

The Points About Inquiry, and There are Many

by Moira Ekdahl, Liaison Chair, BC Teacher-Librarians' Association

It is generally agreed amongst those who contemplate how learning will be transformed in the 21st-Century that students—well, all citizens, really—will need to become more adept, effective, ethical, and critical users of information. What students learn to do with information is likely to last longer than the specifics of the information itself.

Yet, educators continue to present, measure, and expect information in formats that place less value on the learning processes and more value on the content. Caught in the cross-currents of educational debate in a socio-cultural environment where it is expected—no, mandated—they may gather quantitative data at regular intervals on products of student learning, compare these to pre-determined standards throughout a term, and thus document "coverage" of multiple bulleted curriculum learning outcomes. Continued adherence to this traditional approach to the construction and assessment of learning may be at the expense of learner empowerment and independence acquired with more effective, meaningful, and lasting engagement in the complex and multiple opportunities for meaning-making afforded by inquiry-based learning.

Educators enable students to be more *information literate*—able to access, retrieve, process, use, communicate, and reflect upon the information that emerges from their learning processes—as they engage in multiple and complex tasks in inquiry-based learning contexts. Educators, deeply engaged within the dynamics of a classroom charged with changing information-rich learning, learn how learning takes place and how their own teaching and students' learning in relation to knowledge changes; they:

- move to the side and work to guide or "scaffold" the learning
- provide feedback that empowers students to move more deeply into the learning
- encourage students to have more authority over their own knowledge and inquiry
- are actively engaged in learning, assessing, and teaching
- ensure new learning takes place in active, collaborative, and social contexts, real or virtual.

For teacher-librarians, information literacy:

- has often been constructed as a set of skills linked within learning processes to be embedded in content
- is often shown as a "scope-and-sequence" that parallels grades of the formal school curriculum

- has been a movement led by Carol Kuhlthau, Barbara Stripling, and others
- has been packaged as Big6, Research Quest, Information Power, and more
- is not and cannot be a separate "library skills" curriculum; information skills cannot be learned in isolation of the content
- is not an optional add-in as the ICT curriculum was intended to be
- is not widely embraced by school communities
- has not received official status or recognition in BC, aside from the adoption of the Research Quest model 10 years ago
- yet, is more important now than ever before.

In BC, teacher-librarians have a long history of working for the information literacy agenda:

- *Developing Independent Learners: The Role of the School Library Resource Centre*, 1991, Ministry of Education (subsequently delisted)
- The Coquitlam *Learning Outcomes for Information Literacy*, derived from BC IRPs (Bens et al.) which were included in *Developing Independent Learners*
- *Achieving Information Literacy* standards, published in 2003 by CASL (formerly CSLA/ATLC)
- *The BCTLA Research Quest model*, one of only two Ministry of Education documents, that has provided direction for our work (now also delisted).

For years, teacher-librarians in BC believed it would be simply a matter of time before the BCTLA Research Quest model, adopted by the BC Ministry of Education in 2001, would be shared with, and understood by, our teacher-colleagues as the provincial model for working with students and teacher-librarians to achieve important common goals for information literacy and independent learning. The "adopted model" would enable teacher-librarians in their work; teachers would bring students to the school library ready to learn to *Focus, Find and Filter, Work with Information, Communicate, and Reflect*. Instruction using the five-step linear sequential model would begin during the intermediate years and be reinforced until students could, by graduation, apply it as independent learners.

All that remains of the Research Quest model on the Ministry website are a few brief references without explanation. Like so much smoke and mirrors, the long-awaited model was adopted and then was gone. Try Google and you find that the term *research quest* has been adopted into an educational application for video games that, for engagement, far outstrips the uses teacher-librarians had so long anticipated.

Members of the BCTLA Information Literacy Task Force recognized that the learning-as-process Research Quest model hadn't worked. They agreed: it was time to move on. While information literacy is conceptually significant, as important for learning as reading is foundational for all other aspects of literacy and literacies, teachers do not really "get" it; students need to be supported and scaffolded as they move in multiple

ways and modes through vast reams of information; they make sense of and transform information into new meaning, forms of expression and thinking, and can do so independently if they are supported just at the times they need it. New ways of learning, changed dramatically by technology, have made one thing crystal clear: lest we get left behind, it is time to adjust our teaching.

There are the AHA! moments in any learning project that shift the engagement factor for participants and significantly affect the project. For the Task Force, one of those moments came at a summer conference in Vancouver. Keynote presenter James Henri, president of the IASL and a man with a penchant for provocative commentary, often challenges long-held tenets of school librarianship. *Just exactly how much ground do you think we have gained, he asked, in the struggle to put information literacy onto the agenda of schools?* Teacher-librarians in Vancouver still cite James; every so often, one will be overheard saying to another, “It’s like when James told us, ...”. James told us, *“We went astray when we told ourselves it was our job to work with students; it isn’t. We need to work with teachers ... We need to meet teachers in curriculum.”*

As James gave voice to the unthinkable notion that pitching information literacy isn’t working all that well for teacher-librarians, a collective sigh of relief was heard in the school library that hot August afternoon. For each person in the room, the sense of failure to make this information literacy thing a shared agenda item in the school was exposed and then released. Who doesn’t recall a colleague’s glazed-over eyes, or the ones who simply had to dash, or the stammering apologetic ones who hoped they could bring in students to look for content (and get caught up on backlogged marking, as they really need to cover the curriculum)? Or how about the school staff meeting and professional development agendas always too full to include information literacy, never a top choice for collective professional consideration. What was it that our colleagues couldn’t stand to hear, or couldn’t get their heads around, and why? And for teacher-librarians, James’ question also provided a chance to re-examine why, at the same time, we also couldn’t simply agree to meet our colleagues on their terms, that is, by simply introducing the resources and taking on the Works Cited piece at the end. There was still a lot of work to do but it was also time to cede some ground.

Prior to the “Henri Intervention”, the Task Force had been pulling relevant intended learning outcomes from provincial and other curriculum documents, sorting them into long and messy lists of skills in a “cubic model” that featured:

- three *strands* (3Rs, Reading, Research, and Resources)
- four learning *dimensions* (the student as information seeker, as information processor, as communicator, and as reflective learner)
- four *benchmarks* identifying what students should be able to do by the end of grade 3, 7, 10, and 12; the focus at each benchmark was to build on all previous skills, and thus, to enhance capacity for independent and lifelong learning.

- *foundations* built of the strands, dimensions, and benchmarks such that students had learned everything needed for practicing the complex processes for independent inquiry in grades 11 and 12.

Borrowing from notions of “backwards design” with “the end in mind” (Wiggins & McTighe), the Task Force also asked BC post-secondary education librarians (Ball & Power) to survey colleagues for what were perceived as the most common academic research problems faced by first-year students. *Are Grade 12 graduates of BC schools able to demonstrate critical thinking skills and to engage in independent inquiry? What are the ten things first-year students need to know how to do better if they are to succeed with the demands of academic research?*

BC students, according to the survey results, needed to know more about:

- how to find a book
- how to find books by author or by topic
- how to select and use databases
- what a journal is and how it differs from a book
- how to paraphrase
- how to evaluate sources critically
- why to write the citation for the quotation being incorporated into a paper
- what plagiarism is
- how to write a research question and a thesis statement
- how and who to ask for help.

The Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations simultaneously released the results of their online survey of 2,000 of 15,000 faculty members including academic librarians; first-year students’ research and internet-seeking behaviours were found to be going downhill rapidly. What were these students doing to make that impression? They were:

- avoiding databases in favour of Google as the only search tool of value
- using Wikipedia as a citable academic source
- not knowing how to find a book or even how to ask for help
- providing evidence of poorer skills than three years earlier.

What might be the causes of this decline? Faculty had speculated, amongst other things (Rushowy), there was:

- a sense of entitlement or “attitude issues”
- under-resourcing in the public secondary school system
- overvaluing of leisure and a declining work ethic.

While BC's post-secondary education librarians were not asked to identify possible causes of the state of student information literacy skills, it is true that chronic underfunding of public education has had an impact on teacher-librarian staffing and thus on the capacity of BC's school library programs and on professional and curricular support for promoting initiatives like teaching for information literacy.

To further contextualise the work of the Task Force, the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) published its *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner* and *The Standards in Action* describing learning in terms of skills, attitudes, and responsibilities in 2009:

Learning in the twenty-first century has taken on new dimensions with the exponential expansion of information, ever-changing tools, increasing digitization of text, and heightened demands for critical and creative thinking, communication, and collaborative problem solving ... All learners must be able to access high-quality information from diverse perspectives, make sense of it to draw their own conclusions or create new knowledge, and share their knowledge with others.

Essential to acquiring these standards are educators who are teaching for and developing their own skills in and understandings about:

- *literacy*, traditionally reading, and also the multi-literacies so students acquire skills to decode "text" or meaning from different print, digital, media, visual, cultural, and other formats.
- *inquiry and critical thinking* so students can move developmentally along a continuum towards independent learning by asking good questions and then finding, reading, evaluating, and making sense of appropriate resources and using them effectively to share answers.
- *technology*, integrated with teaching and learning to ensure equitable physical and intellectual access, so that all students are better prepared for learning, working, and living, more broadly in social and global contexts.
- *assessment* so that students are able to manage their own learning in the information-rich environments of school, life, and work, by engaging in and receiving reflective feedback. Students need to know what they know, what they need to know, what they need to do better, who to ask, and how to refine or revise or re-direct their own and others' inquiries.
- *social learning and learning to be socially responsible* including collaborative working relationships where learning is active and process-driven, so that students expect they and their team members, real and/or virtual, will know how to access, use, and create information in responsible, respectful, equitable, lawful, and appropriate ways. They need to be aware of others' rights.

The Task Force wholly embraced the principles that underpin the AASL Standards which they agreed had moved away from traditional notions of information literacy and concepts such as “scope-and-sequence”; included the multi-literacies and technology; were benchmarked by years to enable flexibility; and were best taught:

- with teachers working collaboratively with teacher-librarians
- in the context of curriculum
- within an inquiry model
- with multiple resources
- in a supportive environment that exemplifies equitable access
- with guidance, as required, in the form of direct instruction or scaffolding
- in conjunction with assessment rubrics that include process as well as content, skills and content goals, self- and peer-assessment.

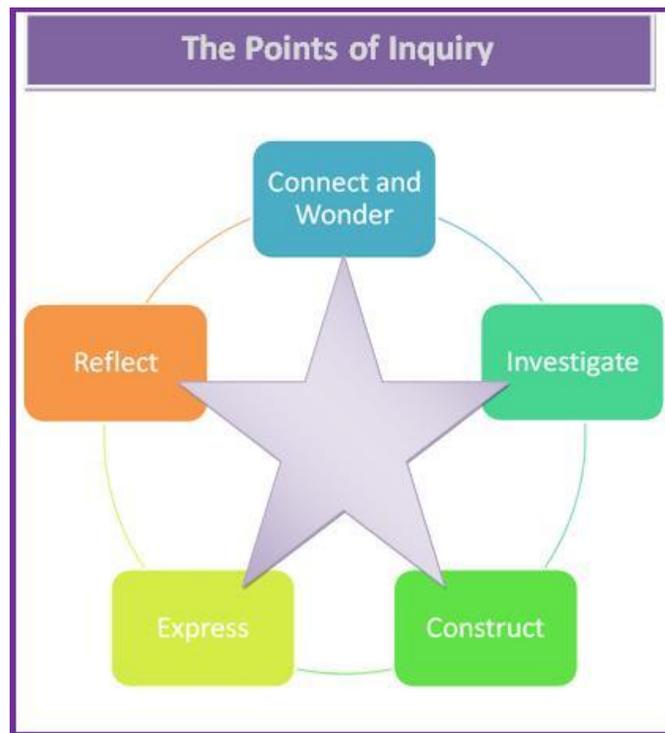
One more AHA! found its way into the Task Force’s thinking about teaching and learning for information literacy in BC classrooms and school libraries. Collaborative inquiry-based learning projects with students and with educators must always leave room for serendipity and keep an eye out for the unintended learning outcomes. Two members of the Task Force were also involved with a group of Vancouver teacher-librarians completing a four-month long district collaborative learning opportunity; it was led by trained facilitators and constructed, using the teacher inquiry model, to put regular group conversations and reflections about practice on top of collaborative inquiry-based professional learning. How perfect the teacher-librarians felt for the task! They knew how inquiry worked. The teacher-librarian inquiry question was, *How can we, as a professional learning community, support teacher-librarians in implementing exemplary school library programs in our schools?* The group re-designed a mentoring model, scripted and shot a film of what *exemplary* looks like, built a wiki of tools and a record of the teacher-librarian inquiry, as well as talked about various readings.

In the second-to-last meeting, one of the facilitators brought an article for discussion: Barbara Stripling’s “Using Inquiry to Explode Myths About Learning and Libraries”. Stripling’s writing has a crystal-clear, formulaically organized, textual structure, as if written from a graphic organizer. What she described included much that made sense; it:

- used active verbs that were clear, concrete, and simple (no more Find, Focus, Filter) and that resonated with language of reading as much as with research
- allowed for messiness and recursivity by allowing movement anywhere, on reflection, at various points in the process
- began and was infused with literacy and critical thinking
- was cognitively manageable for all ages of students at five “points”
- included technology as a tool

- called for reflection at every point
- identified reading for deep understanding as inquiry
- could be used from Kindergarten to Grade 12.

There was no cycle that implied progression, no linear, lock-step sequential model that implied everyone moved in the same way and at the same time; just inquiry for deep understanding and student empowerment by learning to learn on their own. The textual framework inspired a graphic organizer and the conceptual design of *The Points of Inquiry* model:



This model was designed and adapted, with permission, from a reading of Barbara Stripling's Inquiry discussion, in "Using Inquiry to Explode Myths about Learning and Libraries" (CSLA Journal)

Stripling, contacted in New York City where she is Director of Library Services for the New York City Department of Education, was readily agreeable to the visual adaptation: five "points" (not six) and a star within a circle. At Stripling's recommendation, the Task Force then looked at the book, *Curriculum Connections Through The Library* (Stripling & Hughes-Hassell), from which the last pieces of the puzzle in our quest for a new model were extracted.

Every discipline engages in inquiry that is unique but structurally similar, from scientific method to literary appreciation to writing process to historical understanding, as

examples. Reading is the key to literacy; it is foundational to all literacy/literacies; it is deeply and increasingly linked to inquiry, as young readers go beyond fluency and decoding to maturing understanding and creation of increasingly complex messages, or from learning to read to reading to learn. Inquiry-based learning includes reading and research. *Resources* are not a separate or third aspect of learning but integral to *reading* and *research* constructed as inquiry.

In summary, the BCTLA Information Literacy Task Force moved, over a period of three years, to deeper understanding of the importance of learners being able to think critically about resources, information, and their own questions; away from information literacy and the search for a right model for research for the BC curriculum to the capacity for drawing new knowledge from an inquiry-based approach to information, reading, and 21st-Century learning. The BCTLA inquiry-based approach, termed *The Points of Inquiry*, is:

- framed by well-established and new understandings about learning including traditional literacy and the multi-literacies
- constructed as a model that works for reading as well as research
- framed by the learners as learning that seeks to explain or find answers to their own questions
- grounded in new and emerging technologies as tools for accessing, using, working with, and presenting information
- built developmentally between benchmarks and added to naturally at transition points in classrooms and in school libraries, in all disciplines, from Kindergarten to Grade 12.

The model no longer puts a focus on information literacy nor does it include a scope-and-sequence of skills. Greater levels of sophistication are built onto what is first learned in Kindergarten (thank you, Mr. Fulghum!). Inquiry enables the designing of learning forwards—developmentally appropriate learning in the earliest years is foundational—and backwards, “with the end in mind”, to empower young British Columbians to apply an inquiry approach to lifelong learning.

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