

A Teacher's Inquiry on Inquiry

The messy, unpredictable journey into inquiry-based teaching and learning.

A pilot project to use an inquiry model of teaching to build students' interest, ownership and excitement in their own learning gets off to a rocky start, but with supportive conversations, collaborative lessons, and resilience over time, the results are positive.

by Christine Marin and Jessica Wang

Margaret Atwood recently said that anyone who writes is a hopeful optimist — hopeful that someone will read what is written and optimistic that it will have some effect. We hope this article will speak to educators who are thinking of using or supporting inquiry as an approach to teaching. It describes an early chapter in Jessica's story as she begins the messy, unpredictable journey into inquiry-based teaching and learning.

Some would suggest waiting for favourable conditions before embarking on innovative practice. But it is April and Jessica is returning from maternity leave, the two small children at home still claiming most of her energy and attention. She faces a grade 5 and 6 class — 30 students whose cultural backgrounds are as varied as are their learning styles and needs. She has no knowledge of their strengths, weaknesses, talents, and triggers. The school staff is collegial and supportive, but there is no one with whom to collaborate at this moment.

During her maternity leave, Jessica had spent quite a lot of time thinking about teaching. Buoyed by the expertise of a district teacher and the enthusiasm of her vice-principal, she agreed to participate in an innovation grant project. The project, *Passion, People and the Planet*, was to use an inquiry model of teaching to build students' interest, ownership and excitement in their own learning. Students were to receive instruction in the areas of reading, writing and math within the context of their personal inquiry in the areas of community, connections and sustainability. After much deliberation and scrutinizing of Prescribed Learning Outcomes (PLO) and processes, she created an essential guiding question: "Why did people move to Richmond?" This question provided links to most of the learning outcomes for grades 5 and 6 Social Studies, Science and Language Arts.

With eight years of experience, Jessica has honed her classroom

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management skills to near perfection. She is an extremely organized teacher — a manager, facilitator and a detailed planner. As expected, she began her planning with a descriptive, multi-paged scope and sequence of lessons and connections to the various PLOs she was targeting. She taught Lesson 1, asking students to identify previous knowledge. She taught Lesson 2 focusing on thick questions, (essential, global and connected to transferable understandings) and thin questions, (answers to which provided the necessary content knowledge). But by the time she was ready for Lesson 3, she had already abandoned the overall plan. The realization had quickly come that it was impossible to predict the learning steps in a neat, numbered, ordered, linear way. Being neat and orderly, qualities that describe Jessica, were not what were needed for this kind of teaching!

Jessica began to focus on her students' immediate needs as they tried to research questions they had generated themselves. Although she was somewhat uneasy about letting go of her focus on PLOs, she had begun to focus on responding to teachable moments. Her students needed to use computer search engines more efficiently. They needed to be able to identify important ideas

and to take notes using key words. They needed to learn to write engaging paragraphs. They needed to generate detailed questions in order to answer the global ones. They needed to summarize their learnings and to present them in an audience-friendly format. She could no longer predict what her next lesson would be.

Jessica continued to support her students as they discovered Richmond's geographical and socio-economical history. With them, she learned of famous names and related anecdotes. Together they learned of Steveston's (Steves' town) importance and the role of Lulu Sweet in the naming of Lulu Island. During two months of spiralling cycles of questioning, research, direct instruction and discussion, Jessica was often overwhelmed by the messiness and difficulty of this approach.

The difficulties were many. Jessica was used to a clear vision of an end product, but she was allowing the students to present their learning in the format of their choice. She was used to pre-teaching a skill, then inviting students to apply it. Now she was teaching skills when students asked for them. She was used to respecting a sequenced plan, but realized that she needed to allow the students to have time to

learn and to explain their thinking. She learned to respect and value authentic student learning, which did not always coincide with what she had envisioned. Rather than present her students with information that had already passed a 'triage,' she asked them to sift through ideas critically, identifying those that were important, relevant and transferable.

When I interviewed some of the students, I was impressed with the honesty of their reflections. "I found making a good thick question hard because my thick questions I thought of were part thin and part thick." "Honestly I'm not happy with this because I'm not used to finding out what I'm supposed to do." "I found it hard to decide what information was important because it all looked important to me." They, too, were challenged with this different approach to learning.

Thankfully, the rewards began to outweigh the challenges. After one month, Jessica started to reflect more positively. "So far, nothing has gone the way I planned and I couldn't be happier. I have learned that I should have confidence in my students. Teaching them to think critically is key." She began learning from her students as they shared ideas and then learned from each other. When she overheard student conversations that included "Solve your own problems" or "Did you think about it?" she knew that real learning was taking place. Students who historically did not 'do well,' started to do well. Students were comfortable saying "I don't know where to start," knowing that their teacher was waiting eagerly to help them. Jessica reflects "... through this process, I have learned that teaching should be messy ... The

whole process is more challenging and more work than any approach that I have done, but it has also been much more rewarding.”

The idea to write about Jessica’s experience came one day in June when she excitedly waved a paper at me.


“Look at this! We created a list of what we had learned this term and ... it is a list of the PLOs that I had wanted to target! It is all there – the Social Studies, the Science, the Language Arts! It has all come together naturally.” This is the power of inquiry-based teaching. It is natural. Students authentically need to learn the curriculum’s prescribed learning outcomes.

I wondered how Jessica found the strength and resilience to continue her first experience with the inquiry approach. Perhaps the supportive conversations and collaborative lessons, (with her

administrator, district staff and colleagues), played a role. During one of those conversations, Jessica realized that this was not her first experience with inquiry. Four years earlier she had been a post-graduate diploma student in an inquiry-based program. She recalled the frustration and annoyance she had felt at the apparent lack of organization, outlines, due dates and structure. Despite her constant battle to find some grounding, the program had allowed her to grow and learn in her own way and at her own pace. She realized that much of her teaching is still based on what she had learned in her own inquiry experience and that it had likely given her the courage to try an

inquiry approach with her students.

As the year ended, Jessica came to realize that while she had offered the opportunity for inquiry to her students, she had also created an inquiry for herself as a teacher. Her students were engaged, motivated and able to identify their own learnings. Jessica was energized, even at the end of June, by what she was planning for the fall.

As I write this, in September, she is collaborating with two other teachers on a new inquiry that focuses on the Fraser River. I am looking forward to supporting Jessica as she embraces messiness and unpredictability, and hope to write about the next chapter in her story. 

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