




 FROM THE MAGAZINE

Burning Questions: Using Big Questions That Lead to Big Learning

It was the early days of remote learning. I was staring at a screen full of avatars, as not a single 12th grade student had their camera on. I was talking into the void, unsure if anyone was listening or learning. I missed their faces. I missed their jokes. I missed their interruptions, comments, questions and most of all, I missed the connection. On the screen, I couldn't see the ah-ha faces or the looks of confusion. I couldn't tell if they were drifting or most importantly, if they were okay. But then, I asked some big questions, and the magic was back.



JENNIFER GUNN

 5 min read



The BIG Question

I always open my high school English classes in New York City with a big question or a set of questions that are provocative, thought-provoking, mindset shifting and debatable. I ask questions that lead to more questions and set us off into a storm of inquiry. What I call “The BIG questions” ignite curiosity and heighten interest in the learning to come. They guide students to *want* to think and learn by sparking the inquiry process.



would you want to see it? Why or why not?” Instantly, the chat feature came alive. Answers were pouring in. Students were writing responses and some couldn’t type fast enough. They were writing. They were engaging. A real, live discussion was happening in the chat. Not only that, they were asking follow-up questions, noting quantifiers, making connections, and responding to each other.

I followed up: “If you could see your life in the future, what might you want to know?” and “What would you definitely NOT want to know?” I heard the click of a mic come on, “Miss, I’m going to just jump in here, if that’s cool,” one student said, breaking the ice. And then more mics clicked on and we were actually *talking*. A few cameras popped on and I saw students in their bedrooms or in living spaces, surrounded by family members listening in. Finally, I asked, “Let’s say you were in love with someone, and wanted to know if they were the right one. If the technology existed and you could see a video of your future with this person, would you watch it or just see what happens?” The chat filled with “hmm’s” and one student responded through laughter, “Miss, now you’ve got me thinking. I don’t know!” The conversation continued.



What was all of this leading to? It was all related to a short story to come — a sci-fi story called “Sequence” by author J. Marcelle Corie from the anthology “A Phoenix First Must Burn: Sixteen Stories of Black Girl Magic, Resistance, and Hope.” Now, I had students hooked into the moral questions examined in the story. They were not only willing, but eager to read it. The high-interest questions paired with a high-interest text was a winning combination. We read the story, we asked a lot of questions and imagined ourselves in the character’s shoes. Then, we dug into the philosophy of free will, determinism and moral responsibility. Later, the students took to writing about these ideas in connection to the text, and it wasn’t a daunting task because they had already thoroughly explored the ideas. They had a lot of material to pull from in crafting their



Later that week, a student's mom emailed me and said, "My son, who usually hates school, is talking about the big question from English class at the dinner table and is telling us about the story you read and the debate in class." That was a win. In the first few days, this particular student was normally very quiet in class, but suddenly he was fired up and was taking that fire home. That's the power of simply asking *big* questions.

Essential Questions

Many of us experienced questioning in the classroom that was solely rooted in a correct or incorrect answer structure. Questions were merely checks for understanding, instead of firestarters, with the teacher asking a question having a *specific* answer in mind. And of course, that's appropriate sometimes. But "The secret to teaching may be as simple as asking students good questions — and then giving them the opportunity to find the answers," said Jeffrey D. Wilhelm, Distinguished Professor of Boise State University, Co-Director of the Boise State Writing Project, and an internationally-known teacher, author, and presenter. He described an essential question as one that "Frames a unit of study as a problem to be solved. It should connect students' lived experiences and interests (their only resources for learning something new) to disciplinary problems in the world. And it should connect what they learn back to the real world, where they can put their new understandings to work." Essential questions are open questions, with no exact right answer. Wilhelm noted the key to crafting successful essential questions is in creating *compelling* questions that lead to ongoing discussion and authentic (real-world connected) learning.

Big Questions Work Everywhere


Big questions are not just for English class or remote learning. They work across content areas and are particularly effective at generating lively participation in





realistically, some don't fly as high. The point, however, is to make engaging connections between academic content areas and the real world. You're doing something right when you foster relationships and a classroom culture in which students feel comfortable to think, be critical, and even argue. All of this is the pathway toward deeper learning. Academic subjects aren't just theories in textbooks to be memorized and recalled. Asking big questions builds a bridge between the learner and the content — one they may just take to the dinner table *and* beyond. And that's ... *big*.

How to Craft Big Questions

- **Think BIG:** Look for the overarching themes, moral issues, and big concepts of the intended topic. 
- **Make Connections:** Create questions that form a link between those big ideas and real life.
- **Keep it Open:** Your essential question should be open-ended with no exact correct answer.
- **Explore Human Experience:** Explore how learning the content relates to the human experience, human emotion, or morality.
- **Keep It Debatable:** Let your question intentionally leave room for argument, and let your students run with it.
- **Know Your Audience:** The more you know your students, the more likely your questions will land. Know their interests, passions, trends, and concerns.



JENNIFER GUNN

Jennifer L.M. Gunn spent 10 years in newspaper and magazine publishing before moving to public education. She is a curriculum designer, teacher, teaching coach, and educator in New York City. She created Right to Read, a literacy acceleration program for teens, steeped in social justice. She also created the progressive learning models, The Big Idea Project and We the Change. Jennifer is also co-founder of the annual EDxEDNYC Education Conference for teacher-led innovation. She is a regular presenter at conferences and frequently writes about education, adolescent literacy and innovation. Connect with Jennifer on Twitter: @jenniferlmgunn.



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RECOMMENDED

Get your Zoom on: 5 simple ways
to get a Zoom class flowing.





Get your Zoom on. 5 simple ways to get a Zoom class flowing.

A global pandemic thrust us into the abyss of e-learning and we either sank or swam. Well, we're teachers, so we treaded water until we learned how to do an Olympic freestyle ... that's just how we do.

MEGAN SULLIVAN

🕒 2 min read






comes to Zoom-based teaching, is getting the tone set at the beginning of class. Normally, getting students engaged in lessons can happen with a hook in a lesson to get them interested. Here's the good news: This same technique can be applied to online teaching, though it may look different. Here are some ideas to hook students into Zoom lessons:

- **Meme Check-in** Compile a collage of funny pictures/images of animals or memes on a slide and begin your lesson by having students choose one of the memes that represents how they are feeling that day.
- **Would You Rather** Begin the day with a “Would you rather” question. For example: “Would you rather smell bad or have walrus teeth?” Stumped? A quick search on the internet for “Would you rather” questions for kids will generate a ton of topics. You can even use this moment as a way to teach proper discussion and debate tactics. The key here is to use funny or relatable topics. Kids won't want to miss the beginning of class if you ask them to debate the superiority of understanding what animals are saying over having the ability to be invisible.
- **Trivia** Start class with a game, content-related or not. There are numerous game-based learning platforms, like Kahoot and Quizlet, offering live gaming options so you can control the pacing and have students compete in real time.
- **I Spy** Engage students and get them focused on the screen and each other with a simple game of I Spy. Students can take turns spying things in each other's backgrounds. Alert kids ahead of time that the game will be happening so that they can find a spot they are comfortable with their peers looking at in-depth.





beginning of class a ton of fun by having kids compete in teams to guess what their peers are drawing. Pro tip: Use this activity to review vocabulary words from previous lessons.

- **Current Events** Choose a video or news story to share with students. You can also assign this as an ongoing activity, giving students the task of presenting a current event on a pre-assigned day. They can comment or ask questions about the current event on a collaborative whiteboard, such as Jamboard.
- **20 Questions** This classic game is a fun way to kick off any class, in person or virtually. Have students guess something or someone you are thinking about by asking yes or no questions. The best part is that you can use this to review vocabulary or characters from a text. 



MEGAN SULLIVAN

Megan Sullivan teaches fifth grade in New York, and has spent the last 13 years teaching mostly middle school grades in Rhode Island, Indiana, and New York. When she's not chasing her two kids around or playing cards with her husband, she is pursuing a postgraduate degree in Educational Administration.



It's that time of year again. The time to reflect on the past, plan for the future, and take on some new and exciting challenges! Let's make this year a great one.

JEN WATKINS

🕒 3 min read



Remember when you were a kid and heard for the first time about the ball dropping at midnight? People gathering in the streets of NYC to watch the spectacle? I remember imagining it all. I couldn't wait to be old enough to stay



below. An explosion of glass and metal to the applause of a million in attendance. When I was old enough to finally stay up, I watched as a tiny yard decoration descended slowly along what looked like a 4-foot spire. What?!

Reality could never live up to expectations. As I grew older still, that idea seemed to apply to more and more New Year's Eve traditions — not the least of which were my resolutions.

Left to my own devices, I'd build my year into something wild, huge, and, honestly, unachievable. Like the monster ball being dropped off a skyscraper, it just wasn't reality. The resolution became a weapon against me; a 30,000-foot measuring stick. So, this year I'm doing resolutions differently. I'm using what I've learned from experts like James Clear, Brené Brown, and Rufus Griscom and built a Mad-Lib-style resolution-maker. Take it for a spin, stay realistic, and set your sights on real, gradual improvement in 2022.





TEACHER RESOLUTIONS

Commitments to health, craft, and community will help you build a 2022 full of substance and joy. Let's resolve to work on ourselves this year, together.

SELF CARE

- 01 Studies show that physical health is directly linked to mental health. This year I'll commit to _____ days per week. Physical activity
Number
- 02 It's important to take care of ourselves before attempting to take care of others. I'm committing to _____ as an act of self care. Something you love
- 03 Meditation is an excellent practice for reducing stress and increasing levels of focus. I will meditate for _____ minutes per day to clear my mind. Number

RELATIONSHIPS

- 04 Sometimes relationships can drain us emotionally. This year, I'll set up boundaries with _____ that help create a more healthy relationship. Name of person
- 06 Having a lifeline in this career is huge. This year, I'm going to establish a closer relationship with _____ as a mentor. Name of person
- 05 Being a mentor is just as important as having one. This year, I'll be working closer with _____ to help them along. Name of person

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

- 07 Priorities are critical for staying on track over time. In teaching, my highest priorities this year will be:
 _____ Priority 01 _____ Priority 02 _____ Priority 03
 _____ Priority 04 _____ Priority 05
- 08 Being armed with information is one of the best ways to stay healthy. I will read _____ to help improve my teaching this year. Name of book
- 09 Growth mindset is all about trying and learning from failure. This year I'm going to try _____ to improve _____. Name of teaching method
Measurable outcome for students



Try our New Year's Resolution Planner!



JEN WATKINS



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