Nudging toward Inquiry. "What's Inquiry? Well, I Know It When I See It"

Column

by Kristin Fontichiaro, February 2015

Have you ever seen an "inquiry lesson plan" and thought it wasn't as curiosity-driven as the title implied? In the case of one of my friends, it was an "animal inquiry" online worksheet that didn't look quite right. It had the word "inquiry" in the title, yet it looked just like a traditional fact-gathering report. Despite being sponsored by a prominent not-for-profit organization, there were no efforts to cue synthesis or meaning-making from students, nor were students expected to consider their own questions. What was it that made my friend's alarm bells go off that the lesson was factual retrieval not inquiry? She didn't need to compare the lesson step-by-step to one of the inquiry models—she used her "teacher sense" and just knew.

SPIDEY SENSE FOR INQUIRY

How can we develop this kind of "Spidey sense" in ourselves and, via professional development, conferencing, or ongoing modeling, in our colleagues and administrators? We could check to see if the lesson followed one of the known inquiry planning formats, such as LibraryLand's Stripling Inquiry Model, Kuhlthau's Guided Inquiry, or science's 5E model. In those models, the familiar names of lesson segments clue us in. However, many lesson plans do not follow a familiar scheme.

We know intellectually that there are steps, and we might do OK if we chart out each step and then identify what we'll do to help students through each stage (and, possibly, to revisit stages as needed). But the reality is, especially in these tightly-structured, data-driven times, we rarely dump our existing projects and replace them completely. So, we need to develop an ability to take the concepts of inquiry and integrate them with what we already know.

What is the "rule of thumb" we can use to quickly assess whether inquiry is happening? More importantly, how can we use that "rule of thumb" to help our administrators see the difference between fact-finding and the deep dive of inquiry during their evaluations of our work, their instructional rounds, and their decision-making about which budgets to slash?

MAJOR CRITERIA

For me, inquiry boils down to four major criteria: authentic student questions; the possibility of open-ended conclusions; critical thinking and active comprehension; and synthesis. Each of these could be woven into a research project in different ways, at different points.

Four Hallmarks of Inquiry
Authentic student questions vs. teacher-directed ones
Open-ended conclusions vs. uniform results
Critical thinking and comprehension vs. regurgitation
Synthesis vs. summary

1. AUTHENTIC STUDENT QUESTIONS VS. TEACHER-DIRECTED ONES

The easiest way to start one's internal inquiry scanner is to look for questions that derive from the student, not from the teacher.

Not only should they be student-centered, but they should be grounded in some "overview-level" understanding of a topic or theme. Too often we think it's inquiry when a teacher says, "Class, today we're going to the library to work on Civil War research projects. What questions do you have?" Yes, you'll get student questions, but they're often questions that reflect knowing very little, so they are low-level, fact-based questions, the kind you find at the bottom of Bloom's Taxonomy at the "Remembering" level like, "What color were their uniforms?" or "When did the war start?'

Saving time for exploration, presearch, and noodling through encyclopedias or other foundational resources before prompting for student questions will raise the caliber of the questions students create.

2. OPEN-ENDED CONCLUSIONS VERSUS UNIFORM RESULTS

Imagine being let loose in your favorite shoe store. Variations in colors, styles, function, and heel design abound. You can buy any pair of your choice! Now imagine being told that you can try on any pair you like, as long as what you buy is a black oxford. Which shopping trip is more appealing?

The same sense of bait-and-switch can be true for our students. When we let their imaginations run wild, exploring questions and challenges that they have self-selected, then it feels anti-climatic when they must report their findings according to a strict template. Real inquiry saves rooms for students to both discover and synthesize their idiosyncratic journey without shoehorning the results into identical presentation templates.

Of course, in the real world, there may be specific writing or technology objectives that students must achieve as part of their research journey. If this is the case, these should be defined, explained, and modeled in advance so that students know to keep those genres and formats in mind and frame their inquiry within those guidelines.

3. CRITICAL THINKING AND COMPREHENSION VERSUS REGURGITATION

Three important changes have shifted the research landscape for our students.

First, as overall classroom curriculum has become more codified and jam-packed with more standards and learning objectives than anyone can achieve, there is simply less time to dedicate a significant portion of classroom time to research.

Secondly, the shift from analog to digital research practices meant it was suddenly easy to jettison the thinking that came along with sorting paper index cards and outlining essay content and move straight to cut-and-paste. Cut-and-paste—even with rephrasing of content into one's own words—brought efficiency, but it also brought an unintended consequence: we denied students the time to think, sort, ponder, and sequence.

Couple this with the third shift, which was a decades-long rise in popularity of slideshow presentations, and today's students have now had a generation of practice compartmentalizing and grouping found facts into a series of often independent slides. Whereas construction of arguments was part and parcel of how students learned about essay and paper-writing, slideshows accidentally taught students to report episodically ("here's one idea… and here's another… and on this slide, there's another… and that was my last slide. The end").

This unintentional cuing to create in episodic style has often made it possible for students to slide straight from finding a fact to depositing it, fait accompli, into a product, bypassing critical reading comprehension steps such as understanding a fact in its greater context, recognizing counterarguments that might affect how a student interprets the credibility or accuracy of a fact, building connections with other information nuggets. Understanding that fact nugget in context, connecting it to other nuggets, and constructing an argument can be bypassed.

Squeezed grapes make juice, but it takes time for juice to become wine. Fact-finding is juice, inquiry is wine. Inquiry also needs check-in points. Traditional Italian wine-

making requires "the egg test" midway through the fermentation process. At a pre-determined point, a raw egg in the shell is placed into the vat. If it sinks, the liquid is thrown out and a new batch is begun. Only if the egg floats does the process continue.

As instructors, our job is to help our students with the egg test: to provide a just-right number of checkpoints to keep them on track, to mini-conference with them—or to arrange peer mini-conferences—at which we gently push back and help them see whether they are actually understanding content or merely moving it around, and to check that they are making progress. Not every research topic bears fruit; at times, we need to help students know that throwing out the juice and starting again will bring a better vintage.

4. SYNTHESIS OVER SUMMARY

Paraphrasing is the process of saying someone else's ideas in our own words. This is a comparatively simple task of word substitution. Summarizing is more complicated. It asks us to take in all of an author or creator's ideas and chunk them into meaningful but abridged synopses of them. Summarizing gives us a birds'-eye view of someone else's writing by delineating just the major themes. Synthesis is the most difficult: it requires not only the ability to put ideas in our own words, not just the ability to take a series of ideas and cluster them into an overarching theme, but the ability to weave together those themes into a cohesive new work.

In a Texas workshop this past summer, Debbie Abilock asked participants how they make sense of new ideas. Overwhelmingly, respondents mentioned that their "heavy thinking" happened not in a noisy room with thirty others. Instead, adults get up from their seats, get a drink of water, chat with colleagues, work on a different project, and mull things over at the gym. As adults, our "connect the dots" moments often happen when we are not at our desks, so we need that thinking time for our students as well. If you cannot give thinking time during class, assign "think about this" time for homework, providing thinking prompts such as, "Talk to at least one other person about your project for no more than thirty seconds. What were the big ideas you shared with them that might point to how you are making sense of what you have learned?"

For librarians to have a place at the table, they need to be nimble in finding points where they can insert themselves into research projects even if an overhaul is not possible.

MLA CITATION

Fontichiaro, Kristin. "Nudging toward Inquiry. 'What's Inquiry? Well, I Know It When I See It'." *School Library Monthly*, 31, no. 4, February 2015. *School Library Connection*, schoollibraryconnection.com/Content/Article/1967136.

https://schoollibraryconnection.com/Content/Article/1967136?topicCenterId=2252404

Entry ID: 1967136

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