

Question Sorts Routine

A routine for identifying powerful questions to guide inquiry and deepen understanding

1. Individually or as a group brainstorm a large set of questions on the topic and write each question on post it notes or note cards.
2. Create a horizontal continuum using masking tape on the table or draw one on the white board. This horizontal axis will represent generativity, that is, how likely the question is to generate engagement, insight, creative action, deeper understanding, and new possibilities. As a group, discuss and place each question on the horizontal line
3. Create a vertical continuum (axis) bisecting the horizontal axis. This line represents how genuine, that is, how much we care about investigating it, the question is. As a group, discuss and place each question by moving the post note up or down on the vertical axis.

Purpose: What kind of thinking does this routine encourage?

To identify powerful questions that can guide inquiry and deepen our understanding, we need questions that are both generative (that take us somewhere) and genuine (that we care about). This routine helps students look at the questions they have generated, maybe through another routine such as Think-Puzzle-Explore or See-Think-Wonder, and identify which are most worth investigating.

Application: When and where can it be used?

When students questions will be the drivers of future inquiry, you may want to use this routine to make sure that their inquiry gets off to a good start. Inquiry, whether independent or teacher-led, depends on good questions. This routine helps students think about what makes a good question.

Launch? What are some tips for starting and using this routine?

You may want to talk about what makes a good question and elicit students' ideas. Then you can introduce the idea of generative and genuine questions as two criteria that can be helpful in making decisions about what questions are worth investing our time. However, these are by no means the only criteria for evaluating questions, just one tool. There won't necessarily be a set answer. It is students' discussion of the questions and their reasons behind their placements that is important. This routine sorts questions into 4 quadrants. The upper right section (quadrant 1) contains the questions best for inquiry: those that are both genuine and generative. Conversely, the bottom left (quadrant 3) contains those questions that should probably be discarded. The top left (quadrant 2) contains questions that can probably be assigned for students to quickly look up independently and report back on. The bottom right (quadrant 4) contains some good questions but ones students don't seem interested in at the moment.