Inquiry for Deep Learning

Course

Inquiry Defined: Curiosity [7:59]

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About

Inquiry begins with curiosity. In this lesson, we will think about ways that libraries can stimulate curiosity, both through passive and active interventions.

Transcript

Let's focus on one disposition of inquiry—one very important disposition of inquiry—and that's curiosity. It's important to recall that inquiry begins with curiosity. Today, we will think about ways that libraries can stimulate curiosity, both through passive and active interventions. But first, let's talk a minute about what we mean by curiosity. Curiosity is maybe something of a mental state that drives us to seek information or solutions that drives us. Notice that's an important verb there. It's not really so much about finding. It's all about the exploring. Curiosity also requires some initial knowledge. We are not curious about something we know absolutely nothing about typically, but as soon as we know even a little bit, our curiosity can be piqued and we can want to learn more. In fact, research shows that curiosity increases with knowledge. The more we know, the more we want to know. To get this process started, Loewenstein suggests in *The Psychology of Curiosity* that we need to prime the pump maybe with intriguing, but perhaps incomplete information. Curiosity isn't likely to arise in a vacuum. It requires a sense of an information gap based on knowing something, but not enough, not everything.

So let's talk about priming the pump. Background knowledge is what we're really talking about here and it's key to piquing curiosity. Inquiring minds must first have some basic information in order to generate interpretive or insight-producing questions. The less we know about a subject, the lower level our questions are likely to be. Conversely, as we get to know more, our questioning can become more complex. We need to understand that the fact gathering that our students do, perhaps unfortunately under the guise of researcher inquiry, actually is laying the foundation for true inquiry. For example, if we wanted students to study the immigrant groups represented within their state, to understand why they chose to settle there, they would first need to study who they are: when they came, what they did when they arrived. Only then would they be ready to begin to wonder the whys of their settlement: Why they settled in my state and not in the neighboring state? How successful were they? What challenges did they encounter and how did they overcome them? What innovations did they bring and how did those make a difference to the people who preceded them? These are the kinds of things that result from building background, the kinds of questions that students can then investigate more deeply.

Another dimension of curiosity is the notion of uncertainty. Let's talk about a peculiar phrase: unlearning certainty. Unlearning certainty. That means we have to get comfortable with being in the state of not knowing. We all like being in the know better than not being in the know, but inquiry is about seeking the unknown after all. Most of us want to avoid that disequilibrium that accompanies uncertainty. It's uncomfortable after all. But without uncertainty, there's no questioning. So we are challenged to give permission to our students, indeed encouragement, to accept the state of not knowing. Sometimes, there will never be a certain or final answer to a question and we need to be ready to say and accept, that is yet to be discovered.

Another dimension of curiosity has to do with observation. Nurturing the skills to be observant is key to engendering curiosity in our students. It's through observation that questions arise. Think of all the scientific discoveries that have been made over decades and generations. Those questions and answers generally arose out of a close observation. Think about an experience that affords opportunities to observe in settings that will generate interest and cause students to raise their own questions within your own settings. Even close reading of a text is an opportunity to observe; pausing to examine an illustration in a picture book provides an opportunity to observe. Wordless books long for young readers to look closely and wonder or looking at a photograph from a website. Time Life has a wonderful collection of photography, for example, that invites close observation and wondering. Or examine a primary source document from the American Memory project. That offers great opportunities to observe.

The school librarian can involve students in close observation and provide an entry point for curiosity by modeling how to look and how to wonder at a variety of sources. One idea is to use the See-Think-Wonder strategy. So when we're reading a picture book to students, having them explore ideas by looking only at the images and asking them to see, think, wonder by studying those images. Later on, we can return to share the entire text to bring their observations into context, but learning how to look and learning how to question is a really important dimension of curiosity and one that we can teach frequently in the library. In fact, let's think of the library as sort of an exploratorium where observation can invite curiosity. We can use displays of various sorts: displays of banned books and why, displays that author features, or even discovery and invitation displays. For example, a display about carbon for discovery and an invitation that says ‘What could our school do to reduce its carbon footprint?'

Or a display about poverty in America and an invitation that asks ‘What could we do to address hunger in our community?' The library website can also be a stimulus for curiosity. It's a place to pose intriguing questions and suggest interesting sites to visit like museum sites, science project sites, links to author pages. All of which can provide interesting responses to questions students can raise or that you can raise through your library website. And of course, the very traditional approach of providing reading lists focused on specific areas of inquiry, maybe driven by current headlines, maybe by a topic in the curriculum, a list of books printed or posted on your website about Mars, climate change, prisons, dystopias, read-alikes. Any of those can stimulate curiosity in our students when we put them before them.

Librarians can also take active intervention to stimulate curiosity in ways that you're very likely doing already, but maybe not recognizing them as stimulii for curiosity. Book talks focused on themes or events aimed at sparking wonder or curiosity whether they're given in the library or in the classroom. Let these book talks often end with ‘I wonder'. Initiate in-feature special events like History Day or International Games Day. Use existing fact-finding assignments to prime the pot. Encourage teachers to design a second tier assignment where they generate real research questions that begin with why, or why not, or what if, or how would, or how could. Young children are innately curious. Think of the child hopping off the bus with a bug, or a seed, or a leaf picked up before boarding and now wondering what it is or where it's from. It's our challenge as educators to sustain that curiosity so that students continue to wonder throughout their school years.

Activities

Pique Students' Curiosity

Context:

As Donham describes, curiosity is a mental state that drives a process of exploring for information or solutions. Being curious is a disposition for inquiry. As learners, we need some level of background knowledge in order to pique curiosity and to shape questions. Uncertainty, or not knowing, also stimulates questions. Close observation, even close reading, are other entry points for curiosity and wonder. A librarian can foster students' curiosity through these entry points via instruction, displays, the library website, booktalks, reading lists, and events.

Instructions:

Stimulating curiosity can begin by asking questions. As Donham recommends, school librarians can encourage curiosity and inquisitive interactions by posing a question as part of a bulletin board, display, or library webpage. Here are the examples offered in Lesson 2:

> We can use displays of various sorts: displays of banned books and why, displays that author features, or even discovery and invitation displays. For example, a display about carbon for discovery and an invitation that says "What could our school do to reduce its carbon footprint?" Or a display about poverty in America and an invitation that asks "What could we do to address hunger in our community?" The library website can also be a stimulus for curiosity. It's a place to pose intriguing questions and suggest interesting sites to visit like museum sites, science project sites, links to author pages.

Create a list of 4–5 questions to post in different platforms in your school library. Can you create…questions that intersect subject areas? Questions that students across grade levels might answer? Questions that have local relevance? Questions that students might talk about at home? What other creative and complex thinking or dialog can you inspire?

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Annotated Bibliography.

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