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Inquiry in the Digital Age

Barbara Stripling

> A group of friends is gathered around the table at a restaurant in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and they start talking about the local Walk to Cure Diabetes. They know that diabetes is a serious health problem, partly because so many cases are undiagnosed until real damage has been done. But what are the symptoms that are so easily missed? Immediately, Taylor pulls out her cell phone, searches, and finds the Mayo Clinic site on diabetes symptoms. The conversation continues, but with solid information, not just conjecture.

We live in a society that is surrounded, permeated, and inundated with information. Digital tools have opened the door to 24/7, fingertip access to finding, using, and creating information. But is collecting information all there is to learning? These friends actually went beyond information gathering; they were engaged in authentic inquiry, facilitated by their digital tools. They had some background knowledge about diabetes, which led them to ask a critical question. They were able to investigate right then, and Taylor knew enough about inquiry to seek an authoritative source for the answers. Then the group followed up by talking about the new information and drawing conclusions together.

The mission of librarians is to empower all the Taylors whom we serve to develop the skills and attitudes to make inquiry a natural part of daily life, ensuring that they do not drown in the overabundance of information and can turn information into learning. Taylor and her friends were certainly in line with the 47 percent of American adults who use a mobile device to get local news and information (Pew Internet 2011). They were, however, vastly

different from most of those adults, because they sought substantive information to answer a question, rather than simply accessing the weather (42 percent), local restaurants/businesses (37 percent), and general local news (30 percent) (Pew Internet 2011).

Our unique contribution to the information age we make as school librarians is to teach and guide our students to look beyond the "what," the information itself, to the "so what." Why do they need information? What are they planning to do with it? What questions are driving their inquiry? What problems are they trying to solve? What do they want to discover? How can we, then, enable them to accomplish their goals?

To understand the "so what," we need to understand the nature and role of inquiry, especially in today's diffused and disorganized information environment. Inquiry is certainly not a new concept, but research about learning has led to a growing interest in inquiry as a door to deep and active learning. The new science of learning focuses on students' understanding and applying ideas to new contexts rather than simply knowing, doing rather than receiving (active instead of passive learning), and constructing new understandings rather than memorizing facts (Bransford et al. 2000). The roots of this type of learning, called *constructivism*, extend back to John Dewey, who theorized that learning is a combination of acting and reflecting on the thoughts, actions, and feelings. Dewey's philosophy was that meaningful learning emerges from a series of coherent experiences that enable learners to engage actively, reflect, and organize ideas to derive their own meaning (Dewey 1938).

Although the foundation of constructivism can be traced back to Dewey, it has emerged as a prominent educational theory during the last twenty to thirty years. Although there are numerous and varied interpretations, its four main characteristics transform thinking about teaching and learning in the library: 1) learners are responsible for *constructing their own meaning*; 2) learners build new *understanding on their prior knowledge*; 3) learning is *social* and formed through *social interaction*; and 4) the most meaningful learning emerges from *authentic tasks* (Applefield, Huber, and Moallem 2000/2001; Bruning, Schraw, and Ronning 1995; Pressley, Harris, and Marks 1992).

INQUIRY-BASED LEARNING

Inquiry captures those characteristics. It is a more authentic, active, and thoughtful approach to learning than traditional teacher-controlled classrooms. The ability to solve problems and use information literacy skills to pursue inquiry-based learning has increasingly been identified as critical in the twenty-first century, not just by educators, but also by business leaders and professionals in every content area.

Based on research about constructivist learning and inquiry, I developed a six-phase model for the inquiry cycle (Stripling 2003), known in the professional literature as the Stripling Model of Inquiry (see figure 7.1). The

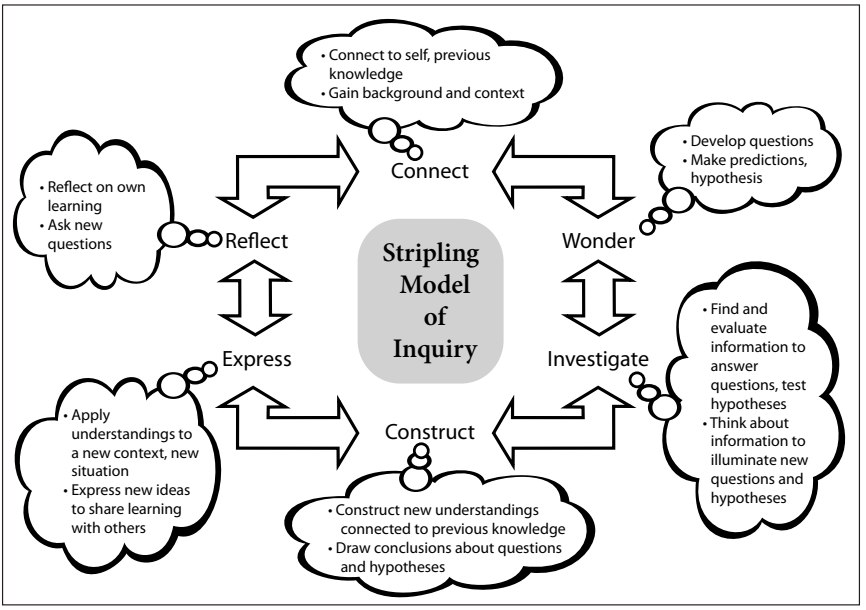

Figure 7.1. Stripling Model of Inquiry

Source: Barbara Stripling, "Teaching Students to Think in the Digital Environment: Digital Literacy and Digital Inquiry," *School Library Monthly* 26, no. 8 (April 2010): 17.

model incorporates the thinking skills of inquiry in a six-phase, recursive process that encompasses a full definition of inquiry.

The Stripling Model of Inquiry is a frame for learning that involves *connecting* to personal interests and a desire to know, asking *questions* that probe beyond simple fact gathering, *investigating* answers from multiple perspectives, *constructing* new understandings and conclusions, *expressing* the new ideas through a variety of formats, and *reflecting* on both the process and product of learning. Inquiry is recursive and cyclical, with learners going back and forth between the phases to ask new questions and pursue new avenues of investigation as they arise. True inquiry should result in new understandings for learners, but not final answers, because learners should naturally discover intriguing areas to pursue in future investigations.

Inquiry is a good model for research in the library, but if school librarians are going to collaborate with classroom teachers to design and teach inquiry-based learning units, then the same model must fit naturally with different discipline areas. Science has a solid connection to inquiry. The scientific process is very much aligned to the Stripling model: defining the problem, generating a hypothesis, designing an experiment, observing and collecting data, analyzing and interpreting the data, drawing conclusions, and reporting results.

The history/social studies curriculum is another good fit for an inquiry model because history is an inquiry- and interpretation-based discipline. Surprisingly, though, a model of inquiry has not been proposed for the history field by educators, historians, or researchers. In the history education literature, what has been investigated and described is an array of discipline-specific skills and habits of mind, not an overall process of inquiry. Students may be expected to *do* historical inquiry, but often not to learn the underlying process behind it.

Why does this matter for school librarians? First, if classroom teachers do not consider the inquiry process, their assignments may be structured to guarantee that students simply grab information, any information, to complete them. Students may come into the library with an assigned topic, but they do not have any context or background to be able to ask questions or develop a search strategy. Students could spend hours clicking on Web sites, finding nothing of value, because they do not know to start with defining what they really want to know. If we, as librarians, are mindful of the inquiry process, we can help teachers effectively transform instructional design and delivery to enable students to be successful at every phase of their inquiry investigations.

Of course, the inquiry experience is much more complex than simply following a process. It involves both skills and attitudes; its special characteristics set it apart from rote learning, direct instruction, or even traditional research. Let's look at those characteristics. Inquiry learning is all of the following:

- *Intellectually active*—Students are making conscious and deliberative decisions and engaging with ideas and text using a critical eye. ["Mrs. Stripling, did you know that that Web site has a mistake? It has the totally wrong date for the invention I'm researching."]
- *Question-based*—Good questions lead to explorations of the unknown, in which the answers cannot be copied from one source. [Finally, Jerry, known as the "what-if" student because he constantly interrupts class time to ask hypothetical questions, has a chance to follow his curiosity to wherever it leads.]
- *Personalized*—Inquiry depends on an individual's pursuing ideas that connect to his or her own interests or prior knowledge. [The little first graders clustered around the insect books, still out of breath from hurrying into the library from the playground. They had to find out: What are those white things the ants are pulling across the sidewalk?]
- *Authentic*—The result of an inquiry exploration should be the application of the learning to a new situation or a connection to the real world. [Derek, the sophomore who never connected with anything he was supposed to be learning at school, cried out with delightful surprise when he was researching the Renaissance, "Oh, so that's where the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles got their names!"]

- *Open-ended*—The answers or solutions are discovered and formed by the inquirer during his or her investigation. It is not a process of the inquirer's looking for the one right answer that the teacher already knows. ["You mean I'm supposed to draw my own conclusions? But what if I'm wrong?"]
- *Divergent and convergent*—Inquiry investigations push against the accepted frames by asking Why? What else? Why not? They also bring together disparate points of view to lead to new ideas and understandings. ["I never thought I would understand the points of view of both the slaves and the slave owners."]
- *Transformative*—During inquiry, mental models are brought to the surface, examined, compared to new evidence, and rejected or revised based on new understandings. ["I always thought the Civil War was just about slavery, but now I see so many other factors that played a part in the war."]

IMPLICATIONS OF THE COMMON CORE FOR INQUIRY-BASED LEARNING

The vision of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) is to ensure that every student develops the knowledge and skills to succeed in college and career. Inquiry-based learning is integral to the Common Core, not only in the research strand of the writing standards, but also in the critical thinking, literacy, inquiry, and technology skills that form the basis of the standards.

A close examination of the Common Core reveals that the type of learning envisioned is completely aligned with the characteristics of inquiry-based learning; in fact, the Common Core opens the door for librarians to lead school-wide implementation of inquiry. The learning outlined in the Common Core is constructivist; students are expected to read text with deep comprehension, make inferences, form opinions and conclusions based on evidence, develop a line of argument, and produce and present their own understandings through multiple formats. Both the Common Core and inquiry are predicated on deep-level thinking, depth of content knowledge rather than breadth, the application of learning strategies and skills across the disciplines, and the continuing development of skills across the grades.

The difficulty that many educators are finding as they try to implement the Common Core into everyday teaching practice is that the CCSS are extremely complex and dense. Each standard and each grade-level indicator actually contains a number of skills that must be taught before the student develops mastery of the standard. That process of breaking the CCSS apart into their component skills is what some school library systems have done in aligning the inquiry skills that school librarians teach with the Common Core. One good example of that alignment can be found in New York's Empire State Information Fluency Continuum (http://schools.nyc.gov/Academics/LibraryServices/StandardsandCurriculum/default.htm).

IMPLICATIONS OF THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT FOR INQUIRY-BASED LEARNING

In addition to Common Core alignment, an important consideration in integrating inquiry-based learning throughout the curriculum is the effect of the digital environment, because that is increasingly where our students live in their personal time. If they are to integrate inquiry successfully into their personal and academic lives, we must identify the new skills, thinking strategies, dispositions, resources, and learning environments that frame inquiry in the digital information world. Librarians should particularly pay attention to the impact on inquiry of three aspects of the digital environment: the nature of digital resources, access, and interactivity.

The Nature of Digital Resources and Impact on Inquiry

Electronic resources are assuming an ever more important role in the information world. eBooks, digitized collections, digital libraries, and open-source and proprietary databases have all become increasingly important as resources that our students need for their investigations. Primary sources are becoming increasingly available. Not only are organizations, cultural institutions, and libraries digitizing their long-held collections of primary-source documents, but increasingly libraries are digitizing and curating local cultural artifacts.

Digital resources, including those on the World Wide Web, have the potential to lend authenticity to inquiry. The information is created and published by individuals and organizations to communicate directly with the reader. Real voices come through; real-world and current issues surface.

But with that authenticity come bias and questions of credibility. Evaluating the authority and validity of digital information now must be done by the inquirer, and sometimes finding the elusive "who" behind a Web site is a little like playing "Where's Waldo?"

Digital resources also offer more global and multifaceted perspectives. That's great for robust inquiry. The challenges for conducting credible inquiry in that diverse information environment are almost frightening, however. First, most of us are encapsulated in what has been called "filter bubbles," because of both our own searching strategies and the hidden algorithms used by search engines (disguised as "personalizing" to your location and priorities). When we relied on print resources in the library, we could almost guarantee that our patrons would at least see both sides of an issue, because the books were right next to each other on the shelf. The lateral and linked organization of the Web leads to multiple sites with the same perspective, rather than opposing views. Most searchers do not consciously seek the other side or multiple perspectives once they have discovered a Web site that confirms what they believe. They may create their own filter bubble through their searching, linking, and friending processes.

Access to Digital Resources and Impact on Inquiry

The most troubling aspect of the digital information environment in terms of the impact on inquiry is the increasing digital divide. Many students have access to a mobile technology, usually a cell phone. Yet those same students and many others may have no computer with Internet access at home and are therefore at a real disadvantage in terms of the depth and quality of inquiry that they can conduct.

A second-level digital divide is also emerging: the lack of skills to navigate, select, evaluate, interpret, and draw conclusions from the information glut. One educator summed up the problem thus: "Kids are tech savvy, but not information savvy."

Inquiry is greatly impacted by the lack of continuity and coherence in the Web environment. All information on the Web is presented with equal importance, and learners may encounter it in an order that has nothing to do with time (historical vs. current), place (Web sites from any area of the world appear on search engine results), or even synchrony with their central idea (especially if there is ambiguity in search terms). Librarians have found that this lack of coherence can be ameliorated by helping patrons use the framework of inquiry to structure the investigation and maintain focus on a main idea. Without inquiry skills, many learners lose their focus, gather superfluous or inaccurate information, or just give up and copy whatever information they find.

The multimodal nature of digital resources provides opportunities for patrons with different learning preferences and strengths, and even different languages, to engage in inquiry. What we, as librarians, cannot forget, however, are the additional challenges that these formats present. We must identify and understand the new literacies required for interpreting and evaluating digital, visual, media, photographic, and auditory information. The concept of transliteracy, or "the ability to read, write, and interact across a range of platforms" (www.transliteracy.com), must start to inform our instructional practice.

Interactivity and the Impact on Inquiry

The interactive Web 2.0 aspect of the digital world poses both opportunities and challenges to learners, librarians, and teachers, because it enables participation, collaboration, and sharing. Individuals can now produce and share their own work with the world. They can engage in online conversations and social learning, and we know from research that that deepens learning. The danger is that the participatory environment has led to a glut of information produced by authors with no authoritative knowledge and limited perspectives. Learners are challenged to hone their own evaluation skills to find high-quality digital information among the clutter. Continual interaction with too much information has led to a deterioration

of thoughtfulness, "chipping away our capacity for concentration and contemplation" (Carr 2008).

TEACHING THE SKILLS NEEDED FOR INQUIRY-BASED LEARNING

School librarians are at the epicenter of an amazing confluence of inquiry-based teaching and learning, implementation of the CCSS, and the opportunities and challenges of the digital environment. School librarians must step up to an instructional leadership role and build a path to success for every student by teaching critical inquiry skills as a part of collaborative instructional units, assessing students' ability to perform the skills that are taught, guiding and mentoring students as they pursue their investigations, and building a culture of inquiry that permeates the entire school.

What Skills We Should Teach

The question that resonates with our focus on inquiry, what should we teach? The educational context for our teaching is provided by CCSS as well as the resources, access, and interactivity of the digital world; the heart of our teaching is found in the skills required for each phase of the inquiry process.

The most often ignored aspect of teaching inquiry skills is actually teaching students to perform the steps of the skill, rather than just telling students to perform the skill. Too often, students are told to create a good inquiry question, make an inference, find the main idea, or identify point of view without being shown the steps to do that thinking. Students need to be taught the steps of any new skill explicitly, be taken through modeling and examples during guided practice, and then be given opportunities to practice the skill on their own. Although the compact nature of the Common Core, with so many skills embedded in each standard, would seem to indicate that several skills should be taught simultaneously, librarians will have the greatest impact on students' development of the skills by teaching one skill per lesson and scaffolding any missing skills that are necessary.

Connect

At the beginning of an inquiry experience, the **Connect** phase, students identify what they already know about the subject and read/explore to gain background knowledge and find intriguing ideas to pursue. When students express their *prior knowledge*, they are actually describing their existing mental model. Sometimes they have a powerful, and perhaps misinformed, mental model that closes them off to new, and especially to conflicting, information. Research has shown that students will not change faulty mental

models (even after gaining more accurate information) unless they explicitly describe their existing ideas first. Librarians can help learners identify their mental models through strategic questioning.

Background information, or *contextualization*, used to be a mainstay for the beginning of all research projects, but it may be harder to sell to teachers who have heard about the horrors of Wikipedia and forbid its use or who see no benefit to students' starting with a general encyclopedia (it takes too much time for students to mess around; they just need to start researching their topic). Contextualized thinking is essential for inquiry, especially in the digital environment, where information on Web sites tends to be very specific and presented without any background or context. Students should start by reading (or viewing) background information to gather key concepts; main ideas; contrasting perspectives; controversies; and key vocabulary, persons, and dates. They should emerge from the Connect phase with interesting ideas about the inquiry topic that they would like to pursue.

Learners often have difficulty in *maintaining a focus in their inquiry*, particularly when researching online, because they get distracted by the small bits of specific information and interesting, but unrelated, sidetracks/links on Web sites. Teaching students to identify *central themes and big ideas* at the Connect phase of their inquiry helps them maintain focus later as they pursue their investigations.

Wonder

Questioning is the driving force behind inquiry. Researchers generally start with low-level, who-what-when-where questions; librarians can teach students to develop *higher-level inquiry questions* that are appropriate for the inquiry assignment, can actually be answered, and lead to expressing new understanding in the assigned assessment product (e.g., a student would develop different questions for a debate than for an ad campaign). Students must be taught how to develop questions that will lead them to pursue their topic in depth and to seek conflicting information or multiple perspectives. The challenge of questioning in the digital environment is that *complexity and alternative viewpoints* are not easily discovered. If learners are asking only descriptive or explanatory questions, then they will not explore the more complex aspects of their topic or even realize that they should pursue different perspectives.

Investigate

Ideally, learners start their investigations by *constructing search strategies*, including the key search terms, their combinations through Boolean or semi-Boolean operators, and an idea of the search engines, databases, or Web sites to be searched in addition to the online catalog. In practice, however, many learners go to Google, enter natural language search terms or whole

sentences into the search box, and then compensate for the millions of hits by looking at the first few references. Without specific intervention by teachers or librarians, learners often do not know how to refine their search terms, and they almost never discover the hidden web of valuable sources not in Google, or the purchased databases of selected, high-quality information.

Sourcing, or determining the authority of sources, is absolutely essential, especially in the digital environment. Students may have a difficult time applying the *criteria for evaluating sources* in the self-publishing world of the Internet, because the identity and credentials of the creators may be difficult if not impossible to determine. To many of our students, a blog may appear as credible as an editorial from the *New York Times*, and a Web site with beautiful images may be more convincing than a more authoritative one without a lot of graphics.

Another difficult aspect of the evaluation of sources is determining the perspective that frames the information. Librarians should teach students specific signals and criteria that will help them determine the creator's perspective. In addition, students can be taught to assess perspective by *corroborating*—weighing one source against another. Librarian guidance and instruction may be necessary for students to find credible sources for corroboration.

Equally as important as teaching students to evaluate the sources that they use is teaching them to evaluate the information within the source. Librarians may begin with the *organizational tools* that help researchers locate appropriate information, like the table of contents and index. Students will be fascinated when the librarian asks them to transfer those ideas to a Web site, so that they learn to identify and use navigational tools like tabs, links, and search boxes.

Once students have learned to navigate the information source, they must learn the important inquiry skills of *evaluating the information* they find, including determining accuracy, currency, comprehensiveness, relevance to research questions, main ideas vs. supporting details, point of view, and fact vs. opinion. Critical thinking skills of interpretation and inference must also be taught. Access to information in multiple formats has led to librarians' attention to teaching the skills of *multiple literacies*. The Common Core requires students to do deep reading of complex texts; many of those literacy skills can be taught by the librarian as an integral part of inquiry investigations. Students should learn to question the text, determine the central idea, evaluate claims and evidence, analyze and interpret arguments, and compare and contrast ideas. Students must also learn to adapt many of those literacy skills to understand and interpret information presented visually, orally, graphically, or through the media.

The skills of *ethical participation* during inquiry must also be taught explicitly. Students find it too easy to cut and paste information from digital text and too difficult to track down the original author of Web information.

The result may be unethical behavior such as plagiarism. Learners are increasingly confused by the blurry lines between proprietary information and creative commons information. Mash-ups and remixing present entirely new, enticing opportunities for copyright infringement.

Construct

Construct is the phase at which learners *synthesize large amounts of specific bits of information and ideas* to form their own understandings. To do this type of thinking, learners have to *look for patterns and relationships among ideas*, even though the pieces of information may be from so many separate sources that the patterns do not emerge easily. Students can be taught how to detect patterns in the information they find and then to *draw a conclusion*, *form an opinion*, and *develop their own ideas* based on their own interpretations. Students can then be taught how to construct their own patterns to express their interpretations and conclusions, such as main idea and details, cause/effect, chronological sequence, or compare/contrast. The Common Core lays out an expectation that students will learn to develop a *line of argument*, which requires sophisticated interpretation and presentation of points, counterpoints, and evidence.

To help students develop the thinking processes of constructing their own ideas and conclusions, librarians can teach them to use *online organization*, *visualization*, and *collaboration tools*.

Express

Publication and sharing of knowledge are essential components of inquiry. The opportunities for our students to use digital tools to communicate their new ideas are bounded only by their imagination and their access to and ability to use the tools. We know that students are both motivated and engaged by the *authenticity* of these modes of communication and their applicability to their own lives. The *allure of alternative digital forms* (e.g., podcasts, wikis), however, may pressure students to create shallow presentations that focus on the glitz of the medium rather than the substance of the content. Librarians can help students use these tools to express their own ideas effectively.

Reflect

Reflection seems like a lost art in the manic digital world. The real challenge for librarians in building a culture that is supportive of inquiry is maintaining a contemplative environment (Wolf and Barzillai 2009, 33). Our libraries can be what Jaron Lanier calls "the thinking space of civilization" (West 2010). We need to build into our instructional designs opportunities for reflection, so that students regularly think about both the product and process of their inquiry experiences.

ASSESSING INQUIRY SKILLS

When we, as librarians, emphasize the explicit teaching of inquiry skills and integrate inquiry into Common Core–based collaborative units, we cannot forget to assess students' learning of the skills. To determine if students are able to apply the skills, we will want to use formative assessment, so that we can reteach or provide specific guidance to students with difficulties before the problems impact the entire inquiry investigation. An effective way to assess an inquiry skill is a graphic organizer that has been designed to walk students through the steps of the skill and allow them to show their ability to perform each step. For sample graphic-organizer assessments for each grade level aligned with the inquiry process and the Common Core, see those developed by the Office of Library Services in New York City and incorporated into the Empire State Information Fluency Continuum (http://schools.nyc.gov/Academics/LibraryServices/StandardsandCurriculum/default.htm).

BUILDING A CULTURE OF INQUIRY

Ultimately, the role of the school librarian in today's educational environment of the Common Core and digital tools and resources is to build a culture of inquiry. To do so, we must follow the wisdom of Mahatma Gandhi: "You must *be* the change you want to see in the world." The first step in empowering our students and teachers to inquire and in creating an environment in our libraries in which participation, collaboration, communication, and questioning are the norm is for us to embrace inquiry, to start with one teacher, one lesson, one collaborative unit and then build from there. Arlo Guthrie may have captured the essence of building a school-wide culture of inquiry in "Alice's Restaurant," when he sang about the power of individuals banding together around a common goal (Guthrie 1967):

> And three people do it, three, can you imagine, three people walking in singin' a bar of Alice's Restaurant and walking out. They may think it's an organization. And can you, can you imagine fifty people a day, I said fifty people a day walking in singin' a bar of Alice's Restaurant and walking out. And friends they may think it's a movement.

We can make inquiry-based learning in the digital age a movement in our libraries and our schools.

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