

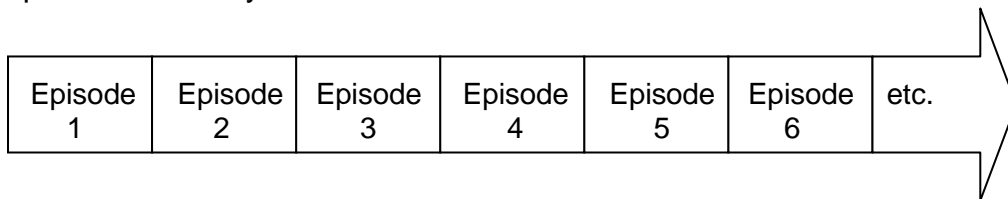
Ulf Schwänke

Key Questions revisited

Revised version of a paper presented at the 4th International Storyline Conference held at the Portland State University, Portland, Oregon, August 2009.

All Storyline teachers know about key questions. So why revisit them?

I think we all agree that a key question is a question the teacher poses to start the next episode in a Storyline.



They are mostly open-ended questions that hopefully help students to engage in an activity other than sitting and listening. Asking questions is a common part of teaching:

- Traditionally the teacher teaches and later asks questions to evaluate the outcome.
- In more active learning environments the teacher encourages the students to ask questions themselves to find out about something they are interested in.
- In Storyline the teacher asks questions to which she often has no answer herself and the students come up with answers generated by their imagination.

This latter approach combines well with a constructivist view of teaching and learning. But

1. Many teachers and teacher students find it especially difficult to pose suitable key questions and
2. If you look at outlines of topics for Storyline work you will frequently find similar and often repeated questions: What will you do? What is best in that situation? How do you... and so on. So it might be that teachers tend to ask rather simple than complex questions. As we don't want Storyline to end up in a mechanistic planning scheme this paper suggests to head for more detailed and more imaginative key questions.

What do we need key questions for anyhow?

I will just name a few reasons:

- To structure a lesson
- To start an activity
- To make the storyline proceed
- To encourage thinking, especially thinking outside the box
- To create new ideas
- To help students find resolutions they haven't been thinking about before
- To make children look beyond their own noses
- To prove that the mark of intelligence is the question mark - or as Anne Michaels put it: "Nothing proves the existence of the future like a question." (The Winter Vault, Toronto 2009, p. 122).

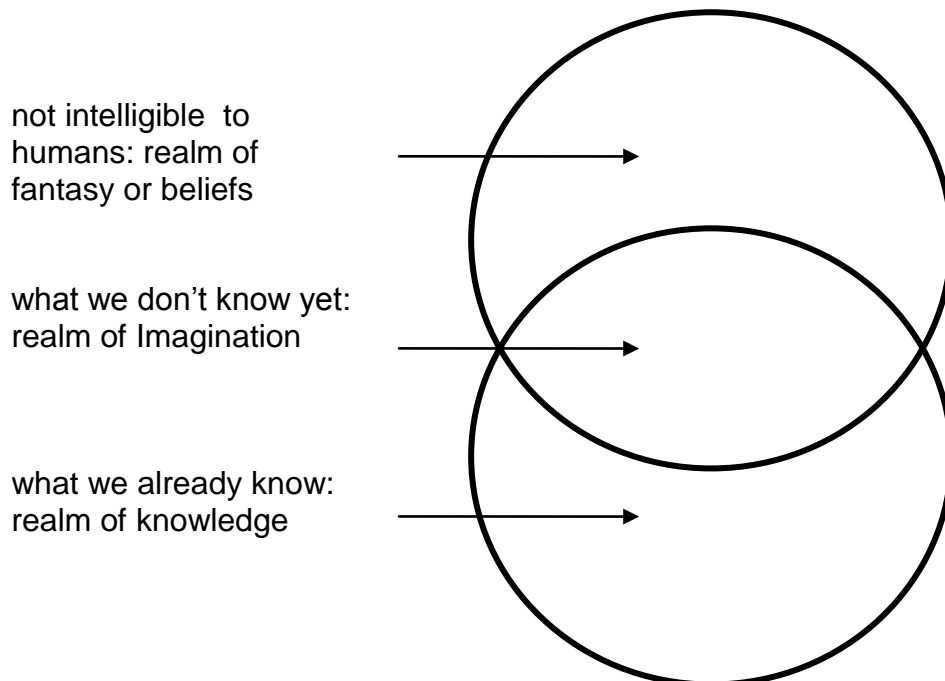
Do key questions really work?

One major objection against Storyline reads: How can we expect the students to learn something, if we don't teach them in the first place? The idea is:

1. First the instruction,
2. the application to a certain task,
3. the test.

Or as a British school inspector once put it: "Teachers teach and children learn – it's as simple as that." If that was true, we would mainly ask questions to test the students' knowledge and abilities. But it is certainly not as simple as that. Storyline – like most other modern approaches to teaching – is about activity, ownership, visualization, cooperation and learning by discovery. We don't want to do without the "Ah-effect". But a behaviourist would object: Would you go to a surgeon who discovered on his own how to do an appendectomy? Wouldn't we all want someone who has been properly taught how to do it? Probably yes. But would we really want to be treated by a surgeon who is only able to do what was taught to him at the end of medical school some 30 years ago? Wouldn't we want someone who has been learning all his life? Wouldn't we want a doctor who can imagine what it is like to suffer from a disease, how it feels to have to undergo a risky operation?

Beside the above mentioned principles Storyline is additionally using a *narrative* as leitmotif and it is based on the importance of *imagination* for learning. Whatever can be learned may be assigned to one of the following three areas:



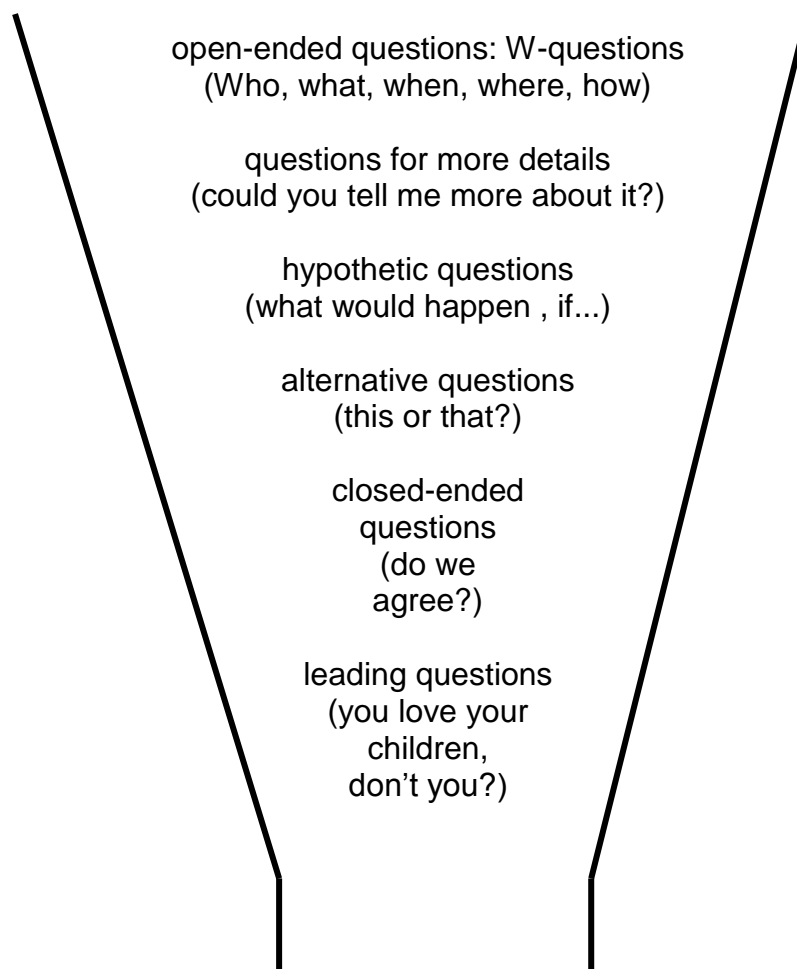
Of course a teacher can just present knowledge and hope it is taken in by the students; she can test them later; she can watch them in application situations. All that is great as long as she only wants the students to learn the standard solutions to well known problems that have been developed in the past. If they are to learn how to cope with new situations there is no sense in trying to teach them what we don't

even know ourselves yet. So what a teacher can do if she wants the students to come up with suitable ideas about complex future problems is to ask questions and enable the students to develop their own answers. Actually I think that's what school is for. That's why key questions are so important. And that is why good key questions work.

What sorts of questions make good key questions?

The Danish author Peter Høeg writes in his book "Borderliners" that there are actually only two kinds of questions, the classic teacher questions, where the teacher already knows the answer and "reflective questions" like the ones researchers ask in their laboratories. In order to find out if this is the main difference between key questions and other questions I suggest having a look at different forms of questions first:

The Question Funnel



The picture illustrates that the sequence of questions might be of relevance: It is advisable to start with rather open questions and then proceed to questions which leave less space for answers. Salesmen are masters using series of questions which inevitably lead to the words: "So you want to take it with you, won't you?"

As a Storyline teacher is not interested in selling but rather in having the students find out about many things themselves she will use the technique of the “question funnel” rather seldom. But what about the open-ended W-questions? Aren’t they a good opening line in most respects?

Well – not always. When Steve Bell was interviewed in a video by the Danish professor Erik Haakonson he told about a situation in a classroom where he almost made a mistake: He asked the students: “What devices are to be found in a studio of a radio station?” And the students said: “We don’t know, we’ve never been to such a studio.” So he had to reformulates the question: “What do you **think**, you would need and find in a radio station?” Then the children came up with ideas like microphone, tape recorder, cd player, amplifier etc.

So should all key questions start: “What do you think....?” “ I think there is an alternative which I call the “additional question”. If students say: “We don’t know”, the teacher could say: “Imagine you want to play a birthday song on the guitar for your grandmother living 1000 miles away from you. How could you make sure she can hear it?” I am quite sure that most students will be able to describe something they would need to bridge the distance even if they are not able to name this something properly. These additional questions though should not be leading questions. (In Germany we talk about “Easter-bunny pedagogy”, if the teacher tries to hide all her wisdom in some questions and then seems to be enthusiastic if the students “discover” her hidden ideas.)

Even from this short look at some sorts of questions we can conclude that there are more than the two kinds of questions mentioned by Peter Høeg. My main purpose though is to supply you with a few more sorts of questions, especially so called “systemic questions”.

What are “systemic” questions and how can we use them in teaching?

Systemic questions aim for understanding instead of delivering information. A teacher asking: “When was Cesar killed and by whom?” is not interested in the opinions of the students but wants to find out if they have been listening or if they have done their homework. If she asks: “What will the members of the senate, slaves or soldiers have thought about Cesar’s sudden death?” the students have to come up with probable ideas. They have to prove that they have some sort of understanding what took place in 44 b.C. They have to think on their own.

The following six sorts of questions are rather dealing with the retrieval of information. They can typically be answered without hesitation and they need little – if any – thinking on behalf of the student.

Kind of question	Purpose	Example
Open-ended questions	Find out about something	Who, what, when, how, where, what for? (The question „why“ should be avoided because it makes people rather excuse themselves instead of explaining something.)
Alternative questions	Reach a decision	Do you need help or would you like to try it on your own?
Information questions	Identify necessary information	What have you already tried? To whom did you talk?
Closed-ended questions (possible answers: yes or no)	Avoid misinterpretations, stop a chatterbox	Did you write that down? So, you found it on the internet?
Rhetoric question	To obtain approval (no answer requested)	Isn't that really terrible?
Leading question	To obtain approval	Don't you agree that ...? So we are finished aren't we?

The following survey provides a number of different questions which may be called systemic. They mostly ask for connections and need some consideration. Systemic questions in the narrow sense aim for an understanding of interdependent systems where all elements are linked to each other.

When using such questions one should bear in mind that the answers can be irritating and sometimes even offending. Their purpose must not be to interrogate the students and make them reveal what they might rather have kept to themselves. Their function should be to help students to develop a deeper understanding of interrelations and to use their sense of imagination.

Kind of question	Purpose	Example
Digging deeper	More precise analysis of a situation	Did I understand correctly that...? Always, never, all, no-one? Could you describe that in more detail? What does that mean for you personally?
Inquire about differences	Make the student give more precise statements	In what respect is this procedure more advantageous? What makes this model better than the one produced by the other group?
Reframing	Make a student think about other possible views	What special action of your fellow student made you angry? In what respect? Is it possible he/she just wanted to help you?
Operationalizing	Give meaning to empty adjectives	How do you know somebody is a "good" teacher? What is it someone has to do so you can trust this person?

Kind of question	Purpose	Example
Rankings/graduations	Find out about importance (for instance if a student complains: "You've never got time for me.")	How often per week would you like to talk to me? Did you do your homework last week: always – often – seldom – never? How do you like American history (e. g. on a scale from 1 to 10)?
Future progress	Find out about assumptions on future developments	If this system is moving on an exponential curve – in which direction will it move in the future?
Consensus yes – no	Identify obstacles	Who is encouraging you if you are stuck? Do your parents agree with your choice of sports?
Hypothetic questions, historical questions	Inspire thinking and creativity	What would you do, if...? In case of... what would you suggest? What do you think the world would be like if motorcars had not been invented?
Conducive questions	Focus on a goal	What would you like to achieve? What is it I can help you with?
Activate resources	Strengthen ones own responsibility	Who could help you? Which of your abilities will be useful in that situation?
Avoidance	Focus on the fact that failing to do something is also a form of action.	What do you avoid by choosing Latin instead of French? Let's assume it does NOT happen – what would be the advantage for you?
Objection	To deal with an objection	You certainly have a good reason against this suggestion, what is it? What would you suggest alternatively?
Boomerang question	Make the student think about an objection	In what respect to you not agree with me? Do you really think it is too expensive?
Question in reply	Leave the responsibility with the student	What is your idea then? What alternative have you got in mind?
Contrast	Make the student think about contrast	If this applies to rich people, what about the poor? If young people are afraid of diseases, what about the old?
Circular questions	Finding out about a persons' speculations	How much – do you think – do your classmates like the teacher?
In addition you might want to observe: What is it the student wants to tell you without saying it directly? Watch mimic, gesture, tone, breaks, exclamations, crying and so on.		

At the presentation of this paper at the 4th International Storyline Conference in Portland the participants applied these questions to a number of examples. One conclusion was that the kind of question should be chosen carefully. Circular questions for instance might be dangerous, because hidden assumptions will be revealed. Teachers who have not been specially trained for counselling should always be aware of the fact that systemic questions might evoke an unexpected behaviour on the side of the student.

“Creative” questions

Apart from the questions mentioned above there are questions which intend to puzzle and irritate. In this respect they function like most pieces of art – paintings, plays, symphonies, dance, novels. In art you rather find ambiguity than distinct answers, strangeness instead of familiarity, disruptions instead of continuity. The artist is giving us resolutions to problems yet undefined. That is why I call these questions creative. Peter **Fischli** and David **Weiss**, two Swiss artists, have collected a vast number of questions which reveal their purpose only at second sight. Some examples are:

Am I invisible to ghosts?
Is freedom alive?
What is my dog thinking?
Does my car know me?
Is seven much?
Is it still possible to share a cave with a strange woman?
Why am I always right?
To what percentage am I an animal?
Is hunger an emotion?
Does everything happen in my head?
Can you apply the principle of yeast to many things?
Will luck find me?
Would I make a good policeman?
Why are there bad people?
Did something go terribly wrong immediately after the big bang?

Peter **Fischli**/David **Weiss**: Findet mich das Glück? Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König. Köln 2003. (The artists are the creators of the Video „The way things go“ – one of the 25 works of art, everyone should have seen.)

Some of these questions may sound like questions children ask. Some are questions all of us would like to ask but do not dare to. Others may express desires of our subconscious mind. And some of these questions (e. g.: Is seven much? Can you apply the principle of yeast to many things? Would I make a good policeman/bartender/doctor?) are good key questions, because they induce students to explain something they have probably not been thinking about before.

Conclusion

So what is our conclusion? We have to be aware that asking questions can be like a tightrope walk: Asking only standard questions means falling to one side. Using mostly very sophisticated questions can also be dangerous, because the students might feel insecure. But if we stick to our primary goal to encourage the students to explore the present world in order to become able to shape the future world – then we will know what question is the right key question in the right time. To select the right question the above given catalogue may be helpful.

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E-Mail of the author: ulf@storyline-methode.de