

This Is the Answer. What Are the Questions?

by Lori Mammen

It is better to ask some of the questions than to know all of the answers.—James Thurber

From the first day of kindergarten, students encounter a basic truth of education: Teachers ask questions that students must answer. Most students quickly learn that their ability to answer questions has a direct influence on their school success. While few would argue the value of correct and appropriate answers, we sometimes ignore another basic truth of education: Students should learn how to ask questions.

In “thinking” classrooms, teachers use questions to stimulate and encourage more thinking. What happens to students who never learn to do this for themselves? Who asks the thought-provoking questions when there is no teacher? Unfortunately, many students never get past the “responder” role they learn so early and so well.

A teacher can reverse the traditional approach by providing an answer and asking students to generate possible questions for the answer. This strategy can:

- create an atmosphere that encourages student questions
- stimulate student interest
- encourage active learning and independent thinking
- develop flexible, fluent thinking
- emphasize ideas rather than right answers
- validate student ideas

Have your students generate questions for the following answers. Then try the same strategy in your curriculum area.

- The answer is erosion. What are the questions?
- The answer is voting and elections. What are the questions?
- The answer is France and Spain. What are the questions?
- The answer is set. What are the questions?
- The answer is 48. What are the questions?
- The answer is nouns and verbs. What are the questions?