# Connecting Students to Inquiry

Article

by Leanne Ellis, September 2020

My job as a school library coordinator involves supporting librarians in their schools with professional development, collection maintenance, and programming/pedagogical ideas. Recently, I visited a new school librarian who works in one building with thousands of students. (This campus model is a legacy of the small school movement which posited that students learn better if large, failing high schools were shut down and replaced with small learning communities.) She was excited because one of the schools offered her the chance to present on research and inquiry to the teachers. The school librarian shared the teachers' research topics with me. They ranged from Existentialism to People You Admire and Why. She eagerly showed me the resources she had selected for each of the issues, ranging from the Encyclopedia Britannica to the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA). We talked about the resources with smiles because nothing engages an information junkie more than discussing the merits and features of databases. But how many of our students have a similar passion for Research in Context?

"Did you talk about the Connect and Wonder phases?" I asked, referring to the two stages of the Stripling Model of Inquiry.

"Yes, good questions are important," the school librarian said, but the enthusiasm was gone. I had pulled us out of our intellectual reverie of resource discovery.

"Everyone starts research with the investigate phase," I pointed out because I had done the same thing myself.

How many of us give students a topic and then explain how to locate information on it? "Don't use Google!" we say even though we use it every day. "Use the databases!" The databases! The databases! I could hear librarians talk about databases all day. But what is the end result of these fact-retrieval assignments? Copy-and-paste "research papers" and PowerPoint presentations with text stretching to the edge of every slide and images stuck on without attribution.

We need to connect students to what they research to give them agency over their inquiry. How many of us would study the tax code because someone asked us to? People look up information when they have a need to do so. And while receiving a grade may motivate some students, the motivation is limited because they will look for shortcuts to get the task over with so they can go back to what they want to do.

Students must be intrinsically motivated in their inquiry. Generating the right questions can help ignite students' curiosity about a topic as they consider what they know or don't know. For example, approaching an issue with different perspectives forces the brain to think–and I don't mean different angles in a pro/con way. The question would not be: "Is climate change real or not?" The question would be chronological or a comparison or solution based. For example,

- When did industrialization first begin to affect our climate?
- How does the impact of climate change compare in a developing country versus a developed one?
- How can I encourage my friends and family to take action to address climate change?

We can also pose questions to connect students to a topic based on their personal experience, interest or passion, or ideas of social justice: How will you apply what you have learned? What perspectives/voices are missing from this subject?

Some topics as they relate to students' personal experiences (or ours) may result in uncomfortable discussions like 9/11, immigration, civil rights, and the list goes on. But as long as we have created a safe environment, all students should feel free to express their thoughts and opinions, even those others may disagree with. Often diversity does not mean difference of opinion, but it needs to. We can create debate and discussion norms for all viewpoints to be heard, so we grow lifelong learners who critically think and analyze the world instead of just responding to it.

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