WHAT'S A GOOD QUESTION?

by Fred Sanders, The Scriptorium Daily

In his visionary book *Finding Common Ground*, Tim Downs noted that "because Christians tend to be answer people, we're not especially skilled at asking good questions; questions that aren't simplistic, leading, or downright insulting." Ouch.

In Biola's Torrey Honors Institute (http://academics.biola.edu/torrey/), we're answer people, but we teach socratically. That means our primary job as teachers is to ask questions, and they need to be good ones. What's a good question? That's a good question.

A good question evokes curiosity by exhibiting curiosity.

A socratic teacher can't hover above the discussion, occasionally hurling a thunderbolt of insight down toward the benighted students from the Olympian heights of clear understanding. A socratic teacher has to get down in the perplexities with the students, and find the way out using the same resources available to them.

When preparing for one of our three-hour class sessions, a socratic teacher can script about half of the major questions in advance. By reading the text with students in mind, the tutor can generate a dozen major questions and some supporting questions under each of those. But once class begins the dialectic takes unpredicted turns, leading out beyond the foreseen questions. Then the tutor has to set aside the scripted questions, and develop the skill of creating new questions on the spot.

A good question, in this sense, will be specifically tailored to the new situation. Here are some dichotomies to help in crafting questions.

Low-level questions only require students to repeat information, perhaps to rephrase it. But **high-level questions** require analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of the information (I'm using "low" and "high" loosely, but see *Bloom's Taxonomy of Cognitive Objectives* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bloom%27s_taxonomy) for a widespread definition).

Information retrieval questions get short, factual answers. ("Who is Athena's mother?") **Information**

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evaluation questions presuppose information retrieval, and usually get the short, factual answer thrown in as the student hurries on to the evaluative task. ("Is Athena like her mother?") Info-retrieval questions are usually best used in a series that are leading somewhere.

Convergent questions imply one right answer. ("What is the main idea of this book?") **Divergent questions** suggest a range of possibilities. ("What are some of the most important things in this book?")

Unstructured questions do not indicate what form the answer should take. ("What did you think of Paradise Lost?") **Structured questions** dictate the right form of response. ("What is a new idea you got from Milton?" "What makes you mad in Paradise Lost?")

Multiple questions offer many questions at once, so the real question is, which of my questions do you want to use? ("Why does God choose certain people for His purposes? Was He not dealing with individuals before Genesis 11? What's special about Abraham? Does the text say why Abraham was chosen by God?") **Singular questions** present a sheer cliff by comparison. ("Why did God choose Abraham?") Singular questions usually produce some silence from students. Multiple questions are a way for the tutor to fill up gaps in the conversation, to seed the clouds, and to check several prospects at once.

Expected questions are smooth. ("Do the Federalist Papers throw any light on the U.S. Constitution?") **Unexpected questions** either approach the subject from a surprising angle, or play against student presuppositions. ("Would the Federalists be in favor of dividing California into three separate states?") Struggling with glib students and rapid answers? Deploy a few dramatically unexpected questions.

Some questions **focus on how the text itself presents ideas** ("Why does Bunyan compare the Christian life to a long journey with battles along the way?"); others look away from what the text presents by **exploring terms and categories the author did not present.** ("Why didn't Bunyan make this a sea journey with pirates? Why didn't he make it a cooking contest? Why didn't he make his characters talking animals?") When you use the second kind of question, make sure you're serving the author and not changing the subject or becoming impressed with your own, supposedly superior, ideas.

Close-ended questions require one short answer, usually yes or no. ("Had you ever read this book before today?") **Open-ended questions** require a complex answer. ("How many times have you read this book before today?")

An **obvious definition question** seeks categorization ("What is an epic?"); a **concealed definition question** presupposes that, but puts it off by one step. ("Is this an epic?")

Some questions clarify by **focusing on the intention of the student who has just spoken** ("Do you mean that having faith is a kind of work?"); others clarify by **focusing on the text.** ("Does Luther think that having faith is a kind of work?")

Some questions offer an **invitation to synthesis** ("How can mercy and justice be reconciled?"); others **force a dichotomy.** ("Would you rather receive merciless justice or unjust mercy?")

Some questions put the **tutor in focus**, requiring students to volley back to the authority figure ("Why am I asking about revenge, if Shakespeare doesn't use that word?"); other questions **encourage students to bat the discussion back and forth with each other.** ("Miss A, you seem to disagree with Mr. B.")

Some questions are really an exercise in **reflective listening in question form**, showing that you are actively listening right now. ("Do I hear you saying that Solomon was in fact one of the most foolish of men?")

Some questions are phrased in a way that aggressively **moves the class over one issue and hurries them on to the next issue**. These show that you have already heard (in the past tense) and are ready for the next step. ("Yes, having hundreds of wives is not exactly wise. But what I

want to know is, which of Solomon's actions show him to be exercising the wisdom we know he was given?")

Many of the best questions are so context-specific that they will emerge directly from close observation of the text or the conversation. Sometimes the tutor should simply ask how one sentence relates to the preceding one, or how a certain set of words is different from the diction used elsewhere in the same work. ("Why are all these courtroom terms being used on this page? Why is the vocabulary of a legal proceeding suddenly so prominent?") Other times a quick internal summary of how the conversation got to this point will suggest an incisive question. ("Then we asked about deceitfulness, and you said the king was a master rhetorician, and we started talking about the abuse of power. Was that a logical chain of thought, or free association?")

Finally, if you get into enough long, involved conversations, you're bound to reach a point where you're out of ideas and the good questions aren't coming to you fast enough, or when a student says something that you just can't get your mind around. Instead of saying "huh" or "what in the world do you mean?", do one of the following four things:

- Inquire into the assumptions behind what is being said
- Examine the reasons given, whatever they are
- Require evidence to be offered
- Ask about implications

Socratic teachers all experience those moments when they lose their bearings and can't figure out how to get to the next major topic, or even what that topic is. While you're waiting for the big idea to occur to you, or in an absolute emergency of mind-not-working-good-hood, you should memorize the following sets of syllables and say some of them out loud instead of saying "duh."

- Why do you say that?
- How does what you're saying relate to what we've said so far in this class?
- X, what do you think Y is saying?
- What is another example of what you're saying?
- If that is the answer, what was the question?
- What is it that convinces you this is true?
- What would it take to make you change your mind about this?
- Can you explain what makes you think this?

None of those are great questions. But in the right place and time, they can be good questions.