Learning Log 2

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In using an inquiry approach in my own teaching, there are a number of challenges to be faced, often at the beginning of engaging in inquiry, while other challenges occur throughout the process. Firstly, a challenge in using inquiry in any classroom or school learning commons may be engaging the stakeholders in the importance of the process and ensuring they understand the potential for results. These stakeholders include fellow staff, students, administration, the school board, and parents.

In my own work, I must be very careful how I roll out inquiry projects and learning, as some staff may see my students engaging in research as "fun time" on the computers. I appreciate how some veteran teachers in my school may primarily appreciate the use of technology for engaging in game-based-learning, but it is partially my responsibility to comfort them in terms of understanding that technology can be used effectively for research. If I were in another school, the conversation might be that game-based-learning is what is effective in the classroom and that technology should not be used singularly for research.

Students, in my experience, struggle with using effective search queries and get lost in a sea of results without understanding how to choose an effective source. Providing reliable websites is a way to start engaging students in the process of research for the purpose of answering guiding questions. Helping students choose appropriate guiding questions also allows for them to be accountable and interested also helps build a relationship based on both trust and interest. In inquiry-based learning, our students can "feel empowerment when they can pick their own topic and they will research it with eagerness because they want to prove their topic is the most important. When we engage students and give them a sense of ownership, they naturally make deeper connections and more meaning in their learning. They start to think outside the box" (Harper and O'Brien, *Student-Driven Learning*, 2012, pp. 12). This ownership can filter into increasing confidence and assisting others, which reduces some of the challenge of reaching students in inquiry-based learning.

Administration, on the other hand, may choose to view inquiry classes or lessons as straying from the curriculum and want to see curricular outcomes being covered effectively. In displaying inquiry work publicly, administration can see the benefits, and inviting administration into the classroom during presentations may help ensure their comfort. In my own work, I have found that approaching the administration and visiting in their office to discuss work on inquiry (and potentials for using technology in the school more effectively) excites them about the work being done in the classroom.

The school board, in my experience, does not fully understand what inquiry is, but like administration, is concerned primarily about curriculum coverage and ensuring staff are doing their jobs well and effectively. Since being in my current school, I have very little contact with the school board, I ensure bulletin boards and displays are available for them to see when they come into the school. Also, I make sure that my classroom has our materials "out and about" in the classroom in the event that they come into the classroom during a meeting. Coincidentally, last night was our school board's meeting for January, and they came to visit my portable classroom after we moved in two weeks ago. They were responsible for the purchase of my classroom and I wanted them to see how well we kept our classroom as well as the exceptional work we were doing that day.

Finally, in my opinion, parents may be the most difficult stakeholder to get on board with the inquiry process. Often, I find that parents fall into one of two camps in their involvement: over involved or under involved. There will always be dissension in the inquiry from either camp, which is normal with anything being done in a classroom. To combat any negative ideas from appearing and stopping the process, it is always my goal in inquiry-based learning that my students will be so excited about their topic or idea that they will be bubbling with excitement at the dinner table when asked "how was school?" I am fortunate in that my students are at an age where they are excited about learning, about school, and completing multiple smaller tasks to reach an end goal. With students in older grades, gathering that excitement can be more difficult, but when given choice and ownership, inquiry-based learning can be an accountability learning experience as well.

There are a number of different strategies and structures which could be used in a classroom or school library learning commons to foster enjoyment of learning, of those includes challenge, choice, mindset, and relationships. In my experience, these ideas assist in the implementation and success of inquiry-based learning.

For many students, school is labeled as boring and the students are disinterested due to not feeling challenged. For any teacher, meeting their students at their ability level while engaging the entire class with age-appropriate content is no easy feat. By implementing inquiry-based learning into the classroom or school library learning commons, students can choose topics or leading questions at their ability level, as well as their interest level. By offering choice and opportunities for challenge, students will increase both their confidence and their understanding of the required content. In *Liking Work Really Matters*, "interest matters more than we ever knew. It is crucial to keeping us motivated and effective without emptying our mental gas tank, and it can turn the mundane into something exciting. Teachers, managers and parents must play an instrumental role in fostering interest in their students, employees and children — interest that will help them achieve their most important goals" (O'Keefe, *New York Times*, 2014). Interest is what drives our students and allows their learning to be meaningful to them personally. Once they have a personal investment, they want to do the best job they can. In my classroom, my students are completing an inquiry project about their family's history. We have been talking about immigration and how many current Canadians are the product of immigration in history. This project has their interest primarily because they are invested in it and it matters to them. I have told them that their parents are important in helping complete this project, and interviewing parents and grandparents is highly encouraged. As a single classroom teacher, I am unable to meet the differentiation needs of every single student for each outcome in my curriculum, so I often choose to use inquiry to put my students in the driver's seat. As mentioned in *Student-Driven Learning*, "how do we make this [differentiated instruction] possible with 30 students; with 30 different needs, learning styles, backgrounds; with one small room and just a teacher in the front? The answer is this: we go back to the Chinese proverb and we involve our students in their own learning" (pp. 9-10). Strategies for increasing challenge in relation to inquiry-based learning may be in introducing a topic and having students brainstorm their ideas together to reach lower-level learners, as well as

providing opportunities to meet one-on-one with the teacher or Teacher Librarian to discuss their question to make it more ability level appropriate.

Mindset, in my opinion, is one of the most important ways to use inquiry-based learning as a buy-in for students. I previously worked in a *Leader in Me* school where we discussed the *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People/Teens/Kids* (see the *7 Habits* made by the woodworking and metal shop student in the image, left). We used the language in the *Leader in Me* in our inquiry work to encourage our students to plan their projects, assignments, and lives, to help them reach their fullest potential. We discussed habit 2 frequently: "begin with the end in mind" - which allowed us to backwards plan based on our end goal. Habit 3 played a large part in our inquiry projects, which indicated to "put first things first" to ensure more time-sensitive tasks were completed before less pressing tasks. Encouraging a growth mindset in the classroom or school library learning commons is how existing relationships can be strengthened. In a number of our schools, no mentorship programs exist. Due to this, students can feel lost and fall between the cracks. Regular check-ins with students to check for accountability, assistance, and provide opportunities for growth are significant in aiding the existing relationship a student may have with their teacher or Teacher Librarian.

References

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