

Do You Doubt Yourself? Doubting Thomas vs. Reflective Teacher

By Emma McDonald

Did I remember to ask the right questions? Was that activity challenging enough? Why am I having so many problems keeping my kids on task?

We all ask questions of ourselves throughout a school day. Reflecting over teaching practices is a healthy habit and one that will help you grow and mature in your role as a teacher. Sometimes, however, our questions tend to lead us into the murky waters of self-doubt. Being a “doubting Thomas” is not a healthy habit. Instead, it undermines our authority and ability to teach. So, how do you recognize the difference between self-doubt and reflective questions? Also, what can you do to get out of that doubting mode?

First, how can you tell whether a question is one of self-doubt or reflection? Begin by identifying the purpose of the question. Does it have one? Is the question one that leads you to eventual improvement? For example, “Was that activity challenging enough,” is the kind of question that becomes a reflection about student response, engagement, and mastery of the activity. Once you consider the various factors, you then determine either yes, it was challenging enough, or no, it was not. From that answer you can then move forward to plan equally -- or more -- challenging activities for your students. This type of question serves the purpose of assessing what was done in the classroom, analyzing the data (observations & work product), evaluating the outcome, and designing a way to improve future assignments.

A question of self-doubt tends to focus on you alone as the problem. “Why can’t I keep my kids under control,” is an excellent example. That question focuses on the teacher’s inability to do something correctly. It might be asked over and over without ever moving forward to a resolution. In the end, thoughts might tend toward the idea that there is a deficiency in the teacher rather than a solution to a problem. A better question might be, “What is causing the students to continually be off task and not follow directions?” That question does not place blame, but instead identifies a problem. Now reflection of past behaviors on the part of the teacher and the student can occur with the purpose of leading to a solution.

Self-doubting questions rarely have a solution because they assume the problem lies with the teacher’s abilities or lack thereof. Blame is laid on the shoulders of the teacher and no one else. Little thought is given to analyzing the situation or determining a solution. Instead, the person continues to say things like, “I’m not a very good teacher,” “I’m not good at this,” “I can’t get my kids to behave,” or “I’m not sure I can _____.”

If that sounds familiar to you, keep in mind that doubt removes authority. Students can sense when we doubt ourselves and they begin to doubt us as well. That leads to their questioning our authority...which undermines our ability to teach...which increases our doubts. You see how the cycle perpetuates itself.

Need Help?

Are you a beginning teacher with a question, a concern, or a situation you aren’t quite sure how to handle? E-mail [Emma McDonald](#) for advice.

Do you have a new-teacher story to share? Click [here](#) to visit the New Teacher area of our message boards and share your experiences.

If you feel you are in self-doubting mode, what can you do to pull yourself out? First, take a question you've been asking yourself (a problem you're facing) and write it out. Now, look at the question you've written. Does it focus on you or on the problem/ strategies? If your question focuses on you and your abilities, rewrite the question to identify the problem or the strategy that concerns you.

Once you've rewritten the question, take some time to assess the situation. What events and behaviors have occurred that might have led to the current issue? Write those down as well. I've said this in previous columns and I'll say it again: writing thoughts and ideas down on paper helps clarify what we are thinking and feeling. It also helps us stand back from the situation and look at it objectively. Once you've written everything out, go back and analyze it. What could be done differently to get better results? What should be done the same? Evaluate your options and make a decision. What will you do to initiate change for the better in your classroom?

Now you've taken a question that could lead you to doubt yourself and changed it into an observation, reflection, and decision for improvement. Does that mean it will work? Not necessarily. However, the point is that instead of wallowing in your own doubts, you have actively worked to improve the situation. If the outcome is not what you wanted or expected, then start the process again. Now you have more data to add to your analysis. You have one additional strategy you know does not work. Try something different and continue to work through the issue until you find one that does work.

If you feel you are the only one constantly worried that you are not doing enough -- don't. We all worry. Every teacher worries about lessons, behavior, paperwork, parents...everything that affects his or her students. The question is, do you let worry become self-doubt or do you channel it to more positive purposes? Reflection to assess, analyze, evaluate, and determine a solution turns worries into solutions. Doubting only leads to more worries and more doubt. Don't be a "doubting Thomas." Be a reflective teacher.