

Questions, Questions

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Two of the most frequent criticisms levelled at the National Literacy Strategy are that it discourages children from reading whole books, and that it damages their enthusiasm by question-overkill. Instead of enjoying books for their own sakes, goes the argument, we are too concerned about testing comprehension. And our questions close children down instead of opening them up. We all know what it feels like to be anxious about getting it right, and what that anxiety does to our thinking. The ‘pose/pause/pounce’ model, of teacher as predator, doesn’t foster learning.

i-read has been designed to answer both these charges. First of all, it uses complete texts, not extracts – whole books, which allow children to experience the real thing, not pre-digested gobbets. And to meet the second charge, questions are woven into work on the whiteboard, with the emphasis on real questions, which are intended to stimulate discussion, not just to seek ‘one right answer’. The most useful questions don’t merely check knowledge but are designed to get children thinking, building on their pre-existing knowledge and asking them to apply it to new situations. This way they are constructing new knowledge for themselves.

It’s important to use the whiteboards effectively by making sure that the software doesn’t take over, that you and the children always remain in control and are able to explore your own individual responses. These days, everyone talks about *interactive learning* but it isn’t always clear what that phrase really means. The way to get a real discussion going, where the children are genuinely engaged with the text, is by asking

real questions. By real questions, I mean questions you don't already know the answer to, questions like these taken from *i-read*:

- What do you think of the ending?
- Do you think the children feel sorry about . . . ?
- How can you tell . . . ?
- What makes you think that?
- What would you have done?
- How could we . . . ?
- Is there anything you particularly like or dislike?
- What do you imagine . . .
- What if . . .
- Should he have told the truth, do you think?
- Does it remind you of anything else you've read?

Whiteboards have the potential for changing the relationship between teachers and pupils. Working around a large screen together encourages collaborative tasks, the to and fro of ideas, with the teacher providing scaffolding and direction by questioning and probing. Step back when you can and let the children have control of the pen. It's important that they should be able to reach the whiteboard easily, and that some of your questions focus on *how* they are navigating the technology – for example, ask them how they did something, or what might happen if they tried something else.

i-read materials are carefully structured so that children move smoothly through the stages of learning, from observation, to shared involvement, and finally to independence. The Demonstration activity, for example, can model how good readers

are constantly asking and answering their own questions – for example, you may vocalise thoughts about setting: “I wonder where this is happening . . . it mentions a pond and some grass . . . is it a field? No, more like a school playground . . .” Or you can show them how to justify their choices by providing evidence, for example, in a drag and drop activity: “Now why did I choose that word to describe the character? Well, I was thinking of the scene where . . .” Emphasise the importance of justifying opinions: it’s a surer way of promoting learning than prompting the children towards one answer. *i-read* is full of opportunities; for example, asking children to pick a favourite line from a poem (Year 5) and explaining why, or the best website (Year 4, non-fiction), or the best description of a teacher (Year 4, poetry). These questions give children something to argue about, one of the best ways of getting a real conversation going.

Many of the questions ask children to express an individual response to the text. Once again, there’s no emphasis on right or wrong; instead, children are led towards understanding how personal reading is; we each bring our own experiences to the text. For example, after reading poetry (Year 4) they are asked to describe the picture they have in their mind, or how it makes them feel, or what it reminds them of.

Prediction is another powerful tool in encouraging engagement with the text. Some of the Starter activities present brief clues and ask the children what kind of text they expect. For example, in Year 6, they look at a photograph of Evelyn Glennie, the percussionist, and listen to a few bars of music: what’s this unit going to be about, and what kind of writing might it include?

Teachers using whiteboards report enthusiastically about the children’s increased motivation and involvement: “their eyes sparkle” . . . “they seem to get a lot more

from it” . . . “they like the lively pace, there’s less writing down for the teacher as well as the children” . . . “ the discussion flows” . . . “they seem to remember what they’ve learned” . . . “I’m better now at asking children how they’ve reached that conclusion, instead of just testing what they know.”

It’s vital to ask questions that invite children to draw on their own experience, and to use higher order reading skills like inference, deduction and evaluation. Encourage them to *ask as well as to answer questions*. Some of the activities ask the children what they want to know more about, and what questions they have about the text so far (for example, Year 4 Historical stories). Others invite them to speculate about writers’ feelings (for example, in response to extracts from Scott’s diaries, Year 5) or to evaluate whether an explanation text is clear or not (Year 4).

If you handle children’s responses sensitively, and if you are willing to share your own without implying that yours are always right, you will be well on the way to creating a genuinely interactive classroom.

Some practical tips to help you:

- start from the principle that you are building meaning together, not testing the children – aim for a *learning conversation* not a Spanish Inquisition
- get into the habit of asking the children for an initial reaction – what they like/dislike/are puzzled by/want to know more about *before* launching your own agenda
- model how to respond to the questions on the screen by sometimes answering them yourself, thinking out loud to demonstrate how you set about working out the answer

- give the children time to think – some recent classroom research found that pupils need at least three seconds to respond, whereas teachers only left an average of one second
- don't target children by name before asking the question – if you do, nobody else will bother to listen
- invite children to discuss the question with a partner before responding –it's much less exposing than answering alone
- try not to have one correct answer already in your head – it will prevent you listening to the children's responses
- make sure you understand the child's answer even if you think it's wrong – it will tell you a lot about their learning
- follow up by asking for more if necessary ('go on . . . tell me why you think that')
- respect every answer even if it seems off-track at first – the golden rule is don't dismiss any contribution. It's tempting sometimes, but it will result in glum silence.
- involve others who don't volunteer by asking them to comment on the answer given: do they agree, or could they have a shot at explaining why they think differently
- supplement the questions on the screen with your own, don't stick too rigidly to the script. Children often respond unpredictably and it's important to acknowledge their initial reaction.