

Supporting Student Questions

Many students are uncomfortable asking questions. Perhaps their school experiences have led them to believe that asking questions is "dumb" because questions reveal that they don't know answers. Perhaps they have been in classrooms where the teacher asked all the questions as a means of assessing whether or not students had done their work or mastered the material.

Good literature discussions, however, are predicated on asking questions and exploring possible answers. Indeed, a basic belief of the *Envisioning Literature* workshops and video libraries is that questions are at the very center of the literary experience. Posing questions—real questions—and seeking answers are fundamental to the way in which good readers build literary envisionments as they work through their understandings of texts. If you sense that your students are uneasy asking questions, you may have to do a little groundwork to help them become more comfortable with their public wonderings. Here are two suggestions for activities that do just that.

1. Barbara Hoetker Ash offers one way to use student questions when introducing a new work of literature. In "Student Made Questions: One Way Into a Literary Text" (for the complete citation, see "Additional Resources" in the library guide) she describes introducing her students to *Sounder* by reading the first sentence of the novel aloud three times: "The tall man stood at the edge of the porch." She then asked her students to write down five questions based on that sentence. A student volunteer shared a question, and then called on another student, and so on until Ash had listed all the student-generated questions on the board. A teacher would have a number of follow-up choices at this point:
 - Pass out the books and invite the students to begin reading.
 - Post the list of questions and use them to frame discussion as students move through the book.
 - Use the questions to discuss the value of questioning itself (How can these questions help us as we read?" or "Which questions do you think will be the easiest to answer as we read?" or "What happens if we have questions that the book doesn't answer?").

2. After students have read several chapters (or perhaps even completed the text) ask them to write two authentic questions—questions they have about the literature that they cannot answer, but that they would like answered. Have them form groups of three to five and share and discuss their questions. Ask them to try to find satisfactory "answers" to everybody's questions. Using sections of the chalkboard, overhead slides, or butcher paper, have each group list their questions to share with the class as a whole, marking any questions that the group could not answer with a star. As the groups share, point out that many of them had similar questions and that support from a group helped them find some answers. Ask how their understandings of the text changed with the discussion. Address the starred questions, noting that, in some cases, readers have questions for which there may be no satisfactory answers.