

Personal Inquiry for Secondary Students – A Narrative

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In the Beginning was the Question

It all began in conversation with one of the CALM teachers at our school. “How can we better engage our students in their teen issues research projects for the Personal Challenges/Wellness unit within the Grade 11 Career and Life Management Program of Study?” The teacher’s frustration was that students even when given a choice for a topic did not become very involved or did not complete the assignment at all. It was from this query and some of my own personal reflections, that I began seeking a deeper understanding of high school students’ reluctance to fully engage with a personal research topic.

Eureka

The CALM teacher agreed to work with me on a strategy to fully commit students to meaningful inquiry through the Personal Challenges/Wellness Unit. Reviewing past collaborative planning work we had done, which had emphasized credible information sources and search strategies, it was agreed that the unit’s focus needed to be on the planning stage of the inquiry process.

Using the Alberta Education document “Focus on Inquiry: a Teacher’s Guide to Implementing Inquiry-based Learning as our model, we would build effective student strategies for selecting a topic, key questions, and essential question with personal meaning.

Inquiry-based learning is a process where students are involved in their learning, formulate questions, investigate widely and then build new understandings, meanings and knowledge. That knowledge is new to the students and may be used to answer a question, to develop a solution or to support a position or point of view. The knowledge is usually presented to others and may result in some sort of action.

Alberta Learning.(2004). *Focus on Inquiry: A teacher’s guide to implementing inquiry-based learning*. Retrieved from

<http://education.alberta.ca/media/313361/focusoninquiry.pdf>

In discussion with the teacher I asked, “What is the key learning outcome for this unit?” She answered, “Students are to become more knowledgeable about contemporary teen issues within the context of managing their own personal well-being. The aim of the CALM course

is to enable students to make well-informed decisions and choices that contribute to the well-being and respect of self and others.” She also wanted the class to demonstrate their speaking and technological skills through a final PowerPoint presentation. Through further conversation, the CALM teacher shared that her true angst about past projects was the lack of engagement that students showed towards an issue and that the content of final projects often appeared to be plagiarized.

My suggestion to improve student engagement was to have final presentations focus on essential questions through personal inquiry. She agreed to this and extended the time needed for the planning stage of the inquiry process. In the past the teacher usually had the class take only one day for deciding on a topic.

Preparing the Way for Meaningful Inquiry

Students were given a Personal Challenges/Wellness course sheet listing the various topics that they could choose. The teen issues included: abuse, anorexia nervosa, depression suicide, violence in schools, body image, bullying, drugs, mental illness , smoking, teen pregnancy, alcoholism, steroids, vegetarianism, and others. They could work in pairs or individually. Most chose to work in pairs.

Students were to choose two to three topics of interest and list what they already knew about the topic, questions they had about the topic and why this topic was of interest to them. Usually the teacher would only have one topic per pair/individual, but I suggested we allow students to choose whatever topics they were most interested in. This provided the possibility for greater buy-in by students. The criteria for choice included the student identifying a topic of high personal interest, having some background knowledge, and more questions than answers about the issue. The expectation was that the outcome for success would personally benefit the learner both intellectually and emotionally.

Letting the Essential Question Find You

The key to creating a successful inquiry learning experience was to have the students personally commit to their chosen topic. They were to identify the rationale for choosing their topic and begin developing four to five powerful key questions. From the key questions and their rationale, a meaningful essential question should emerge that focused on a personal and tangible outcome. As a professional storyteller I often tell my participants that a good storyteller doesn't find the story but the story finds the storyteller. It is the same with the essential question. There has to be a strong emotional connection between the learner and the essential question.

The teacher created a planning worksheet that included the topic/issue, rationale, what I know, what I want to know, essential question, resources to be used. The unit was extended by four classes to provide more time for the preparation stage of the inquiry process. Each class period consisted of ninety minutes.

Personal Inquiry Project Time-Line:

Day 1: Introduction of Unit (CALM Teacher)

Introduction to the Inquiry Model: Focus on the planning stage (Teacher-Librarian)

Brainstorming for 2-3 topics.

Day 2-3: Selecting and finalizing the topic.

Exploring background information on the topic.

Developing key questions and essential question.

Day 4 -5: Introduction to credible information sources and search strategies (Teacher-Librarian)

Identifying possible information sources and keywords for searches.

Dividing up the work: key questions and information searches.

Day 6-7: Retrieving information & note-taking

Day 8 – 9: Creating response to Essential Question

Day 10: Final PowerPoint Completed

Talking the Walk: Forming Meaningful Essential Questions

The students were familiar with choosing a topic for projects in other classes, but taking ownership for a topic with a personal outcome was new to most of the students.

Responses were:

“Just tell me what you want me to study and I will do it.”

“Let me get on with looking for information on the topic and putting it into my PowerPoint”

“I just want to get the project done....”

“I don’t like research projects... boring”

Through guided inquiry questions, I had students explore personal connections to a topic:

- From a personal perspective, what is your rationale or reason for choosing this topic?
- On a personal level, why do you want to learn more about this issue?
- What real-life situation can you attach to this issue?
- What personal outcome or action do you see resulting from your inquiry?

The final task was to create an essential question which included their rationale for selecting the topic and an identifiable outcome.

For many individuals establishing a meaningful essential question with a specific outcome required support and coaching from the teacher and teacher-librarian. Partners had to come to an agreement about a common rationale, personal connection, and shared outcome.

The Power of Personal Inquiry

The students at first were frantic to select a topic, and get on with their search for information. In past research projects, students would immediately set up a PowerPoint and begin copying in any information they found, usually from online sources, so it was a cut and paste activity.

Students began to relax once they realized that the objective was to engage meaningfully with an essential question, and that they were being given more time for planning. Interesting and very personal dialogue was exchanged between partners, students and teachers as they shared their personal connections to issues. They also explored what they already knew about a topic, what they hoped to learn and what their main outcome would be from their learning.

Especially meaningful for me, as a teacher-librarian, was being trusted in personal dialogues with students whom I had not intimately spoken with previously, unlike their classroom teacher. One student, who was working individually, wanted to share his challenge with depression through a personal inquiry but had never spoken openly about his condition. Another student had a younger sister in junior high who was an epileptic. He was concerned that when his sister entered high school next year, she would be made fun of and possibly be bullied. As some topics were very personal and emotionally challenging for some students, we offered them the option of not presenting to the whole class. Interestingly, no one took us up on the offer, as everyone in the class was keenly committed to sharing their learning.

The formation of a meaningful essential question was very challenging for most students. As individuals began sharing their questions, they developed a greater understanding about how a powerful essential question emerges. One touching example of this process, involved two students, a girl and a boy, who had chosen teen pregnancy as their topic. Their reason for choosing this topic was that they had a common friend who was pregnant. Initially they just wanted to have a general understanding about teen pregnancies, but as they dialogued more

deeply, they began to focus on the personal situation of their friend. Their real-life rationale was to have a greater understanding of the challenges their friend faced as young pregnant teenager, so that they could become an intentional and active support network for her. They were deeply concerned about their friend, both emotionally and physically, as their key questions included: What are the physical stages of pregnancy? What agencies are available to support a teen mother-to-be? What are important dietary requirements of a pregnant teen mother and her unborn child? What emotional and social support would a young teen mother need? How can we help her make good choices about her and the child's future? Once they identified their key questions, the two students created an essential question which included their personal connection to the topic with a tangible outcome. They were also concerned that their friend understood how and why she became pregnant, so that she would have a more responsible and hopeful future. The students were committed to supporting their friend through the pregnancy and the ongoing care of her newborn.

Their essential question became: How can we better understand the challenges of a teen pregnancy so that we can become a strong support network for our friend during her pregnancy and future role as a new young mother?

Through the identification of an authentic essential question, the pair established a tangible outcome for their inquiry. They choose to set up strategies for supporting their friend with specific tasks that each would take during the pregnancy period and upon the arrival of the baby. Each of them had a different relationship with the teen and different strengths in supporting her. This would be the essence of their final PowerPoint presentation – a joint support plan for their friend with specific outcomes.

Other essential questions that came from various dialogues with students included:

How can I help others to better understand the challenges of my sister, who is an epileptic, so that she will positively experience the transition from junior high into high school?

How can I most effectively share my personal challenges with depression, so that others have a better understanding of this issue, and can become a support for others?

The Hunt for Best Information

The “aha” moment for many students was the realization that more time spent on planning resulted in the formation of better key questions and more timely retrieval of best information. Most students had previous library demonstrations for locating credible information sources. They used the keywords from their good questions to search for pertinent information in a variety of resources. Print and digital sources included encyclopedias, subject specific information literature, magazines, newspapers, government health and social agencies. The

format of an information source was not as important as the quality of the information to best support the personal inquiry.

More Questions Beget Continuous Learning

The CALM teacher and students were pleased with the success of the personal inquiry project. It had provided a meaningful learning experience which resulted in presentations that dealt with personal responses to real-life teen issues.

The timeframe for a unit of study can be very tight in a high school time table, but through the personal inquiry process many students developed deeper questions that they wished to pursue further. Reflecting on the success of the personal inquiry project, many students were fully engaged in their inquiry and demonstrated this by their commitment to a practical and action focused outcome. The students' awareness and enjoyment of taking responsibility for their own learning resulted in life-long strategies for continuous learning. In the future, when they are given the opportunity for a self-directed project, they will have the skills and strategies to personalize their inquiry in a more meaningful way.

Learning to learn ... is the success of personal inquiry!

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