Inquiry Framework: What Makes Sense?

Article

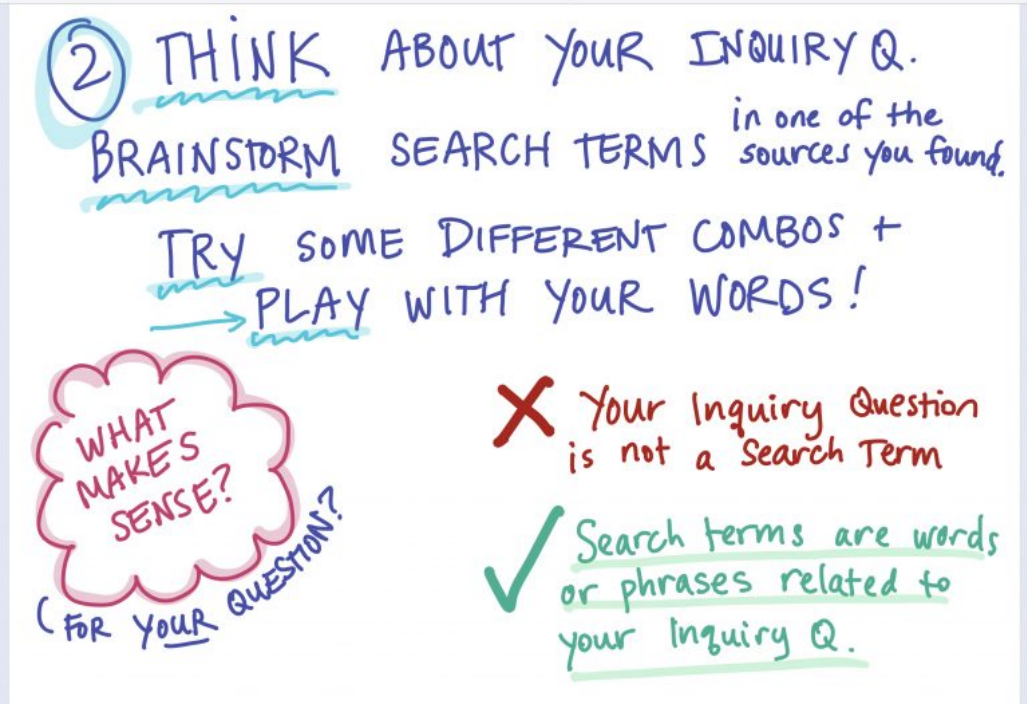
by Iris Eichenlaub, September 2020

I'm on a quest to refine my teaching to be both student-centered and relevant. This has evolved over time to mean that I talk a lot less now, and put more effort into the design of the learning experience. How can students get all of the content I want them to have, without me just blabbing at them? How can I get them to the destination, without leading them by the nose? How can I model authentic inquiry practices to develop their own iterative inquiry process? How can I encourage a *growth mindset* that demonstrates *real-world connections for lifelong learning*, to borrow some language from our AASL Standards (*Inquire*, "Grow," p.72)?

What Makes Sense?

When I'm researching or working on a problem, the question that is ever-present in my mind is: *What makes sense?* At this point, the question is so embedded in my process that I am no longer explicitly aware of it, but it guides me at every step on my research journey. As an educator, I am authentic with my students; I want to share authentic learning with them, modeling various ways to practice information-gathering.

As I was preparing for a recent lesson with a 9th-grade history class, I wanted to bring this sense of authenticity and relevance into the experience. The class would be working on their Genius Projects: an inquiry question of their choice, where they were looking for the connection between past and present. The teacher asked me to help the class become familiar with our Digital Maine Library resources, and discuss how to use Google and Wikipedia responsibly. I decided to take a different approach than what I'd normally plan. Instead of *"Here's a great database, watch me do a search, look at these features, look at me narrowing a search… [yawn]… now your turn,"* I decided to use *"What Makes Sense?"* as the guiding question of our work.

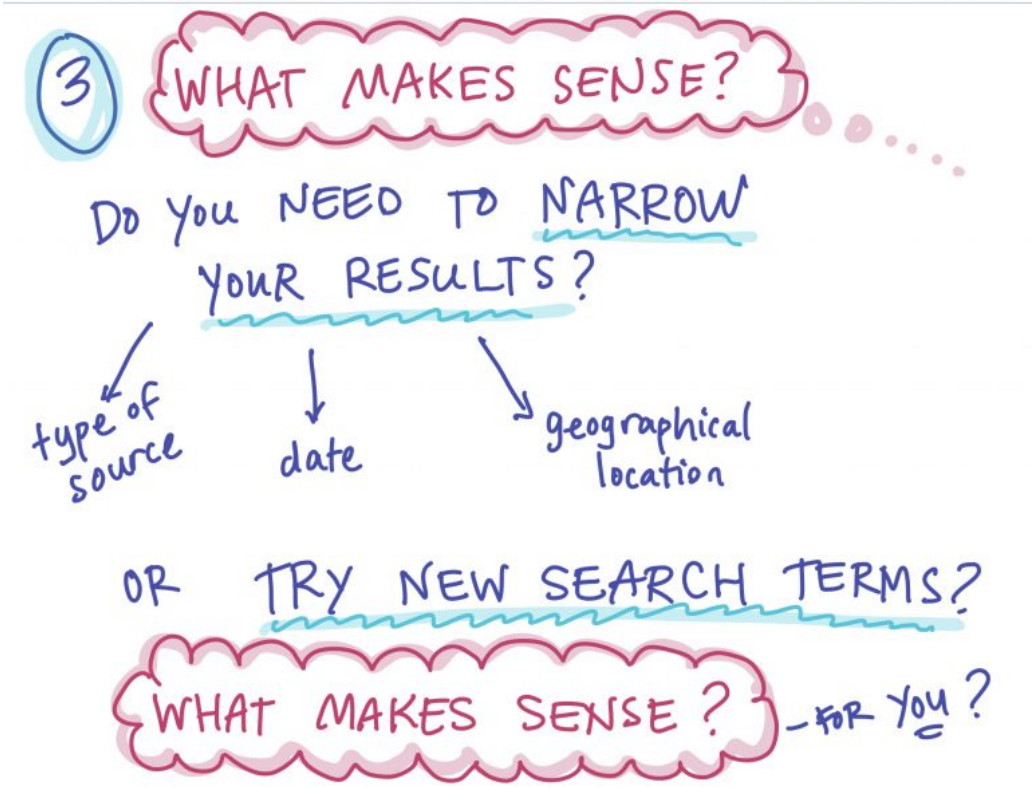


And *Now*, *What Makes Sense*?

I used Notability to create a clean, graphic visual guide for us to follow. I told the class at the outset that this lesson was an experiment, something brand new that I was trying. I wanted to be transparent about teaching as an iterative, always-changing process, and that I was excited to share something new with them, something that might not be perfect! I explained that *"What makes sense?"* is what guides me as a researcher, and I wanted to share that lens with them. The graphic provided a loose framework of how I thought the lesson might progress. It was flexible enough so that I was able to modify and move forward at the pace different classes needed — to differentiate on the spot, with the cues the students were giving me. While students were at work, the classroom teacher and I both circulated around the room to check in with individuals, to provide support as needed. As students made discoveries about search refinement strategies and the features of various databases, I would pause the action and ask a student to project his/her iPad so the class could see the new discovery. This is a way to foster a collaborative learning environment and a relaxed, organic approach to sharing our learning. Hooray! I wasn't the only expert in the room!

***What Makes Sense* for This Class, for These Learners?**

Just for fun, I asked my evaluating assistant principal to pop in and observe this experiment. I thought she would be interested to see how I had taken her feedback about stimulating inquiry and student-centered design, and then applied it in a way that made sense (again, "*What makes sense?*"), given this specific context and this group of learners. Applying the AASL Standards to my own professional practice, this is an example of how I embody the spirit of Explore: taking in feedback, reflecting on my practice, and innovating in my thinking and approaches. It's an evolution. When I make my own thinking and learning transparent to students and teachers, I am modeling the dispositions of a lifelong learner.



How do you frame inquiry projects with your students? How do you connect the classroom to authentic experiences? Do you take opportunities to model and stimulate critical thinking with your learners? In what ways do you create a collaborative learning culture with teachers and students? How do you embrace risk-taking in your teaching?

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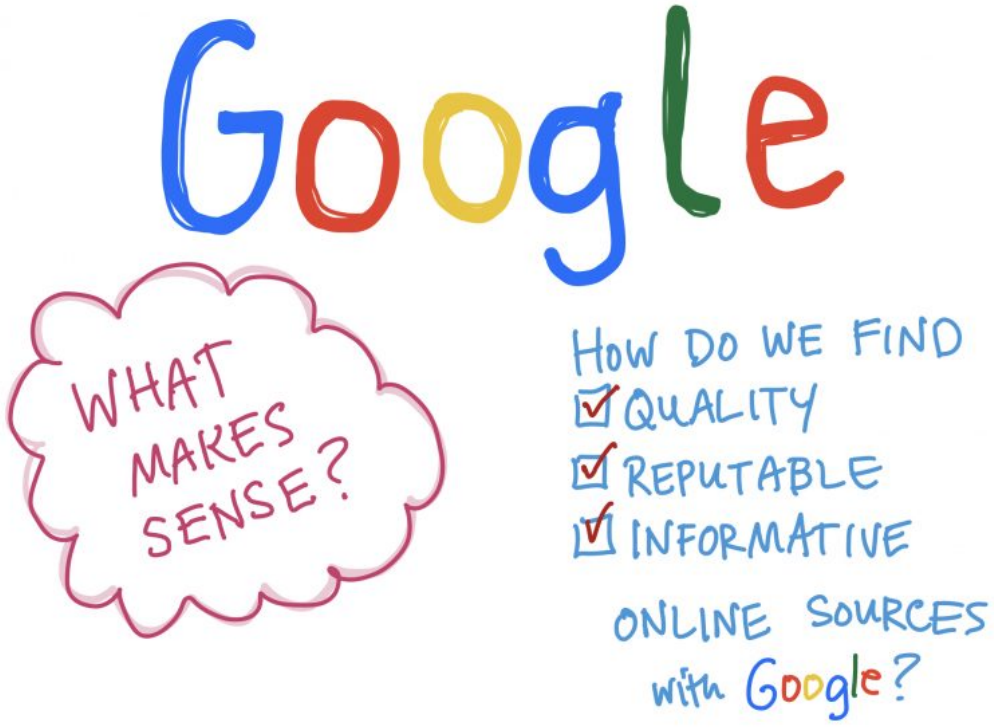

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