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The Art of Inquiry

By Matt Rawlins ©

One of the challenges all of us are confronted with is that we were educated in a system that focused on memorization and yet this skill is not the best tool in the times in which we live.

The Associated Press recently wrote about a new study that estimates the amount of available digital information. The report sought to account for all the photos, videos, e-mails, web pages, instant messages and other digital content cascading through our world today. When added up, it was determined that the world generated 161 billion gigabytes of digital information last year. That is like 12 separate stacks of books that reach from the Earth to the sun or 3 million times the information in all the books ever written.

How much memory would be required to contain the above information? You would need 2 billion 80 gig iPods to hold all that information.

With a growing realization that memory is not automatically the best use of our mind in modern education and computers are much better at data management... now, what do we do? How do we focus on the right data, create space when there is too much data and learn to think more effectively in light of it?

The real work for each of us is to relearn the art of inquiry. As children, each of us learned one of the hardest tasks any human being can learn – language - and the primary tool was asking questions.

So what does an effective question do?

Questions can change our thinking - A consultant was asked to help a group of programmers who were way behind on a \$100 million project. He came in and interviewed them all. After much consideration he simply asked one key question. The question took hold and changed the way the programmers were thinking. The end result was that the project finished on time and was \$15 million dollars under budget. The right question changed the thinking of all those involved in the project.

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Questions create space – A young married woman went to the doctor for help. She asked to be sterilized, as her upbringing was so painful that she didn't want to have her children experience the same thing. The day before the operation the doctor asked her, “What would happen if you could make your children’s life better and could protect them?” She thought about it and was stumped. She changed her mind about the operation and now has two beautiful girls that are the joy of her life. The right question created space in her thinking to look at life in a new way.

Questions validate those involved and asks for help - A college student sat at his desk and was stuck. He had tried the problem over and over and he just couldn’t get it right. With no small effort he asked a friend for help. Although it seems like such a simple example, when someone asks someone else a question, it recognizes the need for other’s gifts and expertise and provides an opportunity for people to work together and ultimately succeed.

Questions open the door for communication and relationship - A couple sat and angrily stared at each other. The counselor looked at them and hoped to change the focus of their communication towards each other. After some dialogue, the man realized that he was asking the question, "How do I change my wife?" when what he needed to be asking was, "How can I encourage my wife?" When he changed this question, he changed the way he communicated, and when the communication changed, the relationship changed.

Make no mistake, the wisest use of the real estate between your ears is not just holding data, but learning how to work with the data, which requires the art of inquiry. Simply put, we must relearn how to ask questions. As with all arts, it is not an easy task to learn and requires discipline and practice with a dose of humility. In the days we live, it is a worthwhile discipline that guarantees new levels of success for all who dare ask.

Quotes

He who asks is a fool for five minutes, but he who does not ask remains a fool forever. Chinese Proverb

The one real object of education is to have a man in the condition of continually asking questions. ~Bishop Mandell Creighton

Matt Rawlins “The Art of Inquiry”, The Straits Times, Singapore, 2 March 2008, Recruit section.