How would you prove you were human, not a robot?

Teaching Essential Questions, Making curriculum content multi-media real life, critical thinking connections

During a commercial, the actress Jennifer Coolidge speaking at 2 am to an operator is surprised to learn that what she assumed was a robot response is that of an actual human. The human operator challenges her back by asking Jennifer how she would prove she is a human caller. For teacher viewers, this query is of course a great Essential Question. How do you prove that you are human, not a robot? A particularly apt question in 21st century with robots so well disguised as humans, even in real life situations.

In integrating this pop culture digital text analysis into already set Science fiction genre study, a method for teaching Essential Questions as deeply resonating real life student social and emotional concerns emerges.

First, have students carefully analyze and define the components of the essential question or rephrase it in their own words. While “robot” is a very familiar word to students beyond ELA class, it is engaging for them to share first how that define “robot.” Once they have offered their definitions and the elements of the definition which may focus solely on exterior or mechanics or capabilities or programming, reveals for both students and teacher much about the students’ frames of reference.

Next, challenge the students to compare and to contrast their definitions of robot with two somewhat differently stated dictionary ones: Cambridge English (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/robot>)

and Oxford Dictionary <https://g.co/kgs/Z4kCUVo>. The students doing so will enhance their text analysis skills in a tight focus given brevity of the definitions.

Now, that the students have first defined “robot” personally and reviewed two dictionary definitions, broaden their knowledge base about current types of robots developed as prototypes or actually sold. An excellent informational text for this would be, 4 Robots That Look Like Humans- <https://www.discovermagazine.com/technology/4-robots-that-look-like-humans> . Make certain as with any diagram and illustrated text, that the students compare and contrast the different type and style of the robots. Allow them after they note specific details for each robot, to add in a personal reflection element by stating which robot they would be most likely to endorse as a product. Make certain since obviously this is a personal opinion, that the individual students explain their preferences among the four robots that look like humans. If desired, make the discussion deeper to evoke student higher order critical thinking by asking whether any students would not care to endorse any of these human looking robots as a product for adults or to purchase/use in the future and if no, why not.

Since the students have so far focused on actual informational definitions and texts concerning very real robots and products available, ask them when they think the first robot story was written and to share a fictional robot story, film or children’s book they have read. Most will be able to name several robot media formats that they are familiar with, but few, if any, will come up with Isaac Asimov’s 1940 robot story- Robbie. There are many free pdf downloads for educators of this story as well as a very accessible online presentation – Isaac Asimov’s Classic-Robbie-

<https://youtu.be/CPJccKSbLYg?si=telRrKEC8CzlSteL>

Focus the students’ attention prior to viewing this video by asking them to contrast this very machine like “Robbie” robot as illustrated and depicted in Asimov’s classic 20th century words with the 21st century humanoid robots. Ask them think as they watch, whether they would want their younger siblings, were the price of a Robbie type companion the same as the modern ones they saw on the previous video, to have one or the other of these robots. In addition, have them focus on the ways in which Robbie and Gloria’s relationship is a very human one. What qualities of it make it human?

After the students have discussed at length their response to this classic science fiction story of Robbie, involve them in considering the essential question of what it means to be human? To provide a context for this deep question which like all essential questions does not have a single correct answer, provide two digital texts which comment on the essential question from different perspectives. For this particular question, the Star Trek: The Next Generation –Sentient Being” episode where Data the android robot is threatened with being disassembled for study (obviously ending his existence as an aspiring human) by a human who questions whether a robot can be sentient (feel)-

<https://youtu.be/vjuQRCG_sUw?si=ydtEzqA7ZidRmbzw>

can be viewed paired with “Robots” Discover it Card Customer- <https://youtu.be/7acC86YdN3Y?si=aa41ddOQ99BjUtWu>.

For each, target the students to give a short summary of the essential question, the director or the scriptwriter was trying to explore.

Have the students provide script quotes that explore that question by taking notes as the segment is played in class.

Divide them into small groups with an experience chart to discuss as a group the essential questions about being human versus being a robot discussed in these two videos.

Finally bring them together as a class to share out their views on these aspects of the essential question and to react to one another without there being a clear “correct” single response.

Final student voice and agency outcomes or products on this essential question can range from a podcast run by students discussing this question to interviews at home with parents on this topic, to a student argument referencing at least two of the digital or print texts studied. This can also be a debate club or a soapbox issue.

What general method for teaching Essential Questions other than this one, can be modeled from this demonstration? First, do not immediately pose the Essential question and have the students “plunge” into reacting to it. Have them define terms in the question by actually checking dictionary definitions, a key aspect of literacy and adult responses to various contract and legal issues. Next, provide a mix of informational credible source digital and informational texts on the issue. If appropriate, provide a fictional text or digital excerpt to see the question from a non-factual perspective. Finally, always elicit student responses to two different perspective texts so they have a frame of ready text or digital resources to draw details to frame their own reactions. While abstract teaching guides and standards do mandate teaching a topic or theme across multiple platforms, connecting students to these print and digital texts does really exercise their analytic, reflective, close text analysis, synthesis and idea creativity/argument formation capacities. What is it to human? While there are infinite possible responses to that essential question, one surely is, to help the human learn to define, examine, review, react and create. Every teacher can agree on that aspect of educating humans for critical thought and decision-making.