

The Crucial Steps Are Those We May Have Skipped

By Alfie Kohn

[This is an expanded version of the published article, which was given a different title.]

One of the most important lessons I've learned in my career is that the best way to respond to a question is not always to offer an answer. Sometimes one should linger on the question itself, asking what assumptions it conceals and what other questions it displaces. Many questions in education, for example, take for granted the inevitability of traditional practices. That means our job is to challenge the question's hidden premises. "Wait," we might say — "you skipped a step."

Here are half a dozen examples from a virtually unlimited list.

1. "How do I motivate these kids?"

You skipped a step by failing to question the belief that it's possible to instill motivation in someone other than yourself. Those with more power may be able to make those with less power do something, but they can't make them want to do it.

Put differently, the step that was skipped was deciding whether you're interested in intrinsic motivation (having students find something valuable in its own right) or extrinsic (coming to see it as a way to snag a reward). Even impressive levels of extrinsic motivation don't bode well for reaching meaningful goals. In fact, [scores of studies](#) have shown that intrinsic motivation declines when people are offered a reward. If you get a prize for, say, reading a book (or for being helpful), you'll tend to find reading (or helpfulness) less appealing in the future. What matters, therefore, isn't how motivated kids are, but how kids are motivated. Only extrinsic motivation can be supplied from the outside, so that's what schools focus on - with grades, points, awards, praise, and the like — and the results are disturbing.

2. "Should grades be 'standards-based'? Should students have the chance to raise a B to an A? Should we ever give zeroes? Should marks be posted online? To what extent should they be based on tests/homework/class participation?"

You skipped a step with all of these questions. Research demonstrates that students who get letter or number grades - particularly if they've been led to focus on improving those grades — become less interested in learning, tend to think less deeply, and prefer the easiest possible task, as compared with students who are not graded (but may receive informational feedback when needed).

The question, then, isn't how to grade but how to stop grading. Fortunately, more teachers are [doing just that](#) in order to create classrooms that help students of all backgrounds and ability levels to become more focused on (and excited about) the learning itself. Even if administrators still demand

a final course grade, these teachers never put a letter or number on any individual assignment. And many let the students decide on their own final grade.

3. “How can we improve the quality of the curriculum — and create more engaging projects?”

You skipped a big step by assuming we should be doing these things for students rather than with them. Educators committed to the latter do more asking than telling. That requires not only relinquishing some control but learning more about students’ interests and how to involve them in figuring out which topics to pursue and how best to do so. The same is true of solving tricky discipline problems, or deciding how to arrange and decorate the classroom. A teacher who simply wonders whether (or when or how) to do x isn’t asking the far more consequential question: “Must x really be decided unilaterally by the adult and imposed on students?” (By the same token, if an administrator mulls what speaker or consultant to hire for a professional development session, he or she has skipped the question “Shouldn’t the teachers be deciding this?”)

4. “Are we assigning the right amount of homework? Are parents helping their kids too much (or too little) with these assignments?”

You skipped right over the question of why we should force kids to work what amounts to a second shift after getting home from a full day of school, particularly when there’s no evidence that any kind of [homework](#) is beneficial for younger students. (Indeed, [recent research](#) casts doubt on its necessity even in high school, and teachers who have eliminated all homework report uniformly fabulous results.) To focus on the quantity, or even the quality, of something is to discourage questions about whether it needs to be done at all. This is especially unfortunate when that something may be the greatest extinguisher of curiosity ever invented.

5. “Are we making progress at closing the achievement gap?”

Wait — how are you defining “achievement”? If you skipped that step, it will probably be defined by default as raising [standardized test](#) scores. Unfortunately, tests measure what matters least, intellectually speaking. They mostly reflect two things: the size of the houses near a school, and how much time has been set aside to train students to be better test-takers. It is not only theoretically possible but actually quite common for a rise in test scores to accompany (indeed, to contribute to) a decline in the quality of teaching and learning.

Because “achievement gap” usually just means “test-score gap,” attempts to narrow it often entail transforming low-scoring schools into test-prep factories. This may succeed in raising scores, but at a substantial cost to the cause of genuine equity. (Much the same is true of closing the digital gap. Greater access to computers doesn’t help — and actually may hurt — if they’re used mostly for traditional drill-and-skill instruction.)

6. “Should we praise students’ ability or their effort?”

You skipped a step by failing to ask why [praising](#) children for anything — offering a verbal doggie biscuit for pleasing the adult — is necessary or constructive. Regardless of one’s criteria (e.g., ability or effort), praise is often construed by the recipient as manipulative. As noted above, a substantial research literature has shown that people typically end up less interested in whatever they were rewarded or praised for doing because now their primary goal is to get the reward or praise. The most salient feature of a positive judgment is not that it’s positive but that it’s a judgment; it’s less about feedback (which is purely informational) or encouragement than about evaluation.

Get the idea? To ask whether kids experience [“summer learning loss”](#) is to skip the step of asking what sort of learning is at issue – real understanding or mere recollection of facts. To ask who should get into the [gifted or honors](#) class is to ignore whether segregating kids by ostensible ability (so that an elite group receives the sort of enrichments that would probably benefit everyone) makes sense in the first place. To ask which indicators best predict success, so that a selective school knows which applicants to admit, is to blow past the question of whether it should be looking for the students who are [easiest to educate](#) rather than those who most need what the school has to offer. And so on.

In general, we should pause to consider why we’re doing what we’re doing and whether it’s necessary or desirable, rather than prematurely focusing on the details of implementation. That way, even if we decide to continue with the status quo, at least we’ve grappled with the most meaningful questions.

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