How To Get Better Questions Faster

This is courtesy of a "Field Correspondent", Lucy Gray, who teaches in Brisbane. I enjoyed the questions her class had created, and that opened up a useful conversation about question generation.

Below are the four stimuli mentioned, the children's questions, our email conversation about question generation - and a request for more Lucys!

The stimuli

John Cage's 4' 33" - the famous piece of music that consists only of silence of a specified duration (if you use this video, play from 1' 00" in so that it can be a surprise.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yoAbXwr3qkg

Pepper the Robot
- fired from grocery store for not being up to the job
https://www.digitaltrends.com/cool-tech/pepper-robot-grocery-store/

The Visitor and **The Ring of Gyges**
These have previously appeared in the bulletin, and are attached as Philosophy Circles Session Plans, the format used in the resource pack.

The questions the children created

The Visitor
Is time travel a curse or a privilege?
What makes something right or wrong and does that change over time?
Are we becoming too politically correct?
If you could change the past to benefit the future, would you?
Is anything really impossible?
Is our fate determined or do we determine our fate?
Would you help yourself or others?
Is there life after death?
How does something once so acceptable become so wrong?

Ring of Gyges.
Why do people want to live forever?
Do you want to live forever?

Can you avoid the inevitable?
If life doesn't end, what is the point of it?
Is everything meant to be?
Is life too long or too short?
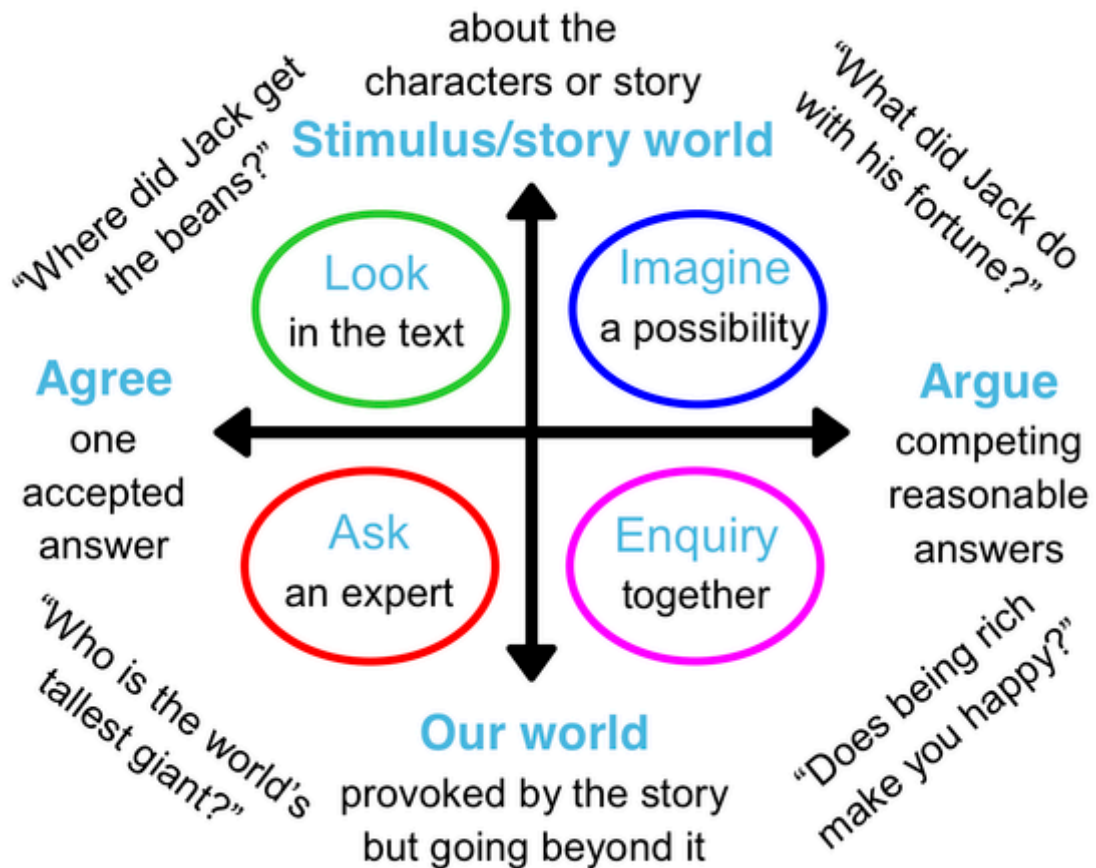Do you have control over your own fate?

Pepper the Robot
Should there be restrictions on using robots so as to preserve human jobs?
Should robots have the same rights as humans?
Does Pepper deserve our sympathy?
What makes humans more capable of having emotions than robots?
What do humans expect from robots?
What is considered a robot?
Can a relationship with a robot replace a human?

Question Generation - Email Conversation

ME: Thanks so much for sending through these questions! I'm thrilled with the diversity of issues they spotted, in The Visitor in particular. It's a useful reminder for us of how powerful the "traditional" method of question generation can be for an experienced group and facilitator. We tend to encourage people to steer clear of it in their initial sessions because the results can be disappointing if people go straight in with it, but the quality of these questions shows its merits as an approach for a group who have got the hang of it. Could I ask how long it took your group to start asking questions of this quality, and how you got them to that point?

LUCY: It took the group 4 weeks to get to this point, practising PI at least twice a week for 70 minutes each time. I did a lot of work on question generation and found the Question Quadrant really useful. I emphasised two things regarding question generation: volume and taking an intellectual risk. I gave students sufficient time to generate lots of questions, the more they generated the more the overall quality of questions they had to choose from was. [Lucy used Phil Cam's quadrant, on which mine is a variation that avoids the double meanings of open and closed questions – on the next page]

about the
characters or story
Stimulus/story world

"Where did Jack get the beans?"

"What did Jack do with his fortune?"

Look in the text

Imagine a possibility

Agree
one
accepted
answer

Argue
competing
reasonable
answers

Ask an expert

Enquiry together

"Who is the world's tallest giant?"

"Does being rich make you happy?"

Our world
provoked by the story
but going beyond it

[ME: This is a great example of an important principle: practice the problems. Just as when you are learning an instrument, it is more efficient to practice the difficult bits rather than just repeating "whole piece practice", so if you want a group to improve in a particular skill, practice that part of the process intensively and you will see faster improvement than if you just repeat the whole enquiry cycle.]

LUCY: Secondly, I encouraged them to take an intellectual risk and create questions that would encourage lots of discussion. This intellectual risk was extended to the actual discussion, I heavily encouraged students to use their voice, even if they were not sure, to move the thinking forward. Regarding John Cage's 4'33 the question, "Why did he write it?" served as a good example of a question that might look philosophical but isn't actually. I wrote in on the board and asked students to decide whether it was philosophical or not. Those that thought it was looked at the why and assumed that "why" questions are always philosophical. Through discussion we teased out that it did, in fact, belong in the literary speculation quadrant. ["Imagine" in my version of the quadrant, shown - Lucy was working from Philip Cam's]

[ME: Skill generally develops through the identification and reduction of errors, as demonstrated here. As philosophical facilitators, we don't teach them what to think, but we still have a role in teaching them how to philosophise!]

LUCY: Another thing... I asked the students to tell me what themes came up in the stimulus before they started generating questions. They have mini whiteboards on their laps when I read to them and they write down the themes as the story progresses so they do not forget any. That serves a similar purpose to the (very useful) debrief that you do at the end of the stimuli but has come from them. Sometimes they think of themes that are not obvious and they have to "defend" their position on why that is a theme (this is light hearted but also ensures that students are not just generating a question like "Does God exist?" because that's what they want to talk about on that given day).

ME: That's an interesting tweak too. Going from the story to themes is absolutely crucial I find, but I've always done it at the end (after they have read and discussed the story). My guess is you get a greater range of responses your way as they can make their own sense of what the story is about (as they hear it) before it gets tied down by the general discussion. [Also for some students, writing as a preparation for speaking gives them a "prop" that helps them participate].

Field Correspondents Wanted!

I'm very grateful to Lucy for sharing her work, particularly as Tom is in schools most of this week and I was stumped for ideas. For lots of reasons, it would be very helpful to get more content from readers so that the bulletin has more of a community feel to it - so please, please, don't be shy about sharing your favorite sessions.

Teachers often underestimate the quality of the work they are doing and the interest it would hold for others, so do please send in stimuli, questions and whatever techniques and activities have worked for you.