Lyrical Questions Exercise

This exercise, which I learned from poet Ross Gay, is an excellent first- or second-day exercise for any class—it can have a profoundly bonding effect. The interviews give students an inside view of one another in a surprisingly short time. The exchange of gifts creates further bonds. Establishing those connections between class members allows them to be more vulnerable with each other when they do creative work. It also creates a foundation of respect and empathy which allows them to engage in conversations in which they may hold different perspectives, which is useful in every class. Here’s how to facilitate the exercise:

STEP ONE

Ask students to come up with a list of 7 lyrical questions about their own life. They will wonder what a lyrical question is, so you can ask them what they associate with the word “lyrical.” They may say, “poetic,” or “like a song”—something along those lines. You can reinforce the notion that the questions don’t have to be literal or conventional. I give some examples from others who have done the exercise:

Where do I let the blue in?
How do I girl?
Will the cycle ever end?
What if we had gotten a hamster instead?

They should be REAL questions that the students have about their own lives. Tell them that they will be sharing the questions, so they aren’t taken off guard by the next step.

STEP TWO

Students will work in pairs. If they are working remotely, they can do a Skype interview. At this point, the students will use their own questions to interview a partner. For example, Steven will interview Gina about her life using HIS lyrical questions. He might ask, “Why can I never catch the ball?” and Gina will answer that however it makes sense to her in terms of her own life.

Steven asks Gina all seven of his lyrical questions and makes notes if it helps him remember what she has said. Then Gina interviews Steven using all seven of her lyrical questions.

You can trust this strange step—it’s magical!

STEP THREE

Each student makes a gift for their partner that reflects what they heard from the partner in the interview. This can take any form. You can have students do this at home with whatever materials they can find or you can have students do it on the spot and have art supplies in the room (Creativity & Innovation is happy to stock your classroom for the day if you want to do it in class).

I’ve seen students make collages, mobiles out of sticks and images, a song recorded on an iphone, comics, nests, folded paper objects, knitted pieces, etc etc.
If you are teaching in person, have the students present their gifts to their partners, providing some context for the rest of the class about why they made the gift they did. If you are working remotely, have students Skype their interview partners to present their gifts; it would be great if they could also pop them in the mail or send photos so the partner has something to keep. Students are often quite moved by what their partners have made, and (if you’re in the room together) the whole class learns something about each member of the group from hearing about the gift.

**STEP FOUR**

Debrief with the class and/or ask students to write a reflection about the experience of doing the exercise. If debriefing in class, ask first in an open-ended way about their experience of the exercise. Give lots of room for them to just process without a lot of comment initially. If you want to, you could then ask them about how/why it works to interview someone about their own life with questions that came from someone else’s life. This is a good opportunity to talk about the way randomness jolts us out of our habitual ways of thinking—the fact that the questions are so strange is one reason that the answers are often rich. Students might take a minute to think, by contrast, of what would have happened if they had interviewed each other using questions such as “Where are you from? What do your parents do?”

In a way, this exercise demonstrates the need to leave conventional/conditioned thinking behind in order to arrive at fresh thoughts—in other words, to engage in divergent thinking. If we accepted the standard interview questions, we would get conventional answers. The strangeness of the questions invites the imagination to respond in its own startling ways.

You might also ask student to reflect on the experience of making and receiving the gifts. How did that affect them? In general, gifts have a bonding effect. They can also make us feel seen. It’s interesting to consider how the constraint of making something for another student might have affected the students’ creativity.

I sometimes use this as an occasion to talk about one of my favorite books of all time, Lewis Hyde’s *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*.

For an in-depth description of using this exercise in an Anthropology class, follow this link:

Exercise developed by Ross Gay, described here by Jane Hilberry

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