

How to Understand the Role of Questions in Thinking and Learning

Thinking is not driven by answers but by questions. Had no questions been asked by those who laid the foundation for a field—for example, physics or biology—the field would never have been developed in the first place. Furthermore, every field stays alive only to the extent that fresh questions are generated and taken seriously as the driving force in a process of thinking. To think through or rethink anything, one must ask questions that stimulate thought. Questions define tasks, express problems and delineate issues. Answers on the other hand, often signal a full stop in thought. Only when an answer generates a further question does thought continue its life as such. This is why it is only when you have questions that you are really thinking and learning.

So, instead of trying to store a lot of disconnected information in your mind, start asking questions about the content. Deep questions drive thought beneath the surface of things, forcing you to deal with complexity. Questions of purpose force you to define tasks. Questions of information force you to look at our sources of information as well as assess the quality of information. Questions of interpretation force you to examine how you are organizing or giving meaning to information. Questions of assumption force you to examine what you are taking for granted. Questions of implication force you to follow out where your thinking is going. Questions of point of view force you to examine your perspective and to consider other relevant view points.

Questions of relevance force you to discriminate what does and what does not bear on a question. Questions of accuracy force you to evaluate and test for truth and correctness. Questions of precision force you to give details and be specific. Questions of consistency force you to examine your thinking for contradictions. Questions of logic force you to consider how you are putting the whole of your thought together, to make sure that it all adds up and makes sense within a reasonable system of some kind.

Continually remind yourself that learning begins only when questions are asked.

Essential Idea: If you want to learn, you must ask questions that lead to further questions that lead to further questions. To question well is to learn well.