

## **Colorful Questioning: Student-Led Discussions**

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*Abstract.* Klima implements colorful questioning strategies to enhance in-class discussion, allowing students the ability to use their natural verbosity to share texts in meaningful ways, thus making both the discussions and the teaching methods student-led and student-driven.

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By nature, English teachers are talkers: We talk about books, writing, our students. And our students are talkers, forever discussing what's happening in their own lives, on social media, on television. As a talker, I've always been interested in how best to harness my suburban high school students' natural gift of gab and make it a classroom-worthy activity connected to the novels and non-fiction that I teach.

The answer began to develop while I was earning my 316 license from the University of Wisconsin-Stout. In Reading 702: Reading Across the Curriculum, I was introduced to a colorful Question/Answer relationship strategy developed by Billmeyer (2006): student-generated Red, White, Blue and Gold questions. Students create book-club worthy questions in groups, then divide them into categories: those whose answers come from the text (red), think and search across the text (white), ask-the-author inferences (blue), and connections to self/world (gold). (More of the work regarding how this technique is useful in the classroom can be found on the [Prezi created for that course](#)).

My own students are familiar with literature circles as created by Daniels (2002) because we facilitate them from elementary school through high school, and they are familiar with the roles and the turn-taking in book-club discussions. What my students needed was a way to use these skills for more meaningful interaction with higher level critical thinking, building "thought-provoking questions [that] can transform students from passive learners to active, curious learners" (Billmeyer, 2006, p. 131). In order to do this, I needed to connect their ability to talk with their ability to think.

## Initial Lesson

I began with what my students know, that is, the difference between a *thin* question (with little to discuss) and a *fat* question (open to interpretations) because this is the language used in my district. I gave groups of 4 to 5 a set of Post-it notes and asked them to construct one fat and one thin question after reading Poe’s poem “Annabel Lee.” Each group easily wrote these and checked each other’s work. For example, they sorted questions like “According to the poem, what happened to Annabel Lee?” as thin because the poem gives all readers the same answer (that she is killed by a “chill” from the “wind” [15]). They also know that readers might infer as fat the questions that sustain various answers, such as “What is the mental state of the speaker in this poem?”

Next, I used [Google Slides](#) and the [tip sheet](#) to introduce the four color questions. Afterward, my students learned how to write each type, recognize the questions as listeners, and sort these questions into the [four-square grid](#), then practiced producing each one for “Annabel Lee”:

<b>RED</b> “Where is the poem set?” (Answer: “in a kingdom by the sea” in line 1)	<b>WHITE</b> “Who or what does the speaker blame for Annabel’s death? (Answer: “winged seraphs” in line 11 and “angels...in Heaven” in line 13, so perhaps God himself)
<b>BLUE</b> “Why does Poe use repetition of Annabel Lee across this poem?” (Answer: Various reasons including musicality of the poem, to show the speaker’s longing for his beloved, to indicate his obsession and mental instability)	<b>GOLD</b> “Is it right that the speaker blames family and religion for his loss? (Answers are even more varied, asking students to respond based upon their own experiences and sense of morality)

They discovered that not all questions fit neatly into one of the four boxes. These multi-color questions are elusive as they invite multiple ways to respond at several levels. For example, a white/blue/gold question such as “What comment is Poe making about Christianity by using multiple allusions to it in the poem?” asks the students to probe the text for multiple examples of these allusions, consider why the poet might use them, and how these hint at the theme of Poe’s own religious views. In the book club speaking role, these multi-color questions allow for depth of thought and the ability to build on their peers’ responses in order to elicit further discussion. As listeners and responders, they have various ways to respond, giving them multi-color options to contribute meaningfully to the ongoing conversation.

### **Group Discussion Procedures**

For our next class meeting, they wrote six discussion questions on Post-it notes to be used in small group Socratic circles, each question requiring a color and direct text reference. Before discussion begins, they set personal goals for their participation, listening, or other meaningful contributions. I ask them to write these down above the debrief questions on our outside-circle grid. While in the inner circle, they record their peers’ responses to questions they ask, pushing for variety and complexity. Outside circle members also record ideas in the four areas: what they agree with, disagree with/see differently, what provokes them, and what they wish to discuss further.

What I hear that I agree with:	What I hear that I disagree with/see differently:
What was “provocative” to me:	What I want to talk more about:

*Self Score:* Select a score window that fits how you performed today. Justify your scoring by explaining what you did that earns this score. Contrast your choice against the other options. You may write in only one box in each criteria!

<b>Preparation before discussion (questions)</b>	5: Exemplary	4: Proficient	3-1: Developing or Limited
<b>Participation / Contributions in discussion</b>	5: Exemplary	4: Proficient	3-1: Developing or Limited
<b>Listening and notes</b>	5: Exemplary	4: Proficient	3-1: Developing or Limited

Group discussions follow the Socratic seminar “fishbowl” style. On the day of discussion, students come with colored questions revolving around a specific text quote/reference.

## Text-Led questions

Sometimes, the best discussion questions lead with the book’s text. These questions start with the book’s ideas and then, ask readers to think/consider the text in light of the white, blue, or gold questions they set up.

Template: On p.\_\_\_\_, the author/book/character notes, “read text here”. (A good place to practice quote integration strategies!) Then, follow with a colored, quote-related question:

(W) What happens in this quote when...

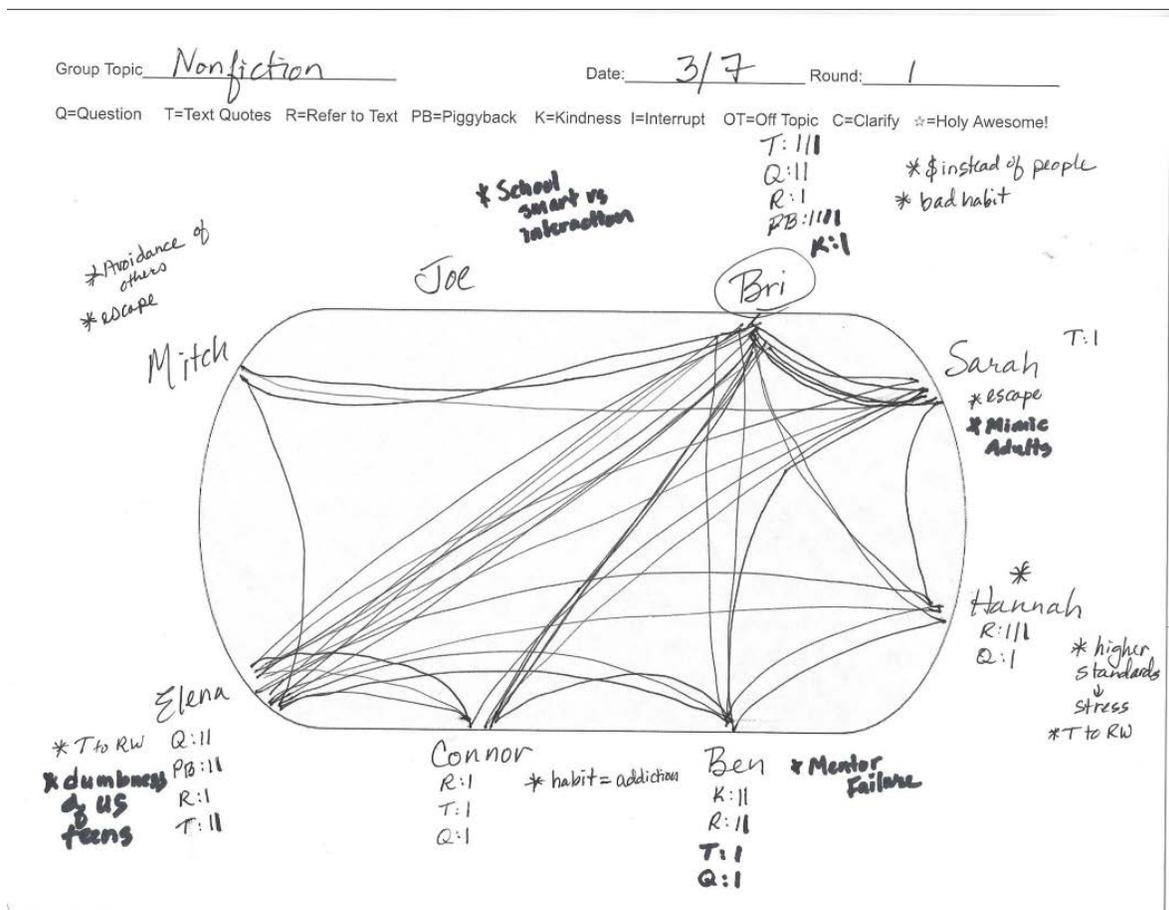
(B) What did the author mean by...

(G) Why would someone say...

Discussion begins with about 8 students in an inner circle for 12-15 minutes, with all others listening outside the circle. Everyone has an opportunity to be part of the small

discussion circle during our 90-minute block. As part of the discussion, I expect all members, whether in the inner discussion or the outer circle, to take notes on what they hear. This approach is two-fold: they will have a record of new learning acquired during the discussion, and I will capture questions or comments to share during debriefing with the large group, done after all small circles have finished their discussions.

While they are discussing, I am assessing their engagement using the spider-web technique (Wiggins, 2017) in order to grade them in the same targets that they will self-assess after discussion: preparation, listening/note-taking, and participation. I often reveal the webs I create between small-circle discussions, informally assessing what we are doing well and where changes could be made for the next discussion group. Students also get a copy of the web from their small-circle discussion session so they have the visual graphic of their work, including the labeled ideas I am tracking.



## **Post Discussion and Next Steps**

After small group discussion, the students assess themselves in two ways: first, their performance, and second, the overall flow/discussion process. By setting their personal goals at the start of the session, they give written assessment of that goal, and they assess procedures, time allotments, or other processes involved in the day's discussions. Finally, they assess themselves and justify their scoring in the three target areas that I also assess. Giving students their webs helps them see what they can do to create realistic goals for their next discussions because their assessment of strengths and weaknesses directly impacts the processes and flow in future sessions, and these suggestions track their own growth from session to session.

I read and reflect on these processes, including what needs to be adjusted or retaught, as well as how to develop the next session's challenges. I have gotten some of the best insights about what students need or where sessions are lacking from their feedback. In turn, I share their feedback with them and discuss how I will make changes for future sessions. Some of the best challenges that I have gotten include how to organize our use of time and the number of students involved in each small discussion. Two thought-provoking suggestions stand out. First, they felt that they were unable to really "know" what they were doing as they were discussing because they could not objectively see their own work until it was shown in post-session webs.

In essence, we add a middle circle of peers who record what their partner did during the session as a contributor and listener. I found a form that helped peer coaches map their partner's work and coach areas for improvement. We ran the timed session with one "coaching" break, when they could help each other see what was working well and what changes they might make in order to increase their effectiveness and scores. This has helped them consider their own interpersonal skills and has furthered their metacognition and evaluation of each other during discussion.

**SOCRATIC SEMINAR CHECK SHEET**

Outer Circle (Name) \_\_\_\_\_ Period \_\_\_\_\_

Inner Circle (Name) \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Topic: \_\_\_\_\_

Behavior	Tally the number of times behavior is shown by your partner	Comments
1. Speaks		1. What went well in the discussion process?
2. Comments on other person's comment		
3. Contributes new idea		
4. Makes connection to text /literature OTHER THAN assigned text(s)		2. How could we improve the discussion process?
5. Makes connection to real world		
6. Asks for clarification		
7. Invites someone into the discussion		
8. Paraphrases others' comments		3. What were the two most insightful comments?
9. Compliments or encourages others		
10. Makes explicit reference to ASSIGNED text(s)		

Another technique that I developed because of feedback was discussion “Uno.”

Book Circle Uno

In book clubs, we need depth. That means we need to spend more time with questions, so we are going to use UNO cards to help with this. Here is the key to “how-to” the depth in your discussions.

When your group is dealt...	Your group must...	Which looks like...
<b>Reverse</b>	Revisit each question and discuss an opposite/alternative answer that could also be supported by the text. Dig for a “Reverse” answer.	“What else might be a reason?” “Could the answer be something different?” “What other right answers exist?” “How else might this work?”
<b>Skip</b>	Skip to another example, quote, or part of the book and use it to prove the answer. You should have at least 2 pieces of support with this.	“Where else have we seen this?” “What pattern can we find?” “What other text supports this?”
<b>Draw 2</b>	Make at least 2 conclusions about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Motivations or character choices</li> <li>● Genre or style of writing</li> <li>● Author/Historical time period</li> <li>● Comparison/Contrast with other events or characters in the book</li> <li>● Moral/ethical dilemmas</li> <li>● Ironic meanings/tensions</li> </ul>	“How does this create multiple motivations?” “What does this say about the (genre, author, period)?” “How does this create irony?” “Can this be both similar and different from...?” “Is this right/fair/just...and why?”
<b>Wild</b>	Come up with another reading that might be “wild” or “out-there” but works with the text’s content/proof	“How might we think out of the box here?” “Is there an outside way to resee the idea?” “What perspective have we not considered?”

Students said that depth and time spent on each question was too short. They felt as though group members were more interested in getting through as many questions as possible rather than on deeper contemplation of the text. I implemented a common language for them to create stronger supplemental questions, using ideas borrowed

from the specialty cards in the game Uno: They could ask each other to “skip” to another part of the text to prove their response, could “draw two” conclusions about their thinking, “reverse” their thinking and try to prove the opposite view, or come up with a provable “wild card” reading of the text. These skills became part of later discussions, helping students spend more time on individual questions and push each other for deeper thinking.

## **Conclusions**

The discussions have begun to harness the power of talk. Students know that their goals matter and that the feedback they get from one another and from me has potential for implementation. This means that they possess the power to make meaning of the texts we encounter and how we work together to encounter what is meaningful. How we discuss texts allows us to play with the format of the class, its procedures, and the knowledge that comes from discussions. As talkers, this feels like meaningful, worthwhile discussion of their own and each other’s thinking. As a teacher, I get to respond to their needs and talk to them about both the books we share, and also how we share them. Talking about texts becomes playful, student-centered, and a natural extension of the human desire to talk with purpose.

## **References**

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