

Rousseau's Sacred Formula in the Contemporary
Classroom

Mark A. Lowe

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"Is this going to be on the test?"

Teaching students to pose questions, is an important, perhaps even an essential, skill that may be used for both classroom learning and for leading a safe, fulfilling existence outside of school. Teachers also must be skilled interrogators in order to monitor student understanding and the efficacy of their lessons. Inquiry is also requisite for the maintenance of freedom and democracy. If we do not question the actions of those in power, they will feel free to pursue whatever narrow self-interested course of action they deem correct. In the absence of questioning, liberty will suffer and die. Our tripartite system of government is designed to provide checks and balances against too much power being vested in a single branch. Without active questioning of the actions and motives of each branch by citizens and the members of the various branches themselves, the intent of a government

characterized by the distribution and separation of power will not be attained.

Yet, despite the necessity and utility of questioning during all, save a tiny number of specific human interactions, few things are more capable of taxing the patience demanded from teachers than the question posed above. Those who have attempted to instill in their students a belief that the pursuit of knowledge is valuable, in and of itself, are profoundly disappointed when they perceive the whining, contempt, or scorn frequently attached to the inquiry. It is fairly certain that the question will frustrate and sadden a math teacher, for example, who was interrupted with the question while a large part of the class was enthralled by his response to an earlier question about the appropriate method for solving a homework problem that had included, as a learning detour, an explanation on the origin of the concept of and symbol for zero. The teacher who takes

advantage of such teachable moments and veers away from teaching the specific content which she is obliged to teach surely takes a risk. This risk includes having students disengage from listening and possibly engaging in disruptive behavior.

There is also a risk that detour will be noticed by an administrator, making a surprise visit to ascertain whether the teacher is on task, trying to impart the content knowledge or skills included in the mandated curriculum.

It is a question that rigorously tests the resolve of a teacher who recognizes that there are a host of reasons for learning beyond preparation for a test. The belief that test scores are the only things that matter seems to be held by an ever increasing number of not only students, but also parents, administrators, politicians, and those contributing large sums of money to public education. Lastly, it is notable that test scores

are of major significance in federal law as is plain in the No child Left Behind Act.

However, the purpose of this paper is not to offer a criticism of the wisdom of using test scores as a measure of teacher effectiveness and educational achievement. Nor is the purpose to lament the intellectually impoverished attitude evinced by the student who would pose the question presented at the beginning of this paper. There can be no doubt that test scores are an important informational tool, capable of being used for a broad range of purposes for all people directly involved in or concerned about education. The problem with test scores arises when they are misused as the single dispositive measure of teacher or school effectiveness and the pursuit of higher test scores seems to develop into an obsessive compulsion.

Notwithstanding the validity of any criticisms about over reliance upon, misuse of, or

misunderstanding of the meaning of test scores, they are not going to disappear from education. In light of their existence, in perpetuity in the educational arena, what can a teacher do to respond to the student who demands an answer to the question with which this paper began?

First, a thoughtful, effective teacher can recognize that the student's question should not be taken as a manifestation of his complete failure to have taught the student that nothing exceeds the importance of obtaining a high, or at the bare minimum, a passing score on an assessment. The teacher should take comfort in the fact that the student's inquiry shows that she has learned how to distinguish among the things the teacher is teaching. It shows that she has been taught successfully, perhaps even by the teacher vexed by her question, how to engage in the cognitively demanding task of classifying information according to its perceived relevance or lack thereof to a

satisfactory outcome on an exam. This analytical skill is one that will serve the student well throughout her life; particularly should she seek a career in a competitive and esteemed profession such as law or medicine.

Despite this evidence of active engagement and cognition on the student's part, the possibility that the student is determining the value of information included in the teacher's instruction, based solely upon whether the information will be necessary to succeed on an upcoming test, is cause for concern. But the teacher's concern should not lead to him to conclude that he is an utter failure in his attempt to inculcate in the student a belief in the intrinsic value of learning. The teacher may view the student's inquiry as the result of the student's desire to occupy herself with those things which she perceives as useful.

The educational philosopher, Jean Jacques Rousseau, provides insight that can be used to

determine the appropriate level of concern a teacher ought to have about the student's inquiry. His philosophy offers an alternative explanation about the driving motivation behind the student's question, thereby allowing the recipient of the inquiry to avoid feeling disconsolate.

Rousseau wrote,

As soon as we have contrived to give our pupil an idea of the word 'Useful,' we have got an additional means of controlling him for this word makes a great impression on him, provided that its meaning for him is a meaning relative to his own age, and provided he clearly sees its relation to his own well-being. This word makes no impression on your scholars because you have taken no pains to give it a meaning they can understand, and because other people always undertake to supply their needs so that they never require to think for themselves, and do not know what utility is.¹

Experienced teachers know that if they train students to follow routines which the students believe perceive as useful to them, the students will engage in the routines on their own. In teacher speak, "Students will self-direct." By

¹ Foxley, Barbara, trans., *Emile, Jean Jacques Rousseau*, (London: Everyman Library, 1993), 169 - 170.

teaching useful routines the teacher has achieved a level of control over his students and given them a sense of the utility of certain behavior.

It is reasonable to view the student's question as an effort to figure out what part of the teacher's instruction is or will be useful to them, notwithstanding that a fair inference can be drawn from the question that the student believes nothing taught by the teacher is useful or merits attention unless she will be tested on it.

Describing the course of the education of *Emile*, Rousseau writes,

'What is the use of that?' In the future this is the sacred formula by which he and I test every action of our lives.²

Rousseau offers up argues his sacred formula as a means to eliminate the type of annoying questions which children pose in order to get attention rather than information.

This is the question with which I invariably answer all his questions; it serves to check the stream of foolish and tiresome questions with

² Ibid., 170.

which children weary those about them. These incessant questions produce no result, and their object is rather to get a hold over you than to gain any real advantage.³

All care-givers of young children are certainly familiar with the endless chain of questions, beginning with "Why" that many children delight in asking and which appear to be a part of a strategy to get attention, although from the perspective of the caregiver may seem to be part of a scheme to drive the care-giver crazy.

Stating his purpose for using the sacred formula Rousseau concludes,

A pupil, who has been really taught only to want to know what is useful, questions like Socrates; he never asks a question without a reason for it, for he knows he will be required to give his reason before he gets an answer.⁴

However potent a weapon Rousseau's strategy may be in arresting the "foolish, tiresome" questions of children, Rousseau's sacred formula has another benefit. Because of this additional benefit, Rousseau's sacred formula should be used in all

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

schools urban or suburban, public or private, wealthy or destitute, at the top of their game or humiliated following having been labeled as failing.

Rousseau intended that his sacred formula would produce a specific outcome. Rousseau wanted Emile to adopt the question as his own.

[M]ake no mistake about it, when you put this question to him, you are teaching him to put it to you, and you must expect that whatever you suggest to him in the future he will follow your example and ask, 'What is the use of this?'⁵

It would be of great benefit to the teacher to treat the student's question, stated at the beginning of this paper, as a variation of the one Rousseau intended to be set to use by Emile. Rather than the source of a teacher's mournful sighs, hair pulling, or in the extreme, resignation and early retirement, the question is better dealt with as a reflection of the student's desire to see to what purpose the teacher's instruction may be put. Today's reflective, effective educator would

⁵ Ibid.

do well to remind herself that the question arises from a child's natural desire to assert control over his environment and to expend his energies on useful activities. The question is clear evidence of the recognition that time and effort are required to understand information and employ it towards the achievement of a desired outcome, here a passing grade on a test. Although the outcome does not present itself as a lofty ideal, it is a rational, reasonable response to the competing demands for a child's time and attention.

Rousseau was not alone in his recognition that children want to engage in useful behaviors. The psychologist and education philosopher, William James, believed that one of the "native reactions" of children is "constructiveness."⁶ He described constructiveness as follows:

Constructiveness is another great instinctive tendency with which the schoolroom has to contract an alliance. Up to the eighth or ninth year of childhood one may say that the child

⁶ James, William, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals*, (New York: W.W. Norton Company, Inc. 1958), 53.

does hardly anything else than handle objects, explore things with his hands, doing and undoing, setting up and knocking down, putting together and pulling apart...To the very last, in most of us, the conceptions of objects and their properties are limited to the notion of what we can do with them.⁷

In the contemporary student this constructivist tendency, is manifest in the "Is this going to be on the test?" inquiry. Although one may justly have suspect that the question is impertinent since it appears to be founded upon a desire to attend only to that which will lead to a better score on a test, the question may be the result of the child's instinct to want to know whether he can make use of the thing or in James' terminology, what he may construct with it. The question may fairly be said to be the product of the natural desire of a child to figure out whether something can be set up or knocked down, put together or pulled apart, although in this case the thing being explored is the intangible content of the teacher's lesson.

"Does this count?"

⁷ Ibid.

"Should I write this stuff down?"

These questions are alternative ways of seeking the information sought by question presented at the outset of this paper. These alternatives and the original, "Is this going to be on the test?" are the contemporary student's articulation of the inquiry in Rousseau's sacred formula. Although the contemporary student's question is distinguishable from the one contained in Rousseau's sacred formula in that Rousseau's was born out his desire to "control" his charge and arrest his annoying inquiries, both questions eventually come to be posed for the same purpose. Once it has been successfully adopted by Emile the question in Rousseau's sacred formula and the contemporary student's should be viewed as the same thing, a manifestation of an instinctual drive. It flows from the child's attempt to impose order upon the world or make sense of the things she encounters in it by determining their use to her.

For the younger child, the immediacy of an object's use is tantamount and her concerns are focused upon the usefulness of the object as a means to satisfy her id. The truth of this assertion may be seen in the behavior of young children who grasp for the objects they encounter and promptly insert them in their mouths. As they get older and recognize that not everything is for eating, they will focus on the object's usefulness as it relates to their play.

As children develop still further, they learn that some objects may be not be put to an instant or playful use, but, nonetheless, may have other uses in the future. For the more mature contemporary student, the drive to determine a thing's usefulness is not limited to objects; she evaluates the lesson or information presented by a teacher by the same usefulness standard.

Rather than allowing the, "Is this going to be on the test?" question to be a source of

frustration, the effective, reflective teacher should recognize that it stems from natural inclinations. It is a reasonable question, necessary for developing a plan for present or future action, despite its appearance as the manifestation of a lazy, narrow, mind unable to appreciate the intrinsic value of knowledge. It is evidence of an active mind and a student's ability to engage in higher order cognition.

While planning lessons, activities or developing behavioral norms and routines, the question should direct the effective teacher to endeavor, to the greatest extent practicable, to make plain their usefulness to the student. In the optimal circumstances, the teacher will design lessons in which the student will be able to define and discover the usefulness of the skills and knowledge contained in the lesson. Yet, as the question demonstrates some students may be unable or unwilling to seek and find the utility of the

lesson. In this event an explicit statement of the utility may be warranted.

Rousseau's sacred formula provides today's teacher with a useful method for understanding an omnipresent though somewhat irritating student query. Rousseau's original intention and justification for his use the sacred formula may be somewhat distinguishable from the intention of the contemporary educator. Nevertheless, if the formula is analyzed for application in today's classroom, while taking into account one of the observations of William James, the utility of the sacred formula is not to be denied.

Bibliography

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