

EDUCATING FOR GOOD QUESTIONING AS A DEMOCRATIC SKILL

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Questioning is a vital skill for gathering information, helping us to learn, to communicate, and to understand our world. As an essentially collaborative, information-seeking enterprise it is of central social epistemological significance. This can be seen in education where questioning has the power to shape individual learning and promote critical, collaborative, and informed student engagement. Despite this, schooling today places substantial emphasis on the ability to answer questions and little or no emphasis on the skill of raising and refining questions themselves. I argue that we should rethink this dominant answer-oriented education model and educate for good questioning. In this paper, I present a central line of argument in support of educating for good questioning, namely, that doing so advances the aims of democracy and so benefits democratic society. Good questioning helps us to identify and inform ourselves and others about issues of societal and political import, and to engage in constructive deliberation and debate. In this sense, good questioning is not merely an essential information-gathering skill, but a democratic one: good questioning is an essential skill to educate for in a democracy. I present three arguments in support of this central claim. Firstly, I argue that good questioning aids *understanding* of democratic processes and institutions. Secondly, I argue that good

questioning facilitates *participation* in democratic processes and institutions. Thirdly, I argue that good questioning enables *informed decision-making*, to the advantage of democratic citizenship and society.

Preliminaries

In order to present the case in support of educating for good questioning as a democratic skill, I draw on two distinct but complementary movements in the philosophy of education: democratic education and skills-based education. A brief sketch of each of these movements will be useful.

a. Democratic education

Democratic education was brought to the forefront of educational theory in the early 20th century, primarily due to the work of John Dewey (1916, 1933). It has subsequently been advanced by prominent philosophers and educational theorists over the past century (Gutmann 1987; Galston 1989; Ostrom 1998; Boyte 2004). Democratic education aims to educate students for democratic citizenship, placing democratic ideals, such as equality, freedom of speech, and the common good, at the heart of formal education. As a form of civic character education, democratic education promotes active participation in democratic society, furnishing students with the tools to collaboratively shape the social and political institutions of their present and future. As Dewey contends, in *Democracy and Education* (1916), “[Democratic] society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder” (p.49). Thus, from its inception, the democratic education movement has sought to advance the case in support of educating for behaviours, attitudes and dispositions conducive to political progress in democratic societies.

This explicitly political objective is a distinctive, and accordingly contentious feature of the democratic education movement. Critics of such a politicized educational objective contend that it limits, rather than broadens the educational enterprise, in an objectionably prescriptive manner. Such a view can be traced back at least as far as Plato, within the Western philosophical tradition, who famously opposed the democracy of his day, and proposed an education system based on educating the few to rule over the many (see esp. *Republic*, Books II, III, V and VII). According to this Platonic system, not all students should receive the same education, nor should all students be expected to actively participate in or influence political processes and institutions. These privileges, or duties, should be preserved for those students who exhibit a natural capacity for reason, which their education should cultivate and refine. Dewey engaged with this line of thought in Plato's work. In *Democracy and Education* (1916), for example, he praises Plato's educational insight regarding the significance of the individual capacities of the student, contending, "[I]t would be impossible to find a deeper sense of the function of education in discovering and developing personal capacities, and training them so that they would connect with the activities of others" (p.85). Yet, Dewey argues, Plato was inhibited by the society in which he lived, from appreciating the sense in which this notion should extend to all students, regardless of which capacities they exhibit, or what social class or status they are deemed to have. For Dewey, a fair and democratic education was paramount to a fair and democratic society. The democratic education movement, following from Dewey, thus maintains that the aim of education is to educate all students, according to their natural capacities and interests, so as to produce productive, informed, and engaged members of democratic society.

b. Skills-based education

Skills-based education also traces its origins, at least in part, to the work of Dewey, and indeed, to Plato, given the attention paid by both to the individual capacities of the student. More recently, the

argument for skills-based education has been advocated by leading educational theorists over the past fifty years (Freire 1970; Scheffler 1973; Siegel 1988; Paul 1990; Lipman 1991). Skills-based education identifies the student's intellectual skills as the primary focus of education, juxtaposing this with the more traditional educational objective of transferring information, knowledge, and understanding between student and teacher. Paulo Freire (1970) an early, influential advocate of skills-based education, argues that, "[L]iberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information" (p.61). Skills-based education aims to train the student's intellectual skills, providing them with the tools to acquire information, knowledge, and understanding for themselves, and engage in a critical and informed way with society at all levels, both inside and outside the classroom. This educational objective has been prominently advocated through the critical-thinking movement, first emerging in the 1970s and now well-established in the philosophy of education (Ennis 1962; McPeck 1984; Siegel 1988; Paul 1990). The critical thinking movement is unified by an emphasis on the student's reasoning skills, as well as their intellectual autonomy. Israel Scheffler (1973), for example, identifies "the ideal of rationality [as] a unifying perspective" (p.1) and endorses "autonomous ideals of inquiry" (p.134) in schools. Skills-based education, fueled largely by the critical thinking movement in contemporary philosophy of education, aims to advance the case in support of educating for autonomous rationality.

More recently, this approach has been adopted and adapted by virtue epistemologists who argue that education should aim to cultivate intellectual character, comprising both intellectual skills and intellectually virtuous motivations (Baehr 2011; Kotzee 2012; Pritchard 2013; Watson 2016). This notion of intellectual character is found, either implicitly or explicitly, in much of the work produced by the critical thinking movement, notably, in Harvey Siegel's (1988) advocacy of the 'critical spirit' and the centrality of dispositions to his argument in support of educating for reason. This aligns skills-

based education closely with intellectual character education. By introducing the vocabulary of intellectual virtues, virtue epistemologists working in the epistemology of education, aim to advance the case for the cultivation of intellectual virtues such as open-mindedness, inquisitiveness, and intellectual humility. This represents a further contemporary development of the skills-based education movement, whilst maintaining the central aim of educating students in their capacity to become competent and independent thinkers and learners, moving beyond the mere transferal of information, knowledge, and understanding. This reorientation of educational objectives, towards the development of intellectual skills and character, can be seen in recent US-based educational reforms, advanced by groups such as the Partnership for 21st Century Education (P21) and the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI).

The democratic education movement and the skills-based education movement together provide a rich theoretical framework for advancing the case in support of educating for good questioning as a democratic skill. Drawing on both of these movements, I make the case, in the remainder of the paper, with a *democratic, skills-based education model* in mind. This model emphasizes the value of educating, not only for democratic citizenship, or for intellectual skills, but for the skills that contribute to democratic character: I call these democratic skills. What, then, is good questioning, how can it be understood as a democratic skill, and why should we educate for this skill in a democracy. The following sections will address these questions.

1. What is good questioning

Questioning is a familiar practice. Good questioning, correspondingly, is an intuitively recognisable skill. Particularly, we can often tell when someone is struggling to engage in good questioning, when

they have asked the wrong person, at the wrong time, or when they have failed to communicate what it is that they want to know. Despite its intuitive familiarity, however, good questioning is a complex and dynamic skill. A full treatment of this skill demands more attention than I can afford here. In this section, I will attempt to offer a sufficiently substantive account of good questioning in order to illuminate the subsequent argument in support of educating for this skill in a democracy. As a starting point, I take the act of questioning to be a form of information-elicitation. When one engages in questioning (good or bad), one is typically in the business of ‘finding things out’. When one engages in good questioning one is engaged in this activity in a skilful manner. This elevates the skill of good questioning above the act of information-elicitation in two ways. In cases of good questioning we do not simply want to elicit information, rather we want to 1) *competently* elicit information that is 2) *worth having*. We will examine each of these conditions in turn.

Firstly, good questioning requires competent information-elicitation. Competent information-elicitation does not permit information that is acquired by accident or luck, in contrast to successful information-elicitation which permits any manner of acquisition as long as the information is acquired. Moreover, whilst successful information-elicitation requires that the information is acquired, competent information-elicitation does not. Rather, in certain circumstances one may competently engage in information-elicitation without actually acquiring the information sought. One may competently attempt to elicit information from a young child by asking her name, for example. If the child is immediately distracted and fails to answer we would not say that one’s attempt was not thereby competent, even though unsuccessful. Good questioning requires competent information-elicitation.

Secondly, good questioning requires that the information elicited is worthwhile. This draws attention to the normative dimension of the skill. When engaging in *good* questioning we do not merely want to

elicit any information, however competently. The aim is to elicit information that is worthwhile, relevant or significant in some sense; information that is *worth having*. There are two senses in which information can be considered worthwhile in the context of good questioning. In the first sense, good questioning excludes cases of trivial or disvaluable information-elicitation. Examples of trivial or disvaluable information occur throughout contemporary epistemology. Counting blades of grass (Kvanvig 2014) or motes of dust (Sosa 2003), or memorising all the entries in the Kansas phonebook (Grimm 2008) are three examples from the literature. Similarly, instances of questioning that aim at trivial or disvaluable information can be easily constructed; ‘how many blades of grass are there in the courtyard’, ‘how many motes of dust on the desk’, and, plausibly, ‘how many cupcakes did Kim Kardashian eat at her birthday party’. Determining why these are cases of trivial or disvaluable information and information-elicitation is a complex and contentious issue, faced by epistemologists across the board (e.g. Lynch 2004; Grimm 2008; Treanor 2013). There is not yet a clear consensus on this. There is however, a broad consensus that some information is indeed trivial, at least in the sense that we do not generally consider it epistemically worthwhile to possess it. As such, it is also broadly uncontroversial to maintain that one can attempt to elicit trivial information by means of questioning and, furthermore, that doing so is not something we generally consider to be epistemically worthwhile. Good questioning requires the questioner to avoid eliciting trivial or disvaluable information.

Worthwhile information-elicitation, in the second sense, requires the good questioner to exercise judgement with respect to the most relevant or significant information given her aims and context. The good questioner will aim to elicit only the information that she needs or desires in a given context and, in doing so, avoid the large amount of irrelevant or insignificant information that is also available to her. If one wants to find out when the next train is due, for example, it is no good asking a fellow traveller what they are planning to vote in an upcoming referendum. Whilst this information is not in

itself trivial or disvaluable, it is certainly not the most relevant or significant information to elicit when one wants to know the time of the next train. As with trivial or disvaluable information-elicitation, determining what renders information relevant or significant in a given context is a complex and contentious issue. Nonetheless, it is not hard to see that some instances of questioning falter precisely in virtue of the questioner's failure to elicit the most relevant or significant information. In this second sense one can fail to elicit information that is *worth having*. As well as avoiding trivial or disvaluable information-elicitation, good questioning requires the questioner to elicit the most relevant or significant information according to her aims and context. Thus, the skill of good questioning requires worthwhile information-elicitation, both in the avoidance of trivial or disvaluable information and in the acquisition of information that is relevant or significant given one's aims and context.¹

Questioning is good in virtue of competent and worthwhile information-elicitation. A good questioner *competently elicits worthwhile information*. We can now return to the central question; why is good questioning a skill that we should educate for in democratic society.

2. Why should we educate for good questioning as a democratic skill

I identify three distinct contributions that the skill of good questioning makes to democratic society, drawing on examples both inside and outside the classroom. My aim is to highlight the ubiquity and

¹ I have distinguished these two senses of 'worthwhile' for the purposes of exposition. However, it is plausible that they are not, in fact, distinct in real-world information gathering contexts. One's questioning will not, for example, be deemed good merely in virtue of satisfying one's aims, if one's aim is to elicit information about the number of blades of grass in the courtyard, for no good reason. Conversely, one's questioning will not be deemed bad merely on the basis that one's aim is to elicit information about the number of blades of grass in the courtyard, if, for example, one is responding to the fact that someone is holding a gun to one's head and demanding to know. The worthiness of any epistemic good is plausibly closely tied to the practical interests of the epistemic agent. I leave this open for the present discussion.

import of questioning in contemporary democracy at both the individual and societal levels. Ultimately, it is the significant and pervasive role that good questioning plays in democracy itself that provides the principal case in support of educating for this skill.

2.1. Good questioning aids understanding

Firstly, good questioning aids understanding. The case in support of this is not hard to make. It is not difficult to see that asking questions, especially good questions, typically helps a person enhance their understanding of a subject matter. Indeed, it would be difficult to deny this. A child who asks why the sky is blue is *more likely* to gain some understanding of why the sky is blue than a child who does not. The same is true at any age. A Wall Street trader who asks what the assets comprising a set of collateral debt obligations are actually worth is *more likely* to understand their true value than a trader who does not.² Asking good questions is an effective way to gain and enhance understanding. This is all that the present claim amounts to and it is, I think, uncontroversial. It is worth, however, highlighting the significance of this in education and drawing attention to the ways in which it might be underestimated or overlooked. The following example will illustrate this.

Imagine a student attending his first history lesson at a new school. His class has been learning about British politics for several weeks but the student is joining late in the school term and is unfamiliar with the term ‘democracy’. Consequently, he struggles to understand key ideas that the teacher introduces at the start of the lesson, struggles to follow the discussion and cannot complete the set exercise asking him to list reasons why voting is important in a democracy. From the student’s perspective this experience may be one of confusion, bewilderment or frustration. It may also involve feelings of embarrassment, anxiety, even anger or simply induce a lack of interest in the topic, the

² Not to mention, make an enormous fortune as a result, as per the 2008 financial crisis.

discussion, and the task. For the most part this will not be conducive to his learning. Imagine, then, that instead of sitting through a lesson in which he doesn't understand the central concept, the student asks the teacher at the outset, 'what is democracy'. The teacher is then able to provide an explanation and offer assistance throughout the lesson to ensure that the student isn't left behind in the discussion and can complete the task. Of course, a good teacher in a favourable environment may pick up on the problem and offer an explanation without the need for the student to ask outright. Given the many competing demands on a teacher's time and attention in any standard classroom, however, and the difficulty of identifying and responding to the diverse needs of multiple individuals, we cannot assume that this will always be the case. At any rate, it is difficult to deny that the student increases his prospects for understanding in the case in which he asks the question, compared to the case in which he does not. The consequences of failing to ask, as noted, are significant: confusion, frustration, anxiety, disengagement. Not being able to identify the source of these experiences, moreover, is likely to exacerbate them further.

In order to overcome these pitfalls, the student must formulate and pose a question that targets the information that he needs. This requires a degree of proficiency that we cannot assume he already has. It requires the skill of good questioning. Without this, the student's understanding of the subject matter is *more likely* to be inhibited. Good questioning empowers the student to access the precise information that he needs and so to direct his own learning in a small but significant manner. Understanding what the term 'democracy' means will enable him to engage with the class discussion and share in the ideas that it generates. This will expose him to further information and alternative viewpoints which will, over time, facilitate a deeper understanding of democracy. The same can be said for many similar examples. Good questioning provides students with a tool that they can employ

in any educational environment, empowering them to determine the information that they acquire and ensuring that it is relevant to their aims and context.

This example illustrates two related points relevant to the central claim; that we should educate for good questioning in a democracy. Firstly, it demonstrates the straightforward but significant sense in which good questioning aids understanding, of any subject matter. Secondly, it illustrates this in the case of key ideas and concepts required in order to understand democracy, in particular. The first is perhaps the more substantial point. The fact that good questioning aids understanding, for any subject matter, demonstrates the sense in which this skill plays a key role in education; at least in so far as facilitating, deepening or refining a student's understanding plays a key role in their being educated. If an educated population is vital to a functioning democratic society, then educating for good questioning serves the aims of democracy itself. The fact that good questioning aids understanding of key democratic ideas and concepts, moreover, illustrates the significance of good questioning for understanding democratic processes and institutions, in particular. In so far as facilitating, deepening or refining a student's understanding of democracy is desirable within democratic society, good questioning also serves this aim.

2.2. Good questioning facilitates participation

Secondly, good questioning facilitates participation in democratic society. This can be illustrated by observing the valuable role that questioning plays in discussion and debate. Return to the class discussion from the example above. In this case the class is being asked to discuss whether voting is important in a democracy. From the outset, the discussion is both initiated and framed by a question. The question indicates the topic of the discussion and acts as its catalyst. Indeed, posing questions is a common and effective way to incorporate class discussion into a lesson, on any topic, and the posing

of educative and stimulating questions by teachers has been the subject of extensive theoretical and empirical work in educational research (Bloom 1956; Dillon 1984; Wilen 1984; Elder & Paul 2005; Sattes and Walsh 2005). Good teacher-questioning is viewed as an important pedagogical device in this literature. Even on occasions where no explicit question is posed at the start of a discussion, moreover, it is unlikely that discussion will get very far in the absence of questioning. In order to engage in any kind of discussion a group must exchange comments and ideas. These will most often lead to questions posed to participants as the discussion unfolds which, in turn, spur the discussion on: ‘what do you mean by freedom’, ‘what do you mean by civic duty’, ‘why do you think your vote doesn’t count’, ‘what *really is* democracy’. One need only attempt to have a genuinely collaborative discussion *without* questions to see the essential role that they play. Indeed, try having any kind of discussion without asking or answering questions. Questions are the hidden oil that fuel our discussions, and our collaborative information-seeking practices, in general.

In addition, not only do questions serve as the fuel for collaborative discussion, they *shape* discussion. Questions direct a discussion and its participants with a force that is surprisingly hard to resist. A well-articulated and emphatically posed question is hard to ignore or divert in the course of discussion. Doing so may leave one open to criticism by the standards of ordinary discourse; a truth often manifested (and exploited) in the context of political journalism. Questions, by their nature, suggest the need for a response and, at the same time, limit the form that that response can take. A class discussion framed by the question ‘how many cupcakes did Kim Kardashian eat at her birthday party’, is unlikely to provoke commentary on democratic voting rights and responsibilities. Questions determine the content of a discussion.

This is perhaps no more explicitly apparent in a democracy, than in the context of formal political debate. The recent (2016) series of US presidential debates offers a salient example. Notable emphasis was placed in the media run-up to the third debate, on the questions that the debate chair, Fox News anchor Chris Wallace, would ask the presidential candidates. The emphasis here is warranted; the questions determined the content of the debate itself. In this case, they are the basis on which a large proportion of those casting votes in the US election (alongside a massive international audience) gained access to the ideas, beliefs, policies, and values of the key rival candidates for the job. Or, at least, an insight into what they were willing to say about these things. Think also of the questions posed by members of the public in the ‘town-hall’ presidential debate, or, indeed, in any political debate, from the real town hall to a national election. Not only do questions shape the debate but they allow the individuals asking them, and those whom they, knowingly or unknowingly, represent, to take part in the discussion. Questions enable and empower us to actively participate in, and impact upon, democracy. What is asked, in the classroom, or in the wider world, determines to a significant degree, what is discussed, considered, noticed, and understood. By asking questions, an individual can participate in discussion. The good questioner targets worthwhile information with their questions, ensuring that the opportunity for discussion is not wasted on trivial or irrelevant topics and that it speaks to their concerns.

A second point relevant to the central claim has thus been highlighted: good questioning plays a valuable (and often unnoticed) role in discussion and debate. Questions both enable (and frequently initiate) discussion, and they often determine its content. Productive, collaborative, and critical discussion and debate, in societal and political settings and institutions at all levels, from the classroom, to the pub, to the highest levels of government – these are the hallmarks of a functioning democracy.

If active participation in discussion, deliberation and debate is an important feature of a functioning democratic society, then educating for good questioning once again serves the aims of democracy.

2.3. Good questioning enables informed decision-making

Thirdly, good questioning facilitates informed decision-making. This can be illustrated by returning to the analysis of good questioning offered above: the good questioner competently elicits worthwhile information. This translates directly into the context of decision-making. Specifically, the ability to identify and seek out worthwhile information - both non-trivial and relevant to one's aims and context - is required in many everyday decision-making scenarios. Consider the array of information one encounters when deciding, for example, which newspaper to read, which supermarket to shop at, which eggs to buy, which mode of transport to use. Not all of the information one encounters in these types of decision-making scenarios will be non-trivial, relevant, or significant. In fact, much of it is likely to be information that one should not consider at all, and some will be information that actively works against the ability to make a decision. Yet decisions such as these comprise the everyday workings of democratic society. The freedom to make *informed* decisions about these things, and many others, is a freedom which fundamentally underwrites democracy itself. No more so than when deciding which box to tick on one's ballot paper. We must, at least, aspire to a democracy in which this decision, for all those making it, is based on an informed evaluation of the options available.

Importantly, the notion in operation here is a normative one; the informed decision is one based on information that is *worth having*. The ability to identify information that is worth having is key to an individual's ability to make informed choices. This ability is also key to the skill of good questioning. Thus, good questioning enables informed decision-making. Furthermore, in a society in which the most worthwhile information is not always readily available to its citizens, as voters or consumers,

protected and distorted, as is often the case, by corporate needs and greeds, the need to educate individuals so that they can identify and seek information out for themselves, as well as critically assess the information that is presented to them, is all the more significant. If having an informed populace is a cornerstone of a functioning democracy, then educating for good questioning is a means of achieving this. A populace that can identify the information that it needs, seek this out, and/or critically assess it, can 'inform itself', so to speak. The significance of good questioning for decision-making can be seen at all levels of democratic society; from the egg-buying decisions of everyday life to the decisions of war and governance. If one lacks the ability to identify and elicit the most worthwhile information in a given situation, then one lacks the ability to make an informed decision, when required. Good questioning provides a valuable tool to counter this. Just as students in the classroom are empowered by good questioning to incrementally direct their learning in line with their informational needs and desires, a populace comprised of such individuals can do the same.

This highlights a final point relevant to the central claim. The skill of good questioning requires an individual to identify, and elicit worthwhile information. Doing so is key to informed decision-making. Good questioning thereby enables informed decision-making in democratic society. This enhances an individual's ability to dismiss or challenge the information that they encounter, and identify worthwhile information that is not provided, or is obscured in some way, by drawing attention to the informational features of their environment and enabling them to act within it. Democracy flourishes when those living under it are free to make informed decisions about their lives and their government. At its best, a society in which individuals are educated for good questioning is one in which this goal can be realised. Educating for good questioning as a democratic skill thereby serves a third important aim; to prepare students for democratic citizenship.

Conclusion

Educating for the skill of good questioning serves three key aims of democracy. Firstly, it aids understanding, in general, and understanding of democratic processes and institutions, in particular. Secondly, it facilitates participation in democratic society, providing the opportunity and tools to share in and shape democratic discussion and debate. Thirdly, it enables informed-decision making, preparing students for democratic citizenship. By cultivating and refining questioning skills, students are equipped with the tools to raise and pursue their own inquiries, as well as actively engage with and challenge those of others. Without such cultivation, learning is in danger of becoming passive and compliant. Active learning and critical engagement is central to the cultivation of democratic character, extending beyond the schools and classrooms in which formal education takes place to the attitude that a learner carries with them throughout their life and to the constitution of democratic society as a whole. At its best, good questioning leads to active, collaborative, and critical democratic citizenship. In this sense, good questioning is an essential democratic skill to educate for.

This publication was made possible through the support of a grant from the John Templeton Foundation to the *Institute for the Study of Human Flourishing* at *The University of Oklahoma*. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation or the *Institute for the Study of Human Flourishing*.

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