Generating Questions Strategy

The generating questions strategy involves requiring students to read a specific assignment, create questions designed to elicit important information from the passage, and answer their questions. Asking students to create their own questions about a reading passage encourages them to read more actively and helps them to focus their attention on key ideas. The questions should, in general, use question stems commonly referred to as “reporters’ questions.” These question stems include who, what, when, where, why, and how. The strategy does not require that students create a question using every reporters’ question stem; indeed, some of the stems would not be appropriate for specific reading selections. However, students are required to include at least one how or why question as a way to ensure that the strategy engages a student at a level that goes beyond literal comprehension. In general, how and why questions require a deeper level of thought that may include analysis or synthesis.

Because direct instruction of any learning strategy is vitally important, instructors who use the generating questions strategy must model the strategy for their students. One of the primary benefits of modeling the strategy is that students will be able to witness a display of intellectual reasoning. As they hear the instructor discussing the questions she selected and why she deemed the questions to be important, the students get to experience a higher level of thinking than that to which they may have been previously exposed. The new experience of “being inside” someone’s intellectual reasoning is deepened as the instructor “thinks out loud” about how she determined the answers to her questions. The modeling process allows the students to hear how a biologist, historian, sociologist, etc. tends to think regarding a specific section of text from within her discipline.

Also, vitally important is that students apply the generating questions strategy to authentic tasks. In other words, the reading assignment should be an assignment judged by the instructor to be important in helping the student master the discipline. The assignment should not be created simply to be able to assign the strategy. Rather, the strategy is assigned as a way to help students better understand or comprehend the message within the assignment.

Students need both practice and feedback in regard to their use of the generating questions strategy. Flexibility certainly exists as to how an instructor provides the essential practice and feedback components of the strategy. Clearly, however, students need a sufficient amount of practice in order to become skilled in the use of the strategy, and feedback is necessary to make their practice sessions conducive to improvement.

The following model is provided as a general representation of the use of the generating questions strategy as it might be implemented into the curriculum. Care has been taken to include the essential components of the strategy while not requiring the instructor to invest major portions of classroom time in order to utilize the strategy. Furthermore, excessive time requirements pertaining to assessment of the students’ work products and of their improvement in the read to understand concept area have been avoided. The goal of using the strategy is to help students become more efficient, more effective, independent learners as they empower themselves to improve their own learning.
Generating Questions Learning Strategy Model

Discuss with students the generating questions reading strategy and explain why and how the strategy can be useful to them. Then model the strategy in class by assigning a short reading passage for which you have already prepared questions and answers. After students have read the assignment, share the first question you generated. Think aloud to re-create for them the process your mind went through that led to the question being selected. Then display the answer you created and share the thoughts you had that led you to that particular answer. Continue in this format until you have completed the thinking process you underwent as you generated questions and answers from the assignment.

Next, require the students to generate questions and answers from another short reading assignment. The assignment can be for inside or outside of class. Ask students to read the assignment and generate questions as they read. Questions should include “How” and “Why” stems to go beyond literal meaning. Students are also to answer the questions. You may allow students to work in groups if they choose to do so although each student should have a copy of the questions and answers that were generated. Their work product will be a valuable review tool.

As you generate questions and answers yourself for the various reading assignments, you will probably come to appreciate the amount of time that students will need to expend in order to complete the assignment. Even average readers will need a fairly significant amount of time to do the assignment, both as they learn to do it and as they strive to do it better with subsequent practice. For this reason, you will want to be selective when choosing the reading assignment for use with this strategy. Rather than assigning students to read an entire chapter and generate questions and answers from the whole reading, you should choose a section within the chapter for which students should do the strategy. The section could be one you think is particularly important for students to understand. Or it could be a section that you know from past experience is especially troublesome for students to comprehend. Whatever your reason for choosing the specific reading pages to be used with the strategy, you want to be careful not to overwhelm students with adding the strategy to an already challenging lengthy reading.

Providing feedback is important, and it is especially important for their initial attempts in using the strategy. You may want to elicit their questions and answers as a form of whole-group discussion. After the discussion, however, you should also display questions and answers that you created based upon the reading. Again, model the thought process that led you to create these particular questions and answers. Doing so will allow students to compare their questions and answers with yours to help them determine the adequacy of their work. Hearing the intellectual reasoning behind your answers will also demonstrate good techniques for them to improve their reading comprehension for the next generating questions reading assignment.

Because the generating questions strategy is a required assignment, you should credit the student in some way for having completed it. This does not necessarily mean that you have to take up their questions and answers each time you assign the strategy, and you certainly do not have to grade it. You
should take them up enough, however, to communicate to the students that their participation in the strategy is not optional. It is your choice whether or not to assign a letter grade for it, and grading it is not particularly recommended.

The number of times that you assign the strategy is up to you, but you are asked to assess the assignment (with the assessment based upon the prepared rubric) a minimum of two times. You are also asked to submit a composite sheet reflecting scores to Institutional Research. The rubric will prompt you to assess each student’s skill in identifying the main idea and key supporting details, understanding key vocabulary in the text, and drawing appropriate conclusions based upon the nature of the text. The rubric will also ask you to assess the student’s skill with the learning strategy itself, that is, the ability to generate effective questions and answers.

The rubric covers four outcomes and it is divided into four skill levels: exemplary, competent, developing, and insufficient. Each skill level is defined in order to give guidance in the assessment process.