

HAVING MEANINGFUL DISCUSSIONS USING “THICK” QUESTIONS

Following each podcast, it is suggested that when students are done listening they talk with peers about what they have just heard. It is not intuitive for students to know how to “discuss” the podcasts in partners or small groups. More than likely, you are already modeling this kind of deeper discussion through your read alouds in class.

The key to getting your students to have a better discussion after your walks is to help them ask better questions and active listen in order to build on their peers’ thoughts. It may seem like your students do nothing but ask questions all day long, but are they asking the right ones? Many students might actively participate in class, but are they good listeners?

Why does it matter?

This may seem like an easy step to just want to skip over, but it really does make a significant difference. If students are given the opportunity and encouraged to discuss the content with their peers, they will retain the information presented in the podcast, and any material for that matter, so much better. Their new learning will be anchored in meaningful conversations and it will help extend their thinking and understanding beyond the 15 minutes spent listening to the material.

Not only that, but as evident by the Common Core Speaking and Listening Standards, being able to carry on a conversation that is text-based and builds on the ideas of others is a vital skill that students must be taught and given the time to practice.

That being said, this portion of the walk will not come naturally to students, but rather must be modeled and practiced and will take time to develop. However, once students start to develop the skills, the depth of their thinking and conversations will truly astound you. Rothstein & Santana, the authors of Make Just One Change: Teach Students to Ask Their Own Questions, conducted research that shows that the ability to ask questions leads to new ideas, new inventions, better solutions, improved learning outcomes, greater student engagement, and more ownership of the learning process. What teacher doesn’t want that for their students?!

However, Rothstein & Santana also explain that “the skill of being able to generate a wide range of questions and strategize about how to use them effectively is rarely, if ever, deliberately taught.”



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Thick vs. Thin Questions

At The Walking Classroom, we talk about asking “**Thick Questions**” instead of “**Thin Questions**” to support good discussion between students.

Thin Questions: Thin questions are those questions whose answers can be found in the text or podcast and can be answered with a few words or short sentences. Another way to think about it is to say that the answers are “right there.” They are easier to answer, can often be answered with a “yes” or “no” response and usually have just one answer.

Examples of Thin Questions:

- When...?
- Where...?
- Who...?
- How many...?

Thick Questions: Thick questions are inferential questions that ask us to think more deeply about the text since the answers don’t come solely from the text or podcast. Answers to thick questions are open to argument, meaning that they should still be supported by the text but one’s own reasoning is a part of the response. Another way to think about it is to say that these questions make you “think and search.” Thick questions are harder to answer, you often need to use your background knowledge to respond, evidence is needed to support the answer, and there are often many answers to the same question.

Examples of Thick Questions:

- What if...?
- How did...?
- Why did...?
- What would happen if...?
- How would you feel if...?
- What do you think...?
- What caused...?

Informal Assessment: Any easy way to see if your students get the difference is to ask your students some questions and ask them to identify if the question is “thick” or “thin”. If you would like to create a visual, they can be sorted on a T-chart.

Some possible questions to sort:

- What time does school start? (Thin)
- How many students are absent today? (Thin)
- When do we eat lunch? (Thin)
- Are there more boys or girls in our class? (Thin)
- Why is exercise important? (Thick)
- How would you feel if the school year was one month longer? (Thick)



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- What do you think about soda being sold in the school cafeteria? (Thick)
- What if homework was banned? (Thick)

OR

Read a book, such as The Mysteries of Harris Burdick by Chris Van Allsburg and have students come up with Thick and Thin questions about some of different images.

Putting it into Practice

Once your students have a good understanding of Thick vs. Thin questions, it's time to try it out! Consider assigning students a partner or partners to discuss the podcast with after the walk. Go out and follow your usual walking routine. After students have finished listening to the podcast they should meet up with their partner(s) and try to have a discussion using Thick questions. Upon returning to the classroom, ask students how the discussion went and consider having them share some of the Thick questions they discussed with their partner(s). As a class reflect on how the discussion might have been different than previous discussion and what they could do to have even better discussions next time. It's often easier to have a better discussion the second time they have listened to a podcast.

Accountability

You can't be everywhere at there are always those students who will wander off topic or simply choose not to discuss the podcasts if the teacher is not right beside them. Listening journals are a great way to hold students accountable for listening to the podcasts and participating in discussions. However you choose to have your students respond, they can write an additional sentence or two about how they felt their discussion went and give themselves and their partner(s) a quick rating from 1-5 about how they did with asking thick questions, staying on topic, etc. Once you know students are having on topic, meaningful discussions, you can just have them rate themselves every once in a while.

Example: Discussion Rating Chart (1 - poor, 3 - good, 5 - excellent)

My partner(s) and I stayed on topic during our discussion.	1	2	3	4	5
My partner(s) and I asked thick questions.	1	2	3	4	5
Our discussion helped me better understand...					
Next time I think we should...					



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Taking it a Step Further -- Conversational Moves: Later in the year, once students know how to ask questions, consider introducing them to conversational moves to ensure they are actively listening to their peers when discussing and that they are learning to build on what someone else thinks.

- I agree with you because...
- I respectfully disagree with you because...
- Why do you think that?
- So, what you're saying is...
- To add on to...
- Can you explain what you mean...

