Introduction

I can't remember a time when I didn't want to be a teacher. It just seemed to be a self-determined fact of my young life. Somehow I understood that teaching involved learning, and learning was what I loved to do, for I was born with an extra gene for curiosity, a gift from my dear father, who was my first and best teacher.

As a teacher, my curiosity manifested itself in a low tolerance for boredom. Every few years I'd cajole my way into a new grade level until finally I'd covered the waterfront from kindergarten through middle school. I loved the chance to tackle a new curriculum, but mostly I just adored kids in any size, shape, or zip code. It didn't take long to discover that my restlessness was incompatible with classroom serenity. As a result, my kids and I became experts at beating the curricular bushes for intriguing projects that occasionally morphed into crusades. We lived and learned contentedly on the barricades, saving murals, defending endangered landmarks, and rewriting the history of our town to include its darker days of racial discrimination.

The most reassuring thing about curiosity-driven teaching was that as my kids grappled with nonstandard topics, their enthusiasm for learning exploded. At times their appetites were so voracious that it took all my energy not to feel like the poster girl for No Teacher Left Behind. Cramming continually to meet the challenge, I was supremely happy.

My greatest fortune was to have a wealth of mentors. Of course, my students were my best and most critical coaches when it came to authentic teaching. And in every school, I discovered a few great teachers who became great friends. In my last years in the classroom I met Dr. Paul Heckman, the quietest revolutionary in education. Actually, it was more like a collision. He

pushed me relentlessly to reexamine my fundamental beliefs about teaching, just when I was ready for a good, long rest on my laurels. But I wanted to be a great teacher, so I listened, dismembered my curriculum, and grew.

For twenty-three years I rose each morning and eagerly headed for a classroom. Most nights I fell asleep with a book in my hands, determined to learn more about learning. I was grateful to any author who could zap a few of my weary neurons violently enough to spark an epiphany.

Now I'm returning the favor. I wrote *Classroom Confidential* to help you have a few epiphanies of your own. First, I emptied a quarter century of ideas from my head. Then I went in search of some truly great teachers who could share their excellence with you. You get to meet Ruby Bridges' teacher and a man who cruises graveyards with his kids as an introduction to local history. You even get a recipe for pumpkin bread from the world's best mentor.

Classroom Confidential is your paperback mentor. And although it can never take the place of learning from your students or those intimate conversations with trusted colleagues, it can keep you company late at night and be a silent partner in your quest for greatness. So swing for the fences! Knock yourself out! I swear you'll never regret an ounce of passion or an hour of your life spent on the awesome task of helping children learn. Be a *great* teacher! It's the most amazing gift you can give yourself.

SECRET #5

Great Teachers Don't Take No (or Yes) for an Answer

Teaching by Asking Instead of Telling

In This Chapter:

- What's the Big Idea About Inquiry Teaching?
- The Three Basic Moves
- The Impact of Inquiry on Learning
- Wait Time in a Hurried World
- Planning Inquiry-Based Instruction
- An Inquiry-Based Unit: The Rise of Civilization
- Inquiry and Classroom Culture

Kids don't have to be in the gifted club or even wide awake to answer most of the questions their teachers pose. In fact, the level of dialogue in some classrooms is so rudimentary that many bright kids have completely abandoned the notion of school as a cerebral experience. That's why in many classrooms you encounter the phenomenon of the DA—the Designated Answerer. Designated Answerers have a single purpose in school—to answer any question the teacher asks. They spend most of the day with their arms in an aerial position, waiting expectantly, cooperatively, even slavishly, to field the next volley.

What's the capital of Iowa?

Des Moines!

What is the major export of Alaska?

Oil!

What do pandas eat?

Bamboo!

How many toes on your left foot?

Uh, five? (Seems like a trick question.)

Some classrooms have just one DA, tirelessly playing verbal ping-pong with the teacher from early morning through the closing bell. Other rooms are DA-rich. Three or even four contenders semaphore vigorously to catch the teacher's eye, or gasp as if being garroted to catch her ear. All for the honor of delivering the "right" answer, so the game can move on to the next round.

And where are the rest of the students? AWOL. Having a rich fantasy life. Working on a series of Baroque doodles, or drafting the great American novel, one clandestine note at a time. They're bored. Indifferent. Ripe for rebellion. Can you blame them? The teacher has made it clear that their presence is only required so that the body count matches the attendance sheet. Participation is strictly optional—maybe even unwelcome from students with inquisitive minds or an argumentative streak. And that's fine with them. School is simply a rehearsal for retirement, without the cane or walker.

The only thing that disturbs the metabolism of most students is when the Designated Answerer is absent or unexpectedly transfers to another school. Who's going to keep the teacher busy all day? The teacher may get a little nervous, too. Who *is* going to answer her questions? What will happen when she asks where Kenya is located, and no one volunteers "right on the equator" or leaps up and gestures toward the middle of the map? Luckily, teachers have a robust repertoire of emergency moves for situations just like this. Faced with stony silence, they repeat the question, "Who can find Kenya?" but louder, as if they've suddenly been transferred into a class for the hearing-impaired. If the silence persists, they're likely to bear down upon a hapless student and demand, "Adrianne, find Kenya!" or simply stab at the map with a yardstick, sputtering, "Right there! We talked about this last week."

Not a pretty picture. But it's pretty accurate. Too many schools and instructional programs that tout critical thinking seem to be fundamentally critical *of* thinking as a basic classroom activity. It takes a long time. It's messy. The outcomes are uncertain. And how do you assess something that has no right answer? The instructional day is so crowded with "experts," from textbooks and videos, to prescribed, scripted, time-driven curriculum that there's simply no place for students or teachers to say, "Wait a minute, I don't think I agree. Let's take a closer look at that."

What if teachers do want to dig in and try some rigorous thinking? Really probe kids to find out what they're wondering besides "Is it lunchtime yet?" They're not likely to get many takers. Any kid who's old enough to tie his shoes

without assistance is too savvy to play that game because from the first day of kindergarten, we teach kids how to *do* school. The teacher asks a question. It has one answer. He already has that answer, but he wants to hear it from a kid. In return for the right answer, the respondent will get a smile or a saccharine "that's right" and the class will get another question to answer. That's how you do school, and woe unto the student who breaks the rules, gives the wrong answer, or worse, asks a question back! Questions posed by students frequently earn the curt reply, "We're not talking about that now."

This is a graveyard for thinkers.

So kids protect themselves by not volunteering unless they're certain of the answer. If you decide to change the rules by asking open-ended questions that seem more like an invitation to ruminate than simply recite, kids think it's a trick. Their response? Industrial-strength silence.

Here's the saddest part. That silence in your room is an echo of the silence in their heads. Their brains are gridlocked—intrigued by the notion of a question that really could have some interesting possibilities, and paralyzed by the skepticism that there's just one right answer after all, and they don't have it.

Enter Socrates.

What's the Big Idea About Inquiry Teaching?

Socrates was one of the first educators to conclude that learning cannot be delivered. Like most great teachers, he believed that people learn best when they're involved, and the way Socrates got them involved was to ask a great question. He spent his life asking and asking, annoying almost everyone in town, until finally they quenched his thirst for knowledge with a cup of hemlock. Happily, teachers who use Socrates as a model rarely share his fate.

The way that Socrates taught is called the Socratic or inquiry method. The word *inquiry* tells it all. It's about motion—probing, eliciting, pressing for, searching, seeking, scrutinizing. Inquiry is an interactive, give-and-take-ish way to pursue learning with your students. It's the opposite of those monologues called the didactic approach, where the teacher delivers large shipments of information to students who are apparently "learning." In reality, many students simply gaze in the approximate direction of the speaker and silently refuse delivery. Occasionally the teacher breaks the monotony by firing a low-level question over their heads—Who was the first president of the United States? How many inches in a yard? Which is bigger, a molecule or an atom? Who fought in the War of 1812?—more as a check for consciousness than comprehension.

The inquiry method uses questions, too, but they're open-ended. That means there's no one right answer, since the purpose is to elicit students' thoughts, and then help them examine their thinking. The answers to inquiry

questions are knowable to anyone within earshot, if the question is well-crafted and the students work at it by thinking.

Let's look at some didactic questions translated into the inquiry mode.

Didactic Questions	Open-Ended Inquiry Questions
What shape is this leaf?	What do you notice about this leaf?
How was this tool used?	How might this tool have been used? By whom?
What color is this?	How would you describe this color?
What is bark?	Why do you think trees have bark?
What animals migrate?	Why do you think creatures and people migrate?
Who invented the first writing system?	Why do you think people invented writing?

Words like *think, would, could,* or *might* embedded in a question indicate inquiry in progress. They signal that there are many ways to answer the question, and typically the answers themselves stimulate more questions. So instead of the tidy game of ping-pong that occurs with didactic teaching, inquiry stimulates talking, puzzling, risking, and debating. Students feel confused, frustrated, tense, puzzled, affronted, shocked, determined, and sometimes triumphantly surprised at their own cognitive accomplishments.

Inquiry demands effort. Teachers have to work hard devising great questions, but the good news is that kids have to work harder because inquiry forces them to root around in their heads and come up with details, examples, evidence, ideas, theories, and speculations. In an era when sound bites have replaced communication and thought, this is revolutionary. The teacher listens, thinks, and asks another question and perhaps another to push students' thinking. The result is that kids get smarter through their own efforts. They construct meaning by interacting with others, rather than waiting in a persistent vegetative state for another delivery of information.

Where does inquiry fit in your teaching day? Great teachers are perpetually in inquiry mode. They use inquiry in the moment, to respond to students' remarks. For example, if a student complains, "I don't get why we have to study history, anyway. All these people are dead, so what's the difference?" An inquiry-type response would be, "That's an interesting question. Why might it be useful for us to learn about things that happened in the past?" If you train yourself to consistently respond to questions and remarks with probing questions, students learn to think first, or pose better questions geared toward finding an answer, not just registering a complaint.