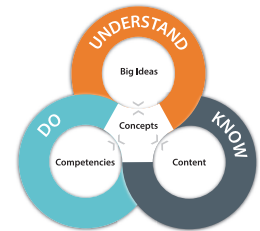


Cannabis: Stories, Questions and Life

“To be able to question means to want to know, and to want to know means to know that one doesn’t know.”

~Hans-Georg Gadamer



This lesson uses Deborah Ellis’s short story “Through the Woods” (in *Lunch with Lenin and Other Stories*) as a catalyst for conversation around questions that are useful in examining the impact of cannabis use and regulation on individuals and relationships.

“Through the Woods” is about a day in the life of Matthew, a 14-year-old boy who buys cannabis at school to take to his ailing grandmother who raised him until she became too sick to care for him. Matthew’s school environment is hostile—fraught with bullies, prowling teachers, police and drug-sniffing dogs—and his community is not cannabis-friendly, forcing him to go through great pains to get cannabis to his beloved grandmother, though he’d never let on to her the risks he routinely takes.

The story is ripe with easy-to-see themes that young people are sure to question naturally and/or identify with (e.g., stereotypes about cannabis dealers, users and non-users; risks and rewards of selling/buying/using cannabis; and reasons for using). As such, the story can be used to help students develop their skills in asking good questions as they interact with a story and its characters in more complex ways.

According to German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, asking “good questions” creates the space to look at a concept from different angles and leads to a deeper understanding of that concept. To be able to ask good questions, we need to have a good imagination. We need to think of different ways of looking at something while asking ourselves those “what could be” or “what if” questions.

Using Gadamer’s theory and Ellis’s short story about cannabis, this lesson aims to deepen students’ understanding of relationships between peers, family members and others as well as the complex nature of human drug use.

Instructional strategies

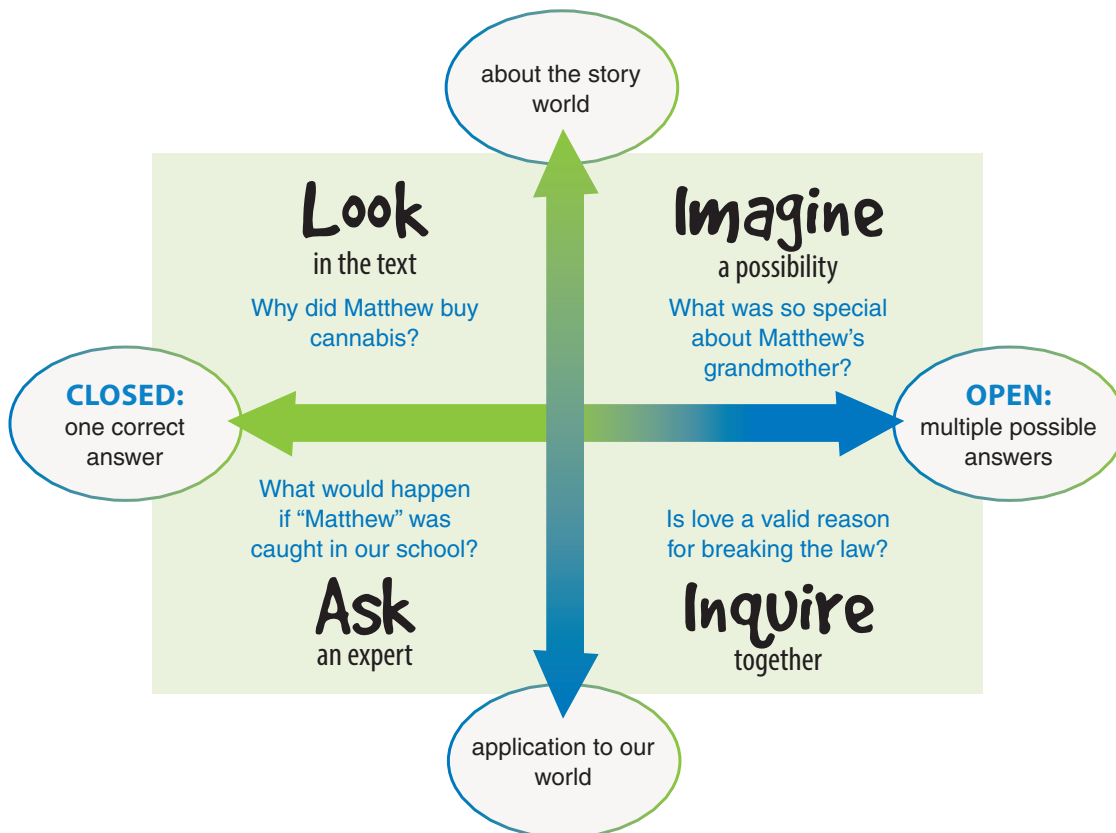
1. Invite students to read Deborah Ellis’s short story “Through the Woods” (or, if desired, read it aloud or have a student(s) read it aloud).
 - a. Have students, working in small groups, come up with a list good questions that arise from the story. These questions should relate in some way to the characters, their relationships or their settings. What were they

doing, thinking or feeling? Why were they doing what they were doing? How were they influencing each other?

- b. Have each group prioritize their questions, and then have each group offer their highest priority question that has not been provided by another group and write these questions on the board.



- c. After each group has supplied at least one question, brainstorm with the class to create a question that is related to the story but cannot be answered definitively by anyone, not even by Matthew or the author of the story. Then use that question as an opportunity to explain different kinds of questions. For example, explain that whereas closed questions have definitive answers, open questions require us to use our imaginations because the answers are not supplied by the story itself. Using the following *Question Quadrant*, based on the work of Phillip Cam,¹ explain that some questions, even some open questions, relate specifically to the world of the story whereas others are about how ideas in the story relate to our world (a display or handout version without the sample questions is provided).
- d. After explaining the *Question Quadrant*, have students return to their groups and discuss where they think each of the questions on the board fit on the quadrant. (Note: You might want to suggest that some questions may be located on the border lines as they could belong to more than one quadrant or type.)
- e. As a class discuss the way(s) groups classified each question. You might explore further by asking questions like:
- What kind of questions, do you think, are most interesting? Why?
 - What kind of questions, do you think, are most likely to help us challenge our own assumptions about a certain topic? Explain.
 - How could we turn any of the closed questions into open questions?



¹ Philip Cam. (2006). 20 *Thinking Tools: Collaborative Inquiry for the Classroom*. <https://goo.gl/ahyJNy>

You might want to remind students that all types of questions can be good questions, but they have different uses. Emphasize that even when we know the answer or are reaching an answer, it's helpful to dig deeper and consider alternatives.

2. Prepare students to write an essay that draws from Deborah Ellis's story, "Through the Woods," and relates to real life challenges. As a way to get them thinking you might facilitate a class discussion on one of the following themes. Point out how questions related to each quadrant help draw attention to elements of the story and lead to deeper reflection as illustrated by the sample questions in the quadrant model above.
 - **Peer and school relationships:** Cannabis seems to have played a key role in some of Matthew's relationships. In which relationships does cannabis play a role? Is Matthew fully aware of the role cannabis plays in his relationships? What impacts does cannabis commonly play in relationships? Is it important to be aware of these potential impacts?
 - **Family relationships:** Based on the story, Matthew put a lot of thought and effort into getting cannabis for his grandma. What risks did Matthew take? Why? What did all of this thought, effort and risk mean to him? Have you ever gone out of your way and taken risks to help someone who was suffering? Would you have done it for anyone or just that person? Explain.
 - **Schools and drug policy:** The drug policy at Matthew's school is an important element of the story. What is the drug policy at Matthew's school? Why do you think his school developed that policy? How does the drug policy affect students, staff, relationships in the school, and the school spirit? How effective are drug policies like those at Matthew's school? What kind of drug policy do you think your school should have? Explain.

Then assign students to write an essay on a question of their choosing. Suggest they might select one of the questions generated by the class in strategy 1 above. No matter what question they choose, they should think about where it fits on the quadrant model and then generate related questions for the other quadrants. Reflecting on this set of related questions will provide a framework for the argument they can develop in the essay.

Drug literacy

Big ideas

- ✓ Drugs can be tremendously helpful and also very harmful
- ✓ As humans, both individually and as communities, we need to learn how to manage the drugs in our lives
- ✓ We can learn how to control our drug use by reflecting on the different ways people have thought about drugs, exploring stories from various cultures and listening to each other

Competencies

- ✓ Explore and appreciate diversity related to the reasons people use drugs, the impact of drug use and the social attitudes toward various drugs
- ✓ Assess the complex ways in which drugs impact the health and wellbeing of individuals, families, communities and societies
- ✓ Recognize binary constructs (e.g., good vs bad) and assess their limitation in addressing complex social issues like drug use



- ✓ Develop social and communication skills in addressing discourse and behaviour related to drugs
- ✓ Develop personal and social strategies to manage the risks, benefits and harms related to drugs

Links to Curriculum

English Language Arts 8/9

Big ideas

- ✓ Exploring stories and other texts helps us understand ourselves and make connections to others and to the world
- ✓ Questioning what we hear, read, and view contributes to our ability to be educated and engaged citizens

Competencies

Comprehend and connect (reading, listening, viewing)

- ✓ Access information and ideas for diverse purposes and from a variety of sources and evaluate their relevance, accuracy, and reliability
- ✓ Apply appropriate strategies to comprehend written, oral, and visual texts, guide inquiry, and extend thinking
- ✓ Think critically, creatively, and reflectively to explore ideas within, between, and beyond texts
- ✓ Recognize and identify the role of personal, social, and cultural contexts, values, and perspectives in texts
- ✓ Recognize how language constructs personal, social, and cultural identity
- ✓ Construct meaningful personal connections between self, text, and world

- ✓ Respond to text in personal, creative, and critical ways
- ✓ Recognize how literary elements, techniques, and devices enhance and shape meaning

Create and communicate (writing, speaking, representing)

- ✓ Exchange ideas and viewpoints to build shared understanding and extend thinking
- ✓ Use writing and design processes to plan, develop, and create engaging and meaningful literary and informational texts for a variety of purposes and audiences
- ✓ Assess and refine texts to improve their clarity, effectiveness, and impact according to purpose, audience, and message
- ✓ Transform ideas and information to create original texts

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