

A Community of Learners' Spiral of Inquiry

By Mary-Lynn Epps

Each year we enter our classrooms and look into the hearts and minds of the individuals who stand before us. As inquiry-minded educators we ask the question: How can we connect and develop a relationship with each individual learner while simultaneously cultivate a momentum of learning within the entire group? Examining the complexity and diverse challenges of the classroom we realize that without a foundation of understanding that considers the development of community and metacognitive awareness of learners we cannot successfully implement the most current 21st Century learning practices and support a thriving learning environment.

Our purpose is to share an educator's story of how the Community of Learners' *spiral of inquiry* affected the learning profile of many individuals. In each case, as the students learn, the educator also learns through reflections on the effectiveness of their practice and the plans made to develop their instructional design. The cyclical inquiry dance of learning over time has created a community of learners' inquiry environment that is noticeable by the level of engagement and metacognitive awareness prevalent amongst learners. Hence, the words, "We are all learners, we are all teachers," acts as our motto.

Reflecting on work of Judy Halbert and Linda Kaser and the teachings

of the networks (*Networks of Inquiry and Innovation, Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network, and Healthy Schools Network*) we have braided the strands of inquiry learning to formulate the community of learners' spiral of inquiry model.

Within our mini-network we believe when learners form communities, the flow of energy to learn together grows stronger. It creates an environment of belonging, trust and inquiry mindedness that spirals us into deeper understanding. The momentum of learning creates innovative thinking, beliefs, and actions.

What is a Community of Learners?

In a community of learners' inquiry classroom you find engaged students who support one another in their learning. Learners are often working with partners and in small groups with and without facilitation. The use of a variety of strategies and processes to support learning are woven throughout each learning experience. If you engage in conversation with a learner they can each identify what they are learning, why is it important, what is supporting their learning, and what they will do next. As a result these learners can be identified as emotionally, socially and academically self-regulated.

We have seen the process of transformation evolve quickly in some

learners while others take several months. However, very few slip through the cracks of not being effected by a community of learners' environment within a semester or school year. If a teacher is persistent in weaving the metacognitive processes of learning using a community of learners' inquiry model, the culture of the classrooms transforms into an environment where students and teachers engage as learners. The commitment to supporting each other socially, emotionally, and academically fosters citizenship, empathy, and a belief they can all succeed. Students say, "Community of learners is people helping, sharing, respecting and learning. We can transform other people in thoughts, beliefs and actions."

How to Develop a Community of Learners

When we scan the composition of our classrooms we realize there are many challenges. Baseline data often indicates learners that present both *below* and *above* grade level standards. In a community of learners' environment the teacher realizes that the goal is every learner moving forward regardless of their place on the learning continuum.

When we share these patterns of learning with our students we discuss how the skills, processes and concepts we explore will support them as lifelong learners. Instruction becomes focussed on creating the background knowledge and skills that learners will need to personalize their learning. It is designed to spark curiosity and make connections. Technology and rich literature become an essential component to the learning environment. Alterna-

tive settings to learning are also explored (building gardens, field trips that connect to the inquiry cycle, and guest speakers) to support meaningful learning opportunities that engage learners in developing a deeper understanding of the inquiry.

When learners can access resources that enable them to manage text and the demands of writing they can feel as though they are part of the learning community. Struggling readers and writers often use the computer or iPad to help them overcome challenges. They also rely on the learning community for feedback. The community provides support academically through a continuous cycle of assessment involving criteria, self- and peer-assessment, and goal setting.

Over time learners develop an understanding of their learning profile. They can identify their strengths, challenges, interests and supports. With each learning opportunity they become more aware of who they are as learners and how to move forward with their learning.

Developing a Hunch

In the beginning we set the foundation for learning by engaging learners in a process to develop a community of learners in the classroom. (*Download a planning summary online at <http://bit.ly/OSiz6L>.*) As an entire class, learners are asked what they would need to see, hear, and feel to be able to learn together. They develop a set of values with criteria to help guide the way they learn. Believing in their community of learners' values, they peer coach neighboring classes to begin to transform others as a community of learners. The community of learners' environment begins to form social connections with peers through a core set of values used to monitor

how they are working together as a group in a number of places, including the classroom, playground, on field trips, and in the hallway.

"In our community we think before we act. We think about how our actions are going to affect others."

To deepen the community of learners' environment we further realized that our Aboriginal learners need a sense of belonging through recognition and inclusion of their cultural understandings. We decided to engage in an inquiry question that would examine the Aboriginal people past and present to see if we could find ways to further support us becoming a stronger community of learners. Our inquiry question as a class read: "What can we learn from the Aboriginal people past and present that will help us become a stronger community of learners?"

Connections to Aboriginal Understandings

After the question was introduced we created a number of integrated curriculum learning experiences to help guide students to constructing their own understanding and eventually to answer the inquiry question and create their own personal inquiry. A rich assortment of multi-levelled, fiction and non-fiction text focussed on Aboriginal understandings were provided for students. Realizing that some of the texts would be challenging for our learners we provided access to electronic text to allow reading aloud.

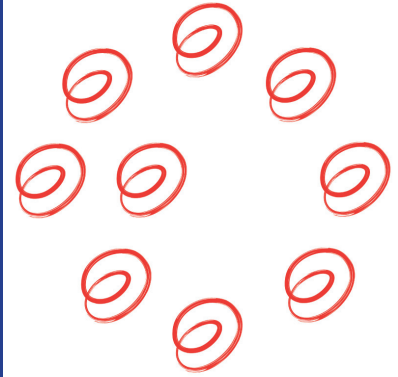
Throughout the first three or four weeks of the inquiry cycle, learners were immersed in experiences to help them develop background knowledge to engage more deeply in developing a personalized learn-

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ing inquiry question. In addition to reading and responding to various texts related to the inquiry, learners also took part in field trips and invited guest speakers. Throughout these experiences they used their community of learners' values to guide their learning and to create positive interactions with one another. The values are continually woven into the instructional design through the assessment for learning practices using self- and peer-assessments and goal setting. The weaving of the community of learners values acts to help develop self-regulation among learners.

Checking

In a community of learners' environment all learners are valued as partners in learning. They support one another to take their next steps using a foundational value system to guide their learning. It becomes a framework to self-regu-


late socially and emotionally within the learning environment. Over time learners apply the values they developed to other environments like the family unit, extra-curricular sports, dance, as well as, socially with friends.

"I teach friends that don't go to my school about the community of learners."

Reflections

At the end of each inquiry cycle we reflect on our overall learning as practitioners. We realize that inquiry acts as a conduit for supporting innovative practice. We are able to remove ourselves from the everyday emotions that often overwhelm us in the classroom by reflecting on where we are with-

in the cycle and decide on how to move forward. Connecting our stories as a network has enabled us to look outward and inward building capacity for all learners to move forward with dignity, purpose and options while rekindling our curiosity for future learning.

From start to finish the inquiry cycle can take anywhere from three to four months depending on the level of depth you undertake. Our perspective is that learning evolves and transforms learners the most when you engage deeply in learning. This requires time, commitment and a willingness to learn from the teacher's perspective and the learner's perspective. Hence we live by our motto, "We are all learners, we are all teachers." 

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