

Forget Inquiry: It's All About 'Learning to Learn'!

I propose that it is time for educators to stop talking about 'Inquiry Learning'.

This perhaps seems like bold, and rather stupid, statement to be made by one who makes his living out of providing professional development for schools in inquiry learning. However it is a carefully considered statement.

The reasons behind this growing belief are not complex and are born out of the experiences I have had in a number of schools over the last few years.

Here are 3 simple reasons why I believe we should stop talking and focusing on inquiry learning.

1: **Confusion.**

Inquiry Learning is not a new concept, it has been around in one form or another now for many years. When I started working with schools in 1999 there was much confusion about inquiry learning. Teachers were struggling with conflicting definitions, competing models, and experts (self-pronounced or otherwise) who disagreed. In 2001, when I completed my thesis on inquiry learning in New Zealand schools the situation was no better. We are now into the middle of 2011 and little has changed.

2: **The project based tradition**

We have a pattern, or structure of research, that has been entrenched generationally in our schools. It is a pattern that is familiar to those who are currently grandparents, parents, university students, teenagers at high school, students in years 7 to 8, and also to many students still in primary school. The basic pattern is one of finding material and then presenting that material. It is a structure that fosters little retention and even poorer comprehension and understanding. I believe that it is an educationally unsound approach that fills a lot of student time with little or no learning outcomes.

3: **The disparity between 'Inquiry Learning' and real life learning.**

Our New Zealand schools are now operating under a national vision of growing "*confident, connected, actively involved, and lifelong learners*" (NZ Curriculum P.8) and yet I see little link, in some of our schools, between their approach to inquiry and real learning.

As a capable learner there will be some stimulus that leads me to recognise a lack of knowledge and understanding, there will be enough engagement or drive

produced within that stimulus to give me the impetus to make an effort to enter a learning process that will hopefully address my recognised lack of information or understanding. I will then utilise a range of skills to locate, comprehend and validate information from a range of relevant sources. This information will be linked with the prior knowledge that I bring to the problem and at some point I will get to the position of applying the new knowledge, as this happens my understanding grows. This is iterative reflective process in that I will likely bounce around between thinking, evaluating, questioning, finding, evaluating, linking, and doing. In some instances this process will be of short duration, in others it may go on of a time frame of years. Regardless of the duration of time it is a messy process as I make meaning, build understanding and apply. Generally, in real life, learning is not a process that results in a powerpoint, poster, video clip, podcast, webpage or some other informational artefact that celebrates what I have found. Yet sadly this is the end point of much 'Inquiry Learning' that I see happening in many schools and in student homework activities.

So....

What do we talk about instead of 'Inquiry Learning'?

What do we do instead of 'Inquiry learning'?

Where do we target our professional development?

How do we address our curriculum content if we are not doing Inquiry Learning?

These are all valid and reasonable questions, especially for those schools with a history of Inquiry Learning. In order to keep this article short and succinct I will not propose some form of procedure of steps to follow because I feel that each school, and each group of teachers have to find their own answer to these questions. However I think there are some broad brush basics that should be considered.

Instead of focusing on Inquiry, focus on Learning.

If we want our students to be effective learners for life, then we need to hold that focus at the centre of all our thinking, planning, preparation and teaching practice. A few generalised steps would be to...

1: Clarify what effective learning is.

What is effective Learning? This sounds like an easy question to throw at a group of dedicated teachers, however it is likely to generate a lot of reflective discussion. It is a base question that needs to be answered. As a school define what effective learning is because this becomes your foundation.

2: Identify the attitudes that empower us as effective learners

Attitude drives behaviour, and our attitudes impact either positively or negatively on our learning. There are certain attitudes which will always empower us as learners and others that are likely to obstruct our learning. As a

school identify a small set of key attitudes that would support us as learners. I would recommend identifying just three or four key attitudes. You need to be able to ...

- remember them,
- talk of them constantly with your students
- model them
- identify them when your students display them
- publicly and privately celebrate when they are displayed

Many schools don't give attitudes the level of focus they should. We need to realise that a person have all the learning skills but if they don't have the supporting attitudes they are likely to make little use of their skills.

3: Identify the core skills that empower us as learners

It is easy to identify a huge collection of skills that we might use as effective learners, however I would again stress that it is important to sift through them and identify a core set of skills (somewhere between 5 to 7 skills) that are basic and foundational to being effective as a learner in any situation. I would suggest that reading, and listening are not included in this set because these are being addressed strongly within the normal school programme.

Target a core set of thinking skills that are central to learning. For each skill develop a matrix of depths of that skill. The idea of the matrix is that it should avoid quantitative elements such as never, sometimes, always etc. and instead focus on complexities of the skill. Once such a matrix is developed it is easy to recognise that it won't be age specific. We won't be able to say that this student is operating at this stage, rather that this student operated at this stage in this situation and context. Over time you will identify patterns of where students are generally operating as well as the best level they have operated at. This gives us exciting potential to discuss with students ways of achieving their best in other contexts.

You need to be able to ...

- remember them,
- identify levels of achievement in different contexts
- talk of them constantly with your students
- model them
- identify them when your students achieve deeper levels
- publicly and privately celebrate shifts in skill level

4: Modify classroom practice to facilitate the development of the identified skills and attitudes

Having identified the skills and attitudes you want to foster and develop the next step is to identify the teaching practices that inhibit and foster these goals. This is not going to be an overnight or one staff meeting process, it will take time and is an exciting goal to take into a 'teaching as inquiry process' (NZ

Curriculum P.35). In a number of schools we have established our beliefs about effective learning and what fosters effective learning, having clarified these beliefs we then create a matching statement of 'expected practice'.

5: Design and implement valid assessment and data gathering to use in review

Outside of our literacy and numeracy programmes, 'learning to learn' becomes the third leg of the triangle. We carry out a large amount of assessment to check on progress and the effectiveness of our programmes in numeracy and literacy, and I would argue that we need to be just as serious about our 'learning to learn' programme. We need to develop some relevant assessment that allows us to collect some valid data in terms of our students' skill development. We need to use this data to track long term change and to help us to review the effectiveness of what we are trying to achieve. The trick is to ensure that the assessment is valid, relevant and manageable. We don't want burdensome and ineffective assessment that waste teacher time and energy, we do want something simple, manageable and useful.

6: Review the goals and effectiveness of approach

If we are serious about facilitating our students to be more effective as learners we need to use the data to review our goals, approaches, systems in terms of student development. We cannot afford to get into a system that becomes entrenched in our schools if it isn't achieving the goals we had in mind. Review doesn't need to be complicated but it does need to be honest, purposeful and focused on improvement.

Summary

I believe that the concept of 'Inquiry Learning' now carries a lot of baggage and misunderstandings that obstructs this approach to learning being implemented well in many of our schools. A simple way to move past these obstacles is to focus on learning, real learning.

As a school identify the skills and attitudes that empower us all as learners. Keep it simple, don't overload with skills, identify a small set of core skills. Having identified those skills and attitudes then carefully examine and adapt classroom practice to facilitate the development of those skills in the students. Ensure you continue to engage students in the learning process. As you go develop and implement assessment procedures that are manageable and give valid evidence and data in terms of your main goals. Use this data to ensure that your classroom practices and programmes are actually having the desired effect. Review constantly so that you know you are making a difference. This is so much more fun and purposeful, for teachers and students, than just trying to cover curriculum content. Curriculum content just provides us contexts for developing the skills and attitudes of an effective learner.