Inquiry Superheroes: Be the Connection

Feature

by Sue Kowalski, April 2016

I get inquiry. I really do. I don't go a day without it. My expertise is so incredibly honed with it, that often people gather at my feet to hear me speak the power of inquiry. I've changed the culture of my entire school community with my wisdom.

Well, at least that is what I'd like to be able to say when it comes to collaborative and embedded inquiry and my job as an instructional specialist in that area. I really *have* read the books. I have seldom missed a workshop, article, webinar, guest speaker, or twitter chat on the topic. I have learned from some of the wisest colleagues I know and I proudly own several copies of our state's information fluency curriculum complete with dog-eared pages to guide me. I have "unpacked" standards digitally and with post-its, aligned them in multiple ways, and even tote the New York state document thumb drive in my bag of tricks.

I know I need to be a leader in transforming inquiry learning. I understand how it impacts student engagement and achievement. I really think "I get it." With some honest self-assessment, however, I know I am not where I need to be—at least not yet. I have more to learn, more to do, and gaggles of instruction to transform.

I have a couple of options: One, I can hang my head in proverbial shame and don a shirt with a large "I" with a slash through it, make a public declaration of my failings and inefficiences, and use my bullhorn to announce, "I HAVE NOT YET MASTERED INQUIRY INSTRUCTION in all of my teaching." Or, as I ponder a more reasonable and less self-deprecating approach, I think I will instead wear that "I" cape with pride, identify those same gaps, and use that same assertive voice to use what I *do* know to transform learning. With equal vengeance, I will reflect on what *is* working and replicate those successes. I will tap into the toolkit I have accumulated, and continue to strategize on how I can lead, empower, and support inquiry.

Every school librarian has obstacles. Fixed schedules may limit the level of embedded collaboration. Librarians who are split between buildings will have to prioritize and make choices about ideal inquiry-based instruction versus reality. Even a robust flexible schedule under one roof can pose challenges as the librarian balances the needs and logistics of multi–grade level partners. Obstacles aside, we have to embrace our realities, imperfect as they may be, and strategically maximize the potential that does exist —not lament what does not.

You may be well on your way to embedding inquiry instruction in all or most of what you do. Keep it up. Even if you have to provide outreach and inquiry instruction on the fly, you can make a significant impact and get things moving in the right direction. But, if you are ready, willing, and able, yet not at the stage you know you need to be, these six steps may provide you with some guidelines and reminders to bring inquiry to the forefront.

- Ask
- Build
- Connect
- Develop
- Excite
- REPEAT

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ASK

Initiate conversations with your teacher partners and potential collaborators. Maybe you cannot get to all the team meetings, planning times, or curriculum work, but you can make it your mission to get the most important information in the least amount of time. ***Don't settle for an "if you need anything, let me know" approach as it may never happen.*** Electronic, paper, or face-to-face prompts can help you find out what resources, technology tools, or instructional leadership your partners need. Listen, take notes, make suggestions, and be efficient and timely with your follow up.

BUILD

Of course, we could go with the "if you build it" metaphor, but that would be so predictable. In fact, it's possible that if you build it, no one will come simply because they don't even know about it. Once you know what your colleagues need, build it, let them know about it, and make it happen to give your partners a concrete beginning. A LibGuide can provide a rich resource portal with database widgets, suggested e-resources, and technology tool recommendations. A sample project as a model for how a student project *could* look can inspire planning; share it as an option for now or "next time." Develop a graphic organizer, thinking map, multimedia guide, or notetaking chart for student use and share it. Do not wait to be asked. Anticipate, predict, assess, and develop tools that can strategically be embedded into instruction. Promote it, share it, model it, and find ways to market what you have, what you can create, and how it all connects to what your partners are doing or need to do.

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CONNECT

Be the glue. Be the duct tape. Be the hyperlink. Be the Lego. Be the travel agent. ***Be the connection*** for the benefit of all. Librarians have the benefit of seeing across grades, across content areas, and very often across buildings. Keep your eye on the trees, but see the forest and make some high-impact choices to bridge some gaps. If you know that one of your ELA teachers is in search of high interest nonfiction articles and a way to assess comprehension, don't keep that to yourself—meet the need. Suggest titles and assessment ideas. When a science teacher is in search of the same thing, connect, suggest, and excite.

For example, if the essential question is "how does the role of community activism for human rights today compare to the time when our country was first being established," it is necessary for students to have a framework. They need to consider geography, government, historical events, political climate, legal documents, and stories that show perspective. The project reflects an ongoing theme through social studies via a students' creation of an interactive timeline (https://timeline.knightlab.com/). Our resource portal (http://pinegrove.libguides.com/humanrights) also has several hands-on activities (drawing, definitions, partner shares, reading) to dissect the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (http://rightsinfo.org/your-rights/) which is a literary tie-in to the ELA book, *Long Walk to Water*. Using media interaction from EdPuzzle (https://edpuzzle.com/) we continue to make powerful connections about the history of human rights protection in our country. We will continue this past-present study as we move through history. When students learn one tool in ELA, they can proceed to use this across the curriculum in other content areas.

Even with space as a challenge this year during our building project, we can still continually seek to meet needs innovatively. Recently students engaged in making personal connections to the novel *Ghetto Cowboy* in our outdoor learning commons! Effective librarians can expand literary experiences with nonfiction tie-ins, author conversations, technology extensions, and community outreach.

My network and professional learning is heavily influenced by my social media outlets. It would be a waste to acquire ideas, strategies, and tools and keep them to myself. I share for the benefit of my networks. When librarians maximize their connections, it can have exponential impact. Cultivate the connections you have and always search for new inquiry ideas and answers to help colleagues.

DEVELOP

You may start on the fly, but that will not be enough for sustainability. Once ideas, strategies, and collaborative instruction are working, you must continue to assess, shift, and improve. No one plan is going to work with every collaborative endeavor, but successful elements can certainly be replicated. Though each outreach opportunity will need to be customized, there is no need to start from scratch each time.

Despite our two-year building initiative, we continually seek opportunities to collaborate. We have learned to "seize the moment" or "seize the space" to incubate inquiry and embed technology. Often embedding technology will lead to weaving in an idea for inquiry. Recently this happened when we engaged students in FLIPGRID contributions to align with a *Character Education Initiative*.

As part of our District PBIS calendar, our theme for November was "gratitude." Across campus we engaged in discussions, writing contests, digital presentations, reading, and a general public relations campaign that prompted responses to the question, "How can the actions of one person change the life of another?" Through the library, we provided thought-provoking media, coordinated a letter writing contest, honored winners and their honorees at a school-wide assembly, created multi-media outreach showcasing student feedback, and taught new tools (Flipgrid, GoogleSlides, Twitter, EdPuzzle) throughout the process to make the campaign more vibrant.

Get honest feedback from your partners and use your own critical lens to see how things are moving. Build on what is working, adjust what isn't, and continue to grow your collaborative outreach. I have experienced successes as well as epic failures and have learned from each.

EXCITE

When your strategic leadership is working, you deserve to be excited! This is *not* the time to be subtle and demure. Speak up, share, celebrate, and let your enthusiasm be your advocacy. If you seem bored with what you are doing, you diminish your potential customer base. Include your successes in your photos, your reports, your promotions, on your Twitter feed, and with your administrators. Be willing to replicate your ideas for those who find your enthusiasm for collaboration contagious. Some will jump on board willingly; others will need some prompting. Some will have a clear vision, others will need your ability to guide that. Be the positive force that your school needs to develop healthy and impactful collaboration.

REPEAT

As an instructional leader, it is our job to continue to develop our toolkit so we can provide consistent and effective leadership. I know I am not "done" with embedding inquiry at the level I know is ideal. I also know that I have an obligation to tap into the many opportunities I have to make powerful connections that will empower high impact teaching and learning. We can't stop because obstacles make things difficult, we have to rise above and continue to provide leadership despite them. We must all continue to ask, build, connect, develop, and get excited on our path to develop our collaborative partnerships.

With thoughtful reflection, I know I don't need to hang my head in shame because of what I haven't yet achieved in the world of inquiry learning. Instead, I will strategically build on what *is* having impact. Armed with my professional toolkit, the power a superhero cape symbolizes, and the assertiveness of a bullhorn, I must continue on my journey to shift the instructional culture of my school. Leadership through the librarian should provide consistent support for projects that benefit the entire community. Join me and "lead out loud!"

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