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Question Asking and the Common Good: A Hermeneutic Investigation of Student Questioning in Moral Configurations of Classroom Practice

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Question Asking and the Common Good: A Hermeneutic Investigation of Student Questioning in Moral Configurations of Classroom Practice

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Abstract

This qualitative study (based on a hermeneutic moral-realist interpretive frame (Yanchar & Slife, 2017)) explored question asking as it unfolded in the everyday practice of being a student in a graduate course on design thinking (with an emphasis on design in education). Findings are presented as four key tensions that occurred within the complex classroom setting under investigation: “theory and overlapping practices,” “convergence and divergence,” “participation and reticence,” and “give and take.” Overall, these thematized tensions point to a dynamic interplay between student agency and the common good of the class. These findings have significant implications for understanding student questioning experiences and the study of classroom interactions.

Keywords: student question asking, hermeneutics, moral realism, moral ecology, practices, qualitative research

Formulación de Preguntas y el Bien Común: Una Investigación Hermenéutica sobre Interrogantes de Estudiantes Basada en las Configuraciones Morales de las Prácticas del Aula

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Resumen

Este estudio cualitativo (basado en un marco interpretativo hermenéutico moralista-realista (Yanchar & Slife, 2017)) exploró el despliegue en la formulación de preguntas en la práctica diaria de un estudiante en un curso de postgrado en el pensamiento basado en diseños. Los resultados son presentados en cuatro dicotomías claves que surgieron dentro del complicado entorno del aula que fue estudiado: “la superposición de la teoría y la práctica,” “la convergencia y la divergencia,” “la participación y la reticencia,” y “el dar y tomar.” En general, estas dicotomías tematizadas señalan una interacción dinámica entre la libertad de elección del estudiante y el bien común de la clase. Estos resultados tienen implicaciones significativas para entender experiencias de formulación de preguntas de los estudiantes y el estudio de interacciones dentro de la clase.

Palabras clave: formulación de preguntas de estudiantes, hermenéutica, realismo moral, ecología moral, prácticas, investigación cualitativa

Question asking has long been viewed as an integral part of human learning. Aristotle proposed that knowledge itself consists of answers to questions (*Posterior Analytics*, 350 B.C.). A significant focus of Einstein’s history of physics (1950) was an account of the development of questions from 2000 BC forward, as the appearance of new information and the development of new technology challenged existing interpretations of the natural world. Gadamer the hermeneuticist (1993, p. 363) proposed that “The path of all knowledge leads through the question,” while Dewey the pragmatist (1971) argued that “thinking is inquiry, investigation, probing... In short it is questioning” (p. 265). Postman and Weingartner (1969) summed up this general sentiment by defining questing asking as “the most significant intellectual tool human beings have” (p. 23).

Prior scholarship in this area has produced a number of conceptual resources that take account of question asking as a central learning activity, primarily including knowledge-based taxonomies, componential analyses, and cognitive models. Work focused on taxonomies emerged from Aristotle’s proposition that “the kinds of questions we ask are as many as the kinds of things which we know” (*Posterior Analytics*, 350 B.C./1994, Book 2, Part 1). Thus researchers such as Dillon (1984), Lehnert (1998) and Graesser and McMahan (1993) have focused on knowledge categories such as definitions, descriptions of attributes, explanation of causes, and so on.

Research focused on componential analyses has sought to break the question-asking process into its components and then trace the cause-and-effect relationships at play among them. Van der Meij’s (1994) review of this literature suggested that research into concepts such as “onset,” “formulation,” and “response” would account for most of the literature in educational questioning. Such studies explored how presuppositions, presumptions, perplexity, motivation, self-esteem, and curiosity affect questioning. They also explored strategies and barriers to the formulation of, and ability to respond to, questions (See Gong, 2018, for a review).

One of the most influential strands of research in questioning resulted from the search for cognitive mechanisms presumed to exist in the learner’s mind and computation procedures presumed to operate on those structures (Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1991). This cognitive view treated question generation as a fundamental component in processes that operate at deep conceptual levels (Chin & Osborne, 2008). Typically, cognitive research on question asking sought to specify the precise mechanisms of the questioning

process itself (Otero & Graesser, 2001), whereas other strands focused on identifying the functional role of questions as they contribute to other cognitive processes (Tsui, 1992) or the classification of cognitive functions of questions (Chin & Osborne, 2008).

With respect to question asking in formal education settings, it should not be surprising that researchers have long been interested in the experience of classroom questioning by students. However, educational research has produced a daunting picture of classes in which students ask very few questions (Dillon, 1988; Susskind, 1969; Van der Meij, 1988). Efforts to encourage more student question asking have included various ways to teach students how to ask questions (for reviews, see Chin & Brown, 2002; Chin & Osborne, 2008; Rosenshine, Meister, & Chaptman, 1996). But many of these initiatives were based largely on a mixture of assumptions derived from classification, cause-and-effect, and cognitive approaches to question-asking (see Gong, 2018), while important critiques have been raised that challenge those assumptions. According to Lindfors (1999), for example, highly controlled environments may increase the number of questions asked, but unless those questions emerge out of a student's desire to know, neither the questions nor the controlled events connect with real-world curiosity and learning. Thus, research focused on ordinary (not highly-controlled) student question asking in classroom settings—when such ordinary question asking does occur—would seem to provide a more effective way to understand the nature and dynamics of this phenomenon as part of real educational experiences (e.g., Fishbein, van Leeuwen, & Langmeyer, 1992; Pedrosa de Jesus, Almeida, & Watts, 2004). A better understanding of ordinary student question asking can lead to ways of facilitating this activity in the classroom.

In what follows, we present a qualitative study of ordinary student question asking in a graduate-level class on design thinking. Though qualitative research offers an effective way to document and understand lived experience, only a few qualitative studies have explored question asking in formal academic settings (Harper, Etkina, & Lin, 2003; Rop, 2003; van Zee, 2000). There are even fewer studies in the graduate school context (for one instance, see Volkman, 2004). But graduate school would seem to provide a rich context for studying the lived dynamics of question asking in a formal learning setting, at least among adult learners, as graduate classes are often intended to provide an environment in which wide-ranging student exploration of scholarly and professional issues is facilitated.

Method

Interpretive Frame

Our study of graduate student question asking was informed by hermeneutic moral-realist thought, rooted in the work of several hermeneutically-oriented theorists (Brinkmann, 2011; MacIntyre, 1984; Taylor, 1989; Yanchar & Slife, 2017). From this perspective, the starting point for any investigation is *practice*, conceptualized as a way of being involved in the world that is guided by moral goods and practice-internal values qua moral reference points for action. MacIntyre offered chess as an example of a practice in this sense. Chess entails *intrinsic goods*, for instance, the joy of the game (independent of any payment or recognition that one might receive), and *moral reference points* that provide guidance on how to play chess correctly and achieve its good (e.g., follow rules, be courteous, be attentive, use effective strategies). From this perspective, practices are constituted by these in-the-world goods and reference points; without them, people would have no clear sense of how to achieve competence or excellence in their efforts to participate in any kind of practice, whether it be relatively inconsequential (e.g., playing chess) or relatively significant (e.g., professional work, parenting, citizenship).

If most human activity takes place in contexts of practice, as hermeneutic theorists have argued, and any practice entails an intrinsic, contextual configuration of goods and reference points, then an adequate understanding of most any activity should take into account how people are engaged in practices, and thus how people navigate practice-specific goods and reference points in their conduct. Similarly, from this perspective, an adequate understanding of any phenomenon must consider its fit into the moral configurations of a given practice—that is, what difference the phenomenon makes, how it (often implicitly) enables and constrains one's conduct, and the tensions it creates as people seek to engage in a given practice and pursue its good. Based on this line of analysis, our study of question asking in a formal academic setting was guided by the following research questions: How does student question asking fit into the moral configuration of goods and reference points in this graduate class? And what is revealed about student question asking, at least in this setting, when studied from this perspective?

Study Overview

We employed a case study approach to investigate question-asking interactions in a graduate-level class on design thinking (with an emphasis on design in education). Conceptually speaking, our approach was loosely based on other hermeneutic approaches designed to provide insight into human meaning and practical involvement in the world (e.g., Addison, 1992; Fleming, Gaidys, & Robb, 2003; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), but with an explicit emphasis on the moral goods and reference points intrinsic to the practice of being a graduate student engaged in a course on design thinking. As in other forms of qualitative inquiry, findings from this study can be transferred to other settings (as described by Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Researcher Roles

Our respective roles in conducting this study were as follows. We both contributed significantly to the conceptualization of the research questions, design of the study, formulation of interview questions, and steps to obtain IRB approval. The first author (SPG) made all classroom observations, conducted interviews 1 and 2 for all participants, analyzed observations and interviews (to provide one version of the analysis), and helped develop the four final themes. The first author also, in collaboration with the second author, helped conduct the third (final) interview for all participants (or helped conduct the second interview in the case of the course instructor, who was interviewed only twice). In addition to participating in all final interviews, the second author (SCY) separately analyzed all of the interviews (to provide an independent version of the analysis) and helped develop the four final themes. All interviews were transcribed by a transcriptionist, guided by a previously created transcription protocol. Transcripts were checked for accuracy by the first author. Details of the data collection and analysis, further specifying the roles played by each of us, are provided in the sections below.

Case Selection and Participants

The graduate course that we studied took place in the school of education at a major university. We selected this case based on the following considerations: for our research purposes, the class needed to be graduate level and entail a structure in which student question asking was at least somewhat prevalent. We also sought a class that included diversity with respect to student experience with the course topic (in this case, design in education). With IRB approval, we invited all students as well as the instructor to participate; all agreed and were fully involved in all aspects of the study. The study included eight participants in total—two women and six men (one male was the instructor). Three of the participants already held PhDs in education. One was the instructor (Dr. Smith), one was taking the class for credit (Harry), and one participated solely for personal professional development (Peter); one of these participated at a distance (Peter). Of the five students taking the class for credit, three were master's degree candidates (Anne, Charles, and David) while two were doctoral candidates (Jacky and Jim).

Data Collection

Our data sources included class observations, class artifacts, and in-depth, semi-structured interviews. One member of the research team (SPG) participated in eight classroom observations over a four-week period, creating a detailed set of field notes. The classes were recorded, transcribed, and used to inform the semi-structured interviews that occurred after this four-week observation period had concluded (more on this below). Each student was then interviewed three times, while the instructor was interviewed twice, with each interview lasting about an hour.

Interview protocols were developed as the study progressed. The first interview (conducted by SPG) was conducted in order to gain familiarity with participants in general and their typical patterns of conduct with respect to question asking in classes. Example questions included: “Why are you taking this class?”, “How does the class fit into the bigger picture of your studies or purposes?”, “How often do you ask questions?”, “What kind of questions did you ask in general?”, “Are your questions like your classmates or different? How so?”, and “Do the questions you’re exploring in class fit

with the questions that you need to have answered professionally? Please clarify?”

The second interview (also conducted by SPG) was designed to explore question-asking interactions that took place in this class. These questions varied according to participant and the dynamics of the class sessions, but usually took the form of something like: “Let’s look at the video (or listen to the audio) to look at your questions. What were you trying to find out here?”, “What did you mean when you said . . . ?”, “This answer and that answer seem contradictory. Are they?”, and “What did you think of this questioning interchange?”

We conducted the third interview for each participant together, as we each had, by this point, formulated unique questions for participants. In this interview, we followed-up on important topics from the first two interviews and sought participants’ reactions to initial themes that we had begun to develop by that time. We followed a similar pattern in our interviews with the class instructor. In the first interview one of us (SPG) explored his views of student question asking, while in the second we both probed into specific episodes from this class, his reactions to initial themes we had developed, and related issues.

Data Analysis

To gain greater familiarity with the class context (particularly student question asking) and prepare for interviews, we reviewed artifacts, field notes, class recordings, and class transcripts. This review provided a basis for the interviews that followed, as many interview questions (especially in interview 2) focused on actual question-asking interchanges in class.

We analyzed interviews independently—using the same general data analytic strategy—and then merged our tentative analyses later in the process (as described below). For each participant we analyzed interview 1 before conducting interview 2 and analyzed interview 2 before conducting interview 3. In this way, our later interviews followed-up on topics discussed in earlier ones, seeking clarity and querying more deeply. Our strategy for analyzing all interviews involved the following activities ([for more on this data analytic strategy, see Yanchar & Gong, 2019; Yanchar & Slife, 2017](#)).

Initial coding

We began by carefully reading each interview as it was transcribed and, using an a priori set of codes that we developed, coded in ways that foregrounded moral reference points, goods, and tensions associated with student question asking. Many passages in the transcripts were assigned more than one initial code. Our initial codes were designed to be sensitive to issues such as: basic descriptions of practical involvement in class (coded as P), explicit value judgments made by students (coded as V), student self-evaluations (coded as S), instances in which questioning enabled (coded as E) or hindered (coded as H) a student's ability to learn something, and other significant events not fitting these codes (coded as O).

Expanded coding

After initial coding, we revisited transcripts to ensure that our initial codes seemed appropriate. When needed, we changed initial codes. We then revisited transcripts again, this time supplementing each initial code with an “expanded” code that offered additional contextual detail.

Initial thematizing

Next, we independently began developing themes by combining expanded codes with similar or related meanings. We each created a number of initial themes through this process that were later revised, reworked into other themes, or deleted.

Initial inferring

We independently made initial inferences about the goods, reference points, and tensions of practice in this setting. Regarding practice-internal goods, we both inferred that the main good of participation in this context was the facilitation of competent or excellent design work—becoming a better designer. We also inferred a number of reference points and tensions, which we include in our findings.

Refined thematizing and inferring

After making initial inferences for each interview, we each (independently) refined the themes and inferences across interviews by merging, splitting, adding, deleting, editing, and so on. During this process we also looked for interrelations among themes, goods, reference points, and tensions by engaging in part-part and part-whole analyses (asking ourselves, for example, “How are these two reference points related?” or “How does this reference point guide toward the broader good of practice?”).

Structuring

After this refining process, we merged what we had independently formulated into a single collection of potential findings. After several more collaborative iterations of refinement, we arrived at a final thematic structure that included four themes.

Trustworthiness

Throughout this study, from conceptualization to completion, we strived to follow well-known and widely-used credibility standards developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). These standards included reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, persistent observation, data triangulation, negative case analysis, and member checking.

Findings

Classroom Context

The class was heavily focused on theory. Students were assigned to read the work of major theorists in the field of design, write weekly reflection papers, participate in classroom discussions, and create a personal design theory as a final project. Classes were held in the department conference room at a long table surrounded by large swivel chairs. At one end of the room, a large screen displayed the participants who sat in on the course electronically from off campus. Besides Peter, who always participated at a distance, other class

members would occasionally participate from an off-campus site, and during one class period most of the members met electronically.

Dr. Smith would usually start class by asking if students had questions regarding the readings. Other questions and comments about the authors, about the larger context of a reading, or about concepts expressed in the readings would generally follow. Such questions would include requests for more information about the background of the theorists, questions about the meaning of a text, questions about implementing ideas, and so on. Dr. Smith actively facilitated discussions by responding, listening, and interjecting his own questions and comments. Dialogues were vibrant and participatory, with questions and answers bouncing back and forth between teacher and students. Comments and questions were wide-ranging as students sought to make connections between their experiences and the ideas covered in class.

Themes Regarding Student Question Asking in the Classroom

The four themes that we offer, enumerated below, represent key tensions and related reference points that students navigated in their efforts to ask questions and learn course material. The themes are as follows:

- Theme 1: Theory and Overlapping Practices
- Theme 2: Convergence and Divergence
- Theme 3: Participation and Reticence
- Theme 4: Give and Take

Quotes that we included within each theme were drawn from interview transcripts. In some cases, we edited participant statements to increase clarity, brevity, and readability. Through member checking, we confirmed that our use of quotes (edited and non-edited) accurately reflected participants experiences and viewpoints.

Theme 1: theory and overlapping practices

Several important tensions related to student question asking grew out of the subject matter of the class itself: design theory. Reading assignments were challenging because of their abstract concern with technical aspects of design, competing design models, and the philosophical underpinnings of design work. Reflection assignments and classroom conversations were calculated to help students understand these theoretical complexities with the

goal of creating a personal design theory for the final paper and presentation, a seemingly straightforward educational endeavor.

Anne found the theoretical emphasis of the class particularly daunting. As a new student in the program, she found the readings difficult to decode and the classroom conversations hard to follow. In her words: “I felt inadequate.” During the interviews, Anne confessed that the class was a significant challenge, and that she might have needed basic tutoring in instructional design and theory. For this reason, she was unwilling to ask her basic questions in class, declaring that, “Informational questions [that] might be good in undergraduate classes” were inappropriate in graduate classes because “in graduate school you are expected to already have content knowledge and background.”

Other students felt similarly. David, who had extensive background in graphic design but little familiarity with design theory, also picked up on the expectation that basic questions like “What is a theory?” were too simple to ask. Most of the participants generally agreed that questions contributed more if they helped “create discussions,” “synthesize information,” and, as some suggested, participate in “deeper” theoretical thinking. These students, new to design theory in education, encountered these expectations as what we refer to here as reference points regarding good question asking in a graduate class such as this—that is, what the good student does.

Ironically, student presumptions about the need to emphasize “deeper” or “higher-level” questions were sometimes problematic in Professor Smith’s view. While he was interested in complex theoretical questions, he also felt that basic questions were a part of deep reading in graduate study. He grew frustrated when students rushed to evaluate design theories before asking the basic questions “informed by the readings themselves.” He thought that students were trying to make connections before making sure that they understood what the authors were saying in the first place. He wanted them to ask, “What question were the writers trying to answer?” In his view, students needed to understand those questions to gain an adequate sense of the theorists’ positions before shifting to critical analysis. Dr. Smith’s ideas of good classroom questions and the students’ ideas were not so different in outcome, but in the reference points that led to those classroom goods. For Dr. Smith, understanding basic issues, and thus asking basic questions, would lead to productive theoretical discussions rather than away from them, as some of the students had presumed. He said, “I wanted questions that went

back to understand the author, to have students be able to articulate the author's views, then decide if they can agree or where they could disagree." Thus, this tension between basic and advanced theoretical understanding pointed to equally relevant, but sometimes contradicting, reference points regarding good learning practice in this class.

A second complexity concerned the good of classroom practice, and its emphasis on theory, versus goods of other practices such as those of participants' respective workplaces. Tensions between the abstract and philosophically-oriented positions of theorists and the everyday work of practitioners has given rise to an oft-noted theory-practice divide. In class, this divide showed up as students—most of whom worked full-time or part-time in some form of curriculum design environment—experienced a practical counterpoint to the classroom emphasis on theory. Questions that emerged from the tension between theory and practice revealed how students positioned themselves in relationship to the theoretical. Sometimes the divide between theory and practice showed up as a synergy, sometimes as a frustration. Jim, for example, was caught between the call to "be more practical" and the call to be "very theory focused" as he worked toward the classroom goal of "trying to figure out how these ideas work together." While perhaps not fundamentally and intrinsically at variance, these reference points leading toward the class good (be more practical vs. be theory focused) often led students in opposite directions.

Charles and Peter, both of whom worked in online course development, were caught between workplace goods of efficiency and economy, on the one hand, and theoretical questions about learner needs on the other. Peter, however, grounded himself in the theoretical stance of the classroom in order to question aspects of his professional aspirations. "I wanted to get clear on the philosophical distinctions because it is important to me to have good chops as a psychologist," he said. In this sense, the good of the class—learning design theory—at times seemed to supersede goods intrinsic to his work practice: the efficient and economical production of instruction. Thus, Peter's orientation, based in the principal good of the class, invited him to question a principal good of his work: being highly practical.

On the other hand, Charles was trying to find answers to very practical questions about "how . . . this [would] be useful at work." And indeed, he said that he would "take something useful back to work after almost every class." For him the practical goals of work were the primary concern, and his

questions in class were informed by his commitment to these goals. Others expressed a similar sentiment, seeing the tension between theory and practice as either a matter of generalization versus concrete experience or as an issue of how theory can be tailored to meet local needs. Their commitment to the primary good of the practical and to the concrete, in the context of everyday work activities, led to questions about the good of theory and seemed to perpetuate the longstanding divide between academic theory and professional practice. As Jacky commented, “I tend to distrust generalizations that aren’t grounded in concrete experience.” And their efforts to pursue the good of the class—namely, becoming a better designer—was sometimes facilitated, sometimes frustrated, by goods and reference points intrinsic to other practices such as their professional design work. As class unfolded, these students navigated the classroom ecology by taking stances with regard to those various goods and reference points—some they embraced, some they ignored, some they balanced in relative priority compared to others. In this sense, students queried and commented in ways that were informed—enhanced or limited—by their relative commitments to the goods of more than one practice (being a student of theory vs. being a designer with practical goals) and in relation to what seemed to matter most in their professional development.

Theme 2: convergence and divergence

Another tension concerned the relative value of two competing reference points—what we refer to here as *convergent* and *divergent* questioning. Convergent questioning focused specifically on the readings and moved the class towards clarity, consensus, and closure. Divergent questions led away from the topic at hand and toward new questions—sometimes creating a sense of ambiguity, sometimes challenging ideas, and sometimes ushering in discussion of alternative perspectives. Students encountered both kinds of questioning as important and necessary. A good student would ask either kind depending on the situation, as both divergence and convergence could help students pursue the good of classroom practice. Participants also suggested that too much of either kind of question was a hindrance—too much closure would be restrictive or stifling, too much divergence would produce academic chaos. However, no consensus emerged about some golden mean between convergent and divergent kinds of questioning.

Participants varied with regard to the relative value of each and in their willingness to engage in either.

In the classroom interplay of convergent and divergent questioning, Harry's role was pivotal. Harry's questions seemed to be the most divergent of the group. His questions continually reached beyond the bounds of course content, trying to make his own historical, social, political, and spiritual connections. He commented that many of his questions were related to his efforts to develop his own learning model. Admitting that his purpose "was quite a bit different from most everybody else taking this course, on a number of levels," he concluded that "it's nice to fly off on a tangent, and just to discuss things and let the conversation flow and go where it's going to go." According to Harry, the professor would sometimes do the following: "[He would] stop the class and say 'Okay, this has really been fruitful and good, but we need to go back because I want to cover these points.' . . . But there's other times [he] would let things go."

Jacky found Harry's tangents interesting and invigorating—perhaps as a way to facilitate good learning practice. She felt that "negative closure is dogmatic," adding, "I think my personal learning is enriched through . . . thinking in new ways about things. I don't want a learning experience that just confirms my preconceived notions." Several other students, however, mentioned that these types of conversations were somewhat unpredictable and possibly unproductive. Jim particularly found this kind of questioning and accompanying discussion unsettling. Although he was not looking for preconceived answers that limited perspectives, he advocated convergent questions and conversations that related productively to the course topic at hand. In this regard, he described his ideal questioning and learning as follows:

My best questions tend to come when I'm talking to someone, with whom I can have a conversation, where I bounce ideas back . . . because I'm on the same wavelength as that person. We have a mutual understanding up to this point and then especially if it happens multiple times where each of us have come up with a question or two and we keep on finishing each other's thoughts or asking similar questions, then I'm confident that the direction is the same and the questions that I'm going to ask are what they're

interested in as well. So I think that's one, that's like ideal learning for me.

Clearly, for Jim, student questions and related discussions didn't always live up to this expectation.

Peter, on the other hand, suggested that the issue of convergence versus divergence was complicated by variation among students' interests and concerns. As he observed, "It was not so much that there were good and bad questions in the classroom, but just questions that were more or less relevant to me." But he also added that, in his view, there were moral considerations (i.e., reference points) about how someone who was not taking the class for credit should act. "An auditor [Peter was auditing the class] should not hijack the class discussion to ask questions that were deeper or more idiosyncratic questions, unique to me and to my situation." Peter was suggesting that the good student, in this setting, was sensitive to a kind of reference point regarding the limits of divergent questioning.

Other students used the final project of the course to gauge how much convergent or divergent questioning might be appropriate. They needed to produce a final paper focused on the design theories that constituted the core subject matter of the class and thus were somewhat less inclined to revel in divergence. In this regard, student responses to the issue of convergence and divergence often revealed conflicting reference points, namely, those that led to exploration and debate versus those that helped produce clarity, order, and an improved chance for academic success.

Overall, the issue of divergence and convergence mattered to the students as they viewed themselves in relationship to the goods of learning in this setting. Different stances regarding divergent and convergent questioning revealed differing reference points—for example, clarity and closure versus wide-ranging exploration. In this sense, different stances regarding the relative value of convergent and divergent question asking pointed toward contextual balance itself as a predominant reference point of classroom practice. Judgments about when to range widely and when to seek closure would need to be made in light of the particular combination of student needs and class purposes. And in making those judgments, no optimum solution for all students seemed possible, though a reasonable balance might, at times, be achieved.

Theme 3: participation and reticence

Exploring question asking necessarily implies an exploration of student participation, and student participation necessarily implies the issue of nonparticipation. For some students, fear was a major obstacle to asking questions. As the most junior member of the class, Anne felt daunted by her perception that the other students were much more mature and familiar with design than she was. In class, she said little and often-deflected questions put to her by the instructor. As she said, "Rather than cause that uncomfortable confrontation or make him defensive . . . I just didn't ask questions". She generally characterized herself as an outgoing person and a vocal contributor; she indicated that in other classes she was often a dominant force in discussions. Some of Anne's reticence in this class was explained by her own perception of others' judgments:

You know, there's a lot of stigma that goes with not participating. So you need to be heard, but if you are being heard in a way that is asking these bad questions that we have talked about, then you are seen as equally kind of stupid or slow, or you're not, you're just not there, and you're taking up class time, and you shouldn't be.

Anne was thus caught in a tension between the need to contribute, as a good student *does*, and the need to appear intelligent or knowledgeable, as a good student *is*. She was ultimately silenced by her concern regarding the possible judgments of others.

Similarly, David articulated how his own judgments, and his presumptions about the judgments of others, influenced his willingness to articulate questions: "They say there are no stupid questions, but there are questions that make you feel like an idiot. . . . And people are going to say, 'Why is this guy in this class?'" Peter made a similar observation; if he found himself mystified by a course reading, he would be very unlikely to reveal that in class. As he said, "I didn't want to look kind of incompetent." Overall, the fears of these students suggest something about moral reference points in this setting. Students should be smart. They should not be ignorant. They should know what is going on, and their questions should reflect this.

On the other hand, Harry suggested that questions must be asked even in light of the possible judgment of others: "If I ask this question, it's going to

make me look stupid, I don't care." For him, the fear of looking unintelligent to others did not necessarily lead to silence. Expressing a broad view of education, Harry suggested that the good student's pursuit of understanding was more important than the good student's manifest knowledge.

However, lack of participation in classroom interactions did not always imply concern about the judgments of others. Anne told a story about watching Charles in class. Because he was quiet, she assumed that he was as lost and fearful as she was. But when Professor Smith called on him, she was surprised to see that he always seemed to be tracking the conversation, and he always made some appropriate response before lapsing back into silence. Charles's silence sprang from other motivations. For example, he claimed that he was quiet because that was his nature. He wasn't afraid to speak up. He was just happy to let other people take the floor. As he said, "Sometimes I have something to contribute, and sometimes I can sit back and let others make a contribution." Indeed, as Harry suggested, "Sometimes silence *is* a question—[asking] what do you have to say?"

Anne's fear was also mixed with moral considerations. Beyond sensing a standard of competence necessary for a graduate classroom, and that her questions would not contribute significantly to discussion, she showed a striking awareness of the emotional dynamics among other students. For instance, she felt that the most vocal participant in class, although appearing confident on the surface, was emotionally vulnerable. If her own questions constituted a challenge to him, she reasoned, it could be personally hurtful. She refrained from challenging him in order to give him the latitude she felt he needed. As she said, "I was trying to avoid an uncomfortable challenge . . . to the student who was defensive." Thus, Anne's conspicuous silence was situated within a confluence of reference points—the value of knowledge, the value of contributing, the value of emotional sensitivity to others, and the value of interpersonal appropriateness in a graduate setting—that ultimately limited her question asking despite her clear need for instruction in this area.

What is revealed about Anne in this situation seems to describe this classroom moral ecology in general. A complex configuration of reference points associated with being a good student led to less or more question asking, depending on how students viewed those reference points, or the reference points they were most committed to as they pursued the good of studying design in this setting. Participation, in this sense, could be viewed

as good or bad depending on personal commitments, moral demands, and contextual circumstances.

Theme 4: give and take

Just as lack of participation was sometimes problematic in the classroom, so also was too much participation. Jacky, Peter, Jim, Harry, and David all articulated some form of the reference point that students should participate without impeding the questions of others. Most of the students in the class showed some awareness that they might talk too much. Harry said, “I am dominant,” but also that “I want to hear from other people.” Jacky said in several ways, “Sometimes I ask too many questions,” and “I’m still learning how to evaluate when I might be too strong or asking too many questions in class.” Peter too expressed his uneasiness: “I hope I’m not talking too much in class.” As Jim said, “A good student would realize, ‘I need to stop talking like this right now because everyone is tired of hearing from me.’” And David noted: “I tried to be aware of how long I’m talking.”

Peter and Jim both viewed this sensitivity to others as a social expectation. As Peter explained, “I guess I’d call it more of an etiquette thing, more than anything else.” He suggested that this form of etiquette flows out of a notion of fairness: “It’s about fairness. . . . It wouldn’t be appropriate for me to hijack the class discussion.” On the other hand, Jacky felt that allowing others to share implied more than etiquette per se; it was a moral obligation. As she asserted, “Asking questions and learning in a group environment isn’t only about my curiosity or my desire to learn more . . . Honoring and respecting other people’s learning matters.” Here Jacky identified personal learning and learning of others as roughly equivalent moral demands that must be carefully balanced in the give and take of everyday class participation. All must have a voice.

In the course of interviews, it became clear that what Jacky expressed in this respect was similar to other members of the class. Indeed, there was consensus among participants that an aggressive pursuit of one’s own personal agenda violated reference points associated with forms of classroom opportunity and equity. Students wondered what opportunity for diverse voices was available, or how different concerns could be addressed, when one’s own interests took precedence over the others. From this perspective, misuse of time was not just an inconvenience or annoyance; it was a kind of

academic moral transgression. If one's efforts to learn were suppressed by a dominant voice—efforts that could and should, in some way, lead to greater opportunity for professional success—then such domination was morally problematic. Jim, for instance, expressed the perspective that, “my personal goals and the class goals were well aligned.” He felt that distractions from the stated course purposes could have a real negative impact on his professional preparedness and reduce his opportunities for future professional growth and success.

All students seemed committed to classroom fairness as a reference point, perhaps each in their own way; that is, each seemed committed to maintaining a class environment in which mutual respect, tolerance, and assistance were commonplace. This would create an environment in which no agenda was subordinated to those of others. Dr. Smith expressed a similar concern. He too was aware of times when class discussions might be less useful (at least some for students) due to dominant voices, and thus he actively sought to curtail such domination. As he said, “One of the things I wrestled with in class is how I make sure we can talk about some really deep and important subjects and explore this world philosophically but not turn away that student who was very interested in how this helps me work tomorrow as well.” As the instructor, Dr. Smith seemed especially committed to this reference point, though it is not always clear that he could maximize the benefit of every discussion for every student.

Interestingly, some participants openly acknowledged that not all questions asked in class were particularly useful or engaging to them. Peter's straightforward statement in this regard provides a good example: “...some of the questions, or lines of questioning or thought, that other students would pursue in class simply weren't interesting to me.” Nonetheless, participants seemed to treat this as an unavoidable reality of learning in a group setting. Participants generally acted patiently in class as others asked questions—even when questions seemed uninteresting—but sometimes, during interviews, expressed frustration with less-relevant lines of questioning. Thus, fairness was a complex moral reference point; it was not always easy to decide when a line of questioning had gone beyond the point of edification, or if it was edifying at all. In this regard, one might ask when it is justified to entertain certain kinds of questions that may be valuable to one or a few students but not the others. Such questions may be justified on some

occasions; but such determinations are hardly simple to make and have implications for the quality of the classroom experience for all.

In this regard, our data suggested that interpersonal tensions can grow among learners with different perspectives, but also that a more general tension can exist between the personal growth and interests of one or some students and the overall quality of the class experience. Participants in our study seemed to be aware of these tensions and transgressions of reference points associated with voice. Moreover, there was evidence in our data—expressed by all participants in some fashion—that reference points associated with voice were significant in their learning experience. According to our participants, as they navigated the moral space of this class, there were times to query and times to listen; times to probe deep and times to cover basics; times to challenge and times to refrain. Reference points such as these provided an intrinsic, often-implicit basis for how to conduct oneself in class and more particularly, how to ask questions. They pointed to a balance of give and take, the exact execution of which depended on contextual circumstances, including moral goods and reference points that we have described.

Discussion

Summary and Significance

Participants in our study did not inhabit a simple educational context marked by unproblematic processes of information dissemination and acquisition. Rather, it was a complex space filled with challenges, interpersonal struggles, and oft-competing demands that may or may not have been conducive to students' academic growth and development. Moreover, students in our study were keenly aware of their social interconnectedness; it was a strongly relational experience that informed much of their activity. Within this complex ecology, student questions played a pivotal role. On the one hand, they were often necessary for clarifying and understanding course content; indeed, for graduate students to not ask questions in a class like this would be unusual. But based on our analysis, the significance of student questions went beyond relatively straightforward processes of clarification and comprehension.

As our findings suggest, the practice of being a graduate student and question asker in this setting entailed moral points of orientation regarding how questions should be asked, even if those reference points weren't always followed. Participants' practices and viewpoints thus suggested an often-implicit configuration of moral concerns that guided toward classroom propriety—that there was a moral demand to act in helpful ways toward others and contribute to a respectful, psychologically-safe educational environment conducive to learning for all. From a hermeneutic perspective (e.g., Yanchar & Slife, 2019; Taylor, 1989), it is how these moral reference points were committed to or ignored in the midst of everyday activity that constituted the agency of these students.

Taken together, the themes of this study point to a general metatheme concerning what might be described as *the dynamic interplay between student agency and the common good*. From the perspective provided by our hermeneutic moral realist interpretive frame, students can be seen as agents negotiating a classroom moral configuration that was anything but straightforward with respect to how they might simultaneously honor the good of the class and pursue their own learning. That this common good, with its multiple, interlacing, sometimes contradicting reference points seemed to be in tension with the pursuits of at least some learners revealed an inescapable reality of classroom practice: *there are moral goods and reference points, and thus agents will be faced with moral tensions and complexities*.

For our participants, then, question-asking exchanges were ways of contributing to or disrupting this common good—with *the good* involving reference points that lead to student edification. In this sense, to be a good question asker was to participate in ways that would strike an appropriate contextual balance among demands and properly handle tensions that arose. We saw that student questions both helped and hindered in these practical-moral ways. Moreover, it might be said that a particular question showed up as an expression of a student's agency in pursuit of learning; thus, participants did or did not ask questions in helpful ways and did or did not handle tensions properly, given the moral demands of practice in this setting. Broadly speaking, questions and question asking (as part of student practice in this setting) offered moral possibilities that students qua agents would press into in the midst of ordinary class involvement.

Situating the Current Study in the Literature

This investigation offered a unique perspective on graduate student question asking in the classroom. While the literature of this topic has generally involved studies that treat questioning as a cognitive or logocentric activity, focused on the formulation of taxonomies, models, and causal mechanisms, this study sought to understand question asking as a part of students' situated, practical involvement in a real world context. Thus, the goal of this study was not to develop a model or some other set of formalisms; rather, it was to better understand the lived experience of student question asking in a structured (higher) education setting. Producing this kind of account was made possible by virtue of a qualitative inquiry approach. However, this investigation differed from the few qualitative studies of this topic (Harper, Etkina, & Lin, 2003; Rop, 2003; van Zee, 2000; Volkman, 2004) by virtue of its hermeneutic moral realist framework and emphasis on the meaning of question asking in the midst of lived, moral space. While prior qualitative studies have explored classroom dynamics and issues regarding student question asking, this study emphasized complex tensions as moral phenomena per se and how students were caught up in a kind of moral engagement in the classroom, even under very ordinary circumstances. The tensions that we identified in the data showed up, so to speak, against a backdrop of in-the-world moral goods and reference points. That is, we suggest that this picture of student question asking (in this setting) was made possible by the framing we employed, and more specifically, that tensions such as those we present—and students' ways of dealing with them—were made salient when student activity was examined with attention to that moral background taken by hermeneutic thought to meaningfully situate ordinary activities such as querying, conversing, and sometimes demurring in the classroom.

Moreover, while our inquiry approach was similar in various ways to other hermeneutic strategies, such as those offered by Addison (1992), Fleming, Gaidys and Robb (2003), and Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), the moral realist framework unique to our study provided a novel perspective on the phenomenon being studied—one that, as stated above, allowed student question asking to be seen as enmeshed in an inescapably moral configuration of goods and reference points. How our participants asked questions in the classroom, from this perspective, was intimately bound with

these moral considerations—so much so, it would appear, that it would be difficult to make adequate sense of their practical involvement in this setting without an understanding of these various goods and reference points that, all together, seemed to function as an omnipresent background condition of meaningful student action.

Conclusion

We do not see this interpretive frame as the basis for some kind of orthodoxy with regard to hermeneutic inquiry in education. Future studies would need to be tailored to the unique circumstances of participant activity and surrounding context; data collection and analysis activities (including coding schemes) would need to meet the demands of specific research questions and study purposes. But this general interpretive frame, with its emphasis on the moral configurations of practice, can yield insight not typically produced by other investigative approaches. In this sense, at least some future research can be aided by variations on the hermeneutic approach that we have presented here.

Overall, we suggest that this study, and other possible studies based on this interpretive frame, can serve to deepen understandings of student participation in the classroom. For example, a greater awareness of moral goods and reference points could help inform educational leaders and policy makers who seek to treat students as primary stakeholders in particular educational settings. Instructor awareness of the moral configurations of classroom practice could inform expectations regarding student-teacher and student-student interactions. And with regard to question asking per se, teaching that is attuned to the moral realities of classroom practice might be oriented to tensions and balances that can make a significant difference to students as they navigate the practical-moral complexities of class involvement. These are possibilities for continued study of this topic.

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