questions selected by the student are not as important as the reasons for selecting the questions.

Assessment

Criteria for Evaluation
Students provide evidence of their learning as they:

- ask powerful questions
- provide rationale.

The above criterion is based on social studies grade level outcomes.

SKILLS AND PROCESSES	
RESEARCH FOR DELIBERATIVE INQUIRY	
K.S.7	• ask questions to make meaning of a topic
1.S.7	• ask questions to make meaning of a topic
2.S.7	• participate in formulating research questions
	➢ develop questions that reflect a personal information need (ICT)
3.S.7	• evaluate whether information supports an issue or a research question
4.S.7	➢ formulate new questions as research progresses
5.S.7	• draw and support conclusions based on information gathered to answer a research question
6.S.7	• formulate questions to be answered through the research process
7.S.7	• formulate new questions as research progresses
8.S.7	• formulate new questions as research progresses

9.S.7	• formulate new questions as research progresses
10-1 S.7	• develop, refine and apply questions to address an issue
10-2 S.7	• revise questions on an issue as new information becomes available
20-1 S.7	• develop, refine and apply questions to address an issue
20-2 S.7	• revise questions on an issue as new information becomes available
30-1 S.7	• develop, refine and apply questions to address an issue
30-2 S.7	• revise questions on an issue as new information becomes available

Cross-curricular Links
Cross-curricular links for the skill of asking questions are found within English Language Arts General Outcome 3:

3.1 Plan and Focus
Determine information needs

Assessment *for* Learning (formative)
The **Student Self-Assessment Checklist** feedback tool provides a structure for formative assessment. Although designed for students to use independently or with peers, teachers can also use the tool in personal conferencing contexts with students. Over time, students gain experience in using criteria to evaluate their questions. As students internalize the criteria for powerful questions, they may not need to use this checklist in a formal way each time.

Assessment *of* Learning (summative)
Summative assessment takes place after students have had the opportunity to practise, receive descriptive feedback and adjust the quality of their questions. Summative assessment is not recommended during students' first experience with the skill of asking powerful questions, but will be more appropriate when applied in a new learning context.

When appropriate, the summative feedback tool, a **Teacher Rubric** can be used by teachers to evaluate the quality of the questions generated by students. Note that this rubric requires teachers to make a holistic professional judgement about the quality of the questions each student has created by anticipating the ability of the questions to generate a quality response.

The formative tool (Student Checklist) works hand in hand with the summative tool (Rubric). As students work to improve the quality of their questions and compile more evidence in the Yes column of the checklist, their position on the rubric moves towards the higher levels. Exemplars of student work can provide another source of support for students in helping them understand what quality responses look like.

Extension

Apply the procedure in other contexts.

- Repeat this activity as other guests visit the class, when students frame questions in preparation for studying a topic or when engaged in inquiry projects.
- An interesting extension for older students would be to adjust and apply the criteria to evaluate the quality of the answers resulting from the questions.
- Consider other contexts where questions and answers are highlighted such as politics, journalism, television, law, and so forth. Encourage students to observe and evaluate questions and answers in real world contexts using criteria generated in this learning sequence.

Credits

Adapted from *Critical Challenges Across the Curriculum* series. Permission granted by The Critical Thinking Consortium for use by Alberta Teachers.

Assessment support provided by the Alberta Assessment Consortium (AAC) in collaboration with The Critical Thinking Consortium.

Documents

The following documents are referenced in the above modelling the tools.
They can be adapted for your needs and re-saved.

Graphic Organizers

- **Sample #1**
- **Sample #2**

Assessment

- **Teacher Rubric**
- **Student Self-Assessment Checklist**

Lesson Material

- **Garfield Gini-Newman: Critical Thinking as a Way of Teaching Social Studies (Part 2)**
- **A Classroom Example of Asking Powerful Questions**