



Constructivist Teaching by Heart

Newsletter, December 2024

“Putting the child at the center of their learning.”

Questioning the Author: A Powerful Constructivist Teaching Strategy

In *Constructivist Teaching by Heart: A Child-centered Approach for Educators, Pre-K-3*, Dana and I (Krista) extensively discuss foundations for a constructivist classroom, including classroom **discussion**. Discussion is essential in a constructivist classroom throughout the day because, as we’ve heard many times, the person doing the talking is usually the person doing the learning. Students need time to verbalize their thinking to move forward in their understanding. Planning for this dialogue is part of our work.

Why? When children struggle, we often want to explain and demonstrate more to clarify the concept. Another approach is to listen to the child by asking questions about the student’s struggle to find out where learning is breaking down. We can have a few universal questions in our back pockets for these situations, such as “What question do you have? Can you show me the tricky part? Or... what are you thinking? Rather than more explanation, we get the student talking about their learning - the parts they understand and don’t yet understand.



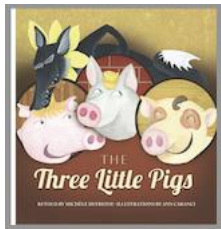
In planning, we choose or develop open-ended questions and use student answers to facilitate learning. When we ask students to come up with the questions, we can hand over the responsibility to them. Dana and I always say that when we know what students’ questions are, we know what they are ready to learn next. *(This is true for teachers, too. When professional learning sessions grow from teachers’ questions, we meet the teachers where they are- the aspect of their teaching craft they are currently working on developing.)*

We can take questioning a step further in literacy lessons by teaching students to **question the author**. Questioning the author (QtA) is a discussion-based approach to analyzing complex texts developed by Isabel Beck and Margaret McKeown. Questions are planned before, during, and after reading. The questions support the teacher in guiding the students through the text by utilizing planned stopping points where students think and respond.

In a 2021 Institute for Learning article, Sandora and DeMartino explain that in QtA, “teachers work with students to break complex texts down into segments, allowing students to pause, respond to queries, and ask questions that help them make sense of new information and connect it to earlier text parts....Using these questioning strategies, we can teach children how

to engage with complex texts. We can teach them that it's important to pause and take stock of what we read, noting changes and new information."

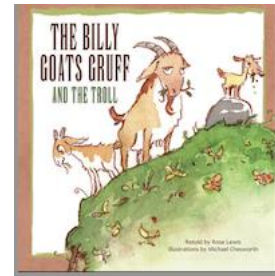
I am working on stopping to hear the students' questions in my reading intervention lessons. Recently, I have chosen some book sets from a fairy tale series to promote questioning the text. Many students find this difficult because of the language or understanding required to form a question. I like to start with books that almost beg you to ask the question, and these fairy tales



published by Pioneer Valley Books invariably lead to students asking questions. In one book in the series (an emergent reader version of *The Three Pigs*), there is a moderate amount of shock when the wolf actually eats the first two little pigs --not pictured, but you get the idea when the wolf licks his lips and says, "yum, yum." I recently watched a young student's eyes get very big when he read that part, and he shook his head and looked at me as he whispered, "Did that just happen?" What a great question to lead our conversation.

Later, another student was reading a version of *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*. In this familiar story, when the first goat and second goat encourage the troll under the bridge to let them go because they were little and advise the troll to "eat my big brother," one of my students gasped, mumbling, "Why would he say that?" as she read along. The others joined in with their opinions before settling back into the story to see if the troll ate the older brother.

In a recent lesson with intermediate students, we read a text about a young teen who babysits for a neighbor and gets caught outside in a dangerous storm with the child. Many questions about whether the main character is making good decisions came up. The group also had opinions about how many mistakes the main character made by deciding to play outside when the weather was clearly bad. This group of students can be "skimmers" who don't have much to say after reading a text, so these questioning strategies change the depth of our conversation and their understanding. We break up the text into 2–3-page intervals and discuss our questions as the story unfolds. When reading nonfiction, we analyze the text for key vocabulary and develop questions using these words.



In a read-aloud of *Pete the Cat's Perfect Pizza Party*, when Pete puts pineapple, then pretzels, papaya, and pistachios on his pizza, we notice. We all have an opinion about these ingredients and adeptly question the text. In *Can I Be Your Dog?* Energetic Arfy writes a letter to every person on Butternut Street to ask to be their dog, and each person replies by letter. Natural stopping points occur after each adorable letter from Arfy and a return refusal letter, where we can ask questions and connect them to textual evidence from what we read before. We are invested in this dog finding a home.





Constructivist teachers often find ways to start with student's questions and comments and go from there. We are thrilled when the conversation becomes between the students, arguing the merits of the main characters' decisions or a respectful debate about whether the *Three Billy Goats Gruff* should even be read to smaller children. One of my students said absolutely not, unless we want them to have nightmares.

It is powerful to start a comprehension conversation by leading with a question from a student. Using books with an embedded surprise lends itself to teaching our young students how to ask text-based questions, encouraging them to monitor meaning as they read. We can teach complex concepts, such as analyzing the text from the author's point of view, by using authentic texts similar to the books mentioned earlier. The more enjoyable the reading and writing, the more our students lean in while learning to analyze and question the text for deeper understanding.

Questioning the Author Reflection Questions:



What do you notice about your students' willingness to question the text?



What steps can you take to encourage student discussion and questioning?



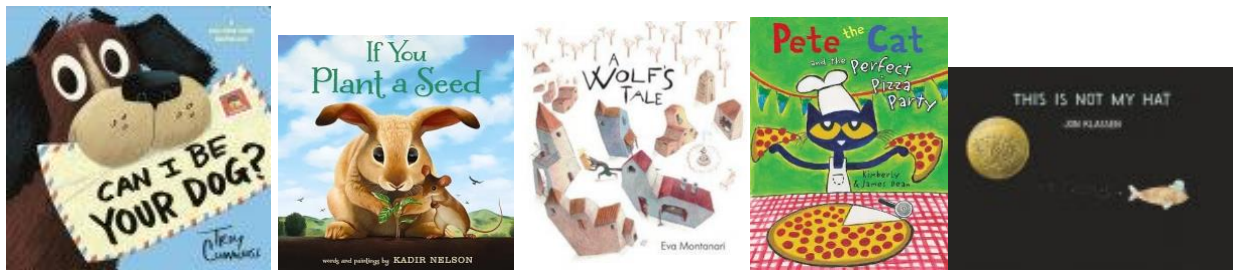
What are your favorite picture books, book sets, or chapter books that promote questioning and student discussion?

We want to hear from you! Share your comments about this newsletter topic, Questioning the Author: A Powerful Constructivist Teaching Strategy, [here](#).



Teaching with High-quality Children's Books

Picture books we love that lend themselves to teaching students to question the author....

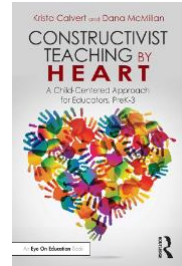


Intermediate chapter books we love for teaching students to question the author...



PONDER BOX

“ When we engage students in talking about texts, we are building their vocabulary, comprehension, and reading proficiency all at once. We also build community, learn about our world, show how we value one another, and discover more about each child’s literacy strengths and needs. Constructivist teachers build discussion and dialogue into all aspects of the learning day, especially literacy lessons.” pg. 91.



Q & A: Ask Krista & Dana...

Q: This year, I have quite a few talkers and a few very quiet students who don’t like to talk publicly, so I have a hard time getting them to speak and share in class. I am worried about the quiet kids, but I also don’t have all day to wait for them to say something. Do you have any ideas?

A: This is a dilemma most teachers face in their classrooms. It’s such an important question if we believe the one doing the talking is doing the learning. You can use discussion structures like turn-and-talk or think-pair-share regularly so the students can get used to talking to a partner. You can start with one-on-one conversations with the student and move up to small groups and then whole groups. You can pull students aside in the morning and “rehearse” what they could say later in the group discussion. Some students won’t share their thinking but will share their writing. Other students are the opposite but will let the teacher read their writing. It won’t happen overnight, but you can work toward facilitating a path for each student to feel comfortable using their voice in the classroom.

Thanks for reading! Do you have comments, ideas, or questions for the newsletter? Submit [here!](#)

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