

Project Based Learning: A TLLP Project

By Caroline Freibauer

When Erin Esposito first embraced student-driven, inquiry-based learning in her junior-level classroom she watched one student play video games for an entire week instead of researching his chosen topic.

“I was nervous about letting them go. Would they just fool around? I let them go.”

She didn't need to worry. When called back to present their learning to the class, the group leader dealt with the video-playing student, who hasn't played video games since.

“I throw it back to the kids,” she said. “We are co-learners. I don't see it as me telling them what to do.”

The class holds regular morning meetings, sets aside time for presentations of learning and run monthly talent shows.

“They organize the schedule,” said Esposito.

And when things aren't working, they are changed by the group.

Esposito transformed her classroom to a student-driven inquiry style after working with a School Work Study teacher, who noted that Esposito's students were not connecting with lessons in class. Since then, Esposito has noticed a vast improvement in student engagement.

“I see kids having fun – learning and motivated,” she said. “The kids who produced nothing last year are the leaders this year.”

Parents have noticed a difference, too.

“Every single parent says their child is excited to come to school and sometimes that's enough,” said Esposito. “One student hated practising the piano. We allowed her to show her talent and now she wants to practise at home.”

Esposito acknowledged that there are difficulties in changing to an inquiry-based classroom but they can be overcome with the right attitude. Teachers need to adopt a success mindset, she told participants at an all-day workshop on inquiry-based learning for teachers in the Brant Haldimand Norfolk Catholic District School Board.

Esposito's words were inspirational for those at the workshop, about 20 elementary and high school teachers who have been thinking about inquiry in the classroom during the past year. They were invited by a Teacher Learning and Leadership Project team to learn more about how to help students develop good questions, find the answers and then reflect on their learning. Many of the teachers were motivated by a new Ontario Social Studies curriculum re-written with a completely inquiry-based focus. I was there because I wanted to demonstrate that teacher-

librarians can make a difference in student learning. In fact, that's why I initiated the Teacher Learning and Leadership Project on inquiry at our board.

Funded by the Ontario Ministry of Education, the TLLP provides financial support to classroom teachers who want to play a leadership role and support other teachers in curriculum and instructional practice. As a new teacher-librarian in September 2012, I saw this as an opportunity to demonstrate some leadership in a collaborative inquiry that would affect teachers and students.

"Will engagement through project-based learning improve student success?" was the question I used to frame my application for funding. But the secret question motivating me was: "How can I demonstrate that teacher-librarians make a difference in education?" I persuaded two other teachers in my high school and an elementary teacher at a nearby feeder school to join me. Since our application for \$16,000 in funding was approved in the spring of 2013, our journey of discovery has generated more questions than answers and unearthed more problems than solutions.

We began by organizing a two-day Project Based Learning Boot Camp. Using our funding we hired Carol Koechlin and David Loertscher, two experts in inquiry learning who know the importance of well-organized school learning commons and good teacher-librarians in the facilitation of real learning in a school. They created what has become their trademark Knowledge Building Centre – a virtual collaborative learning space using Google sites. You can access ours here: <https://sites.google.com/site/bhnbootcamp/>. Then they led a group of educators and system learning leaders through a series of activities, many drawn from their books including **Beyond Bird Units** (2011) and **The Big Think** (2009). For many at the Boot Camp, this was a first exposure to inquiry-based learning. One teacher balked, saying that it wouldn't work in her classroom. Another said that it was the best professional learning she had ever experienced. The majority asked to be invited back at the end of the year so that they could share after trying inquiry learning in their classrooms.

At the Boot Camp we came up against the first of many problems associated with implementing inquiry-based learning: access to technology. Koechlin and Loertscher rely on Google sites to provide a virtual collaborative space for learners because it is easy to access and free. Unfortunately, our school board blocks Google and we had difficulty accessing the site during our workshop.

Our core group decided we would spend the rest of the year learning more about inquiry-based learning and experimenting in our classrooms. We met with a group teacher-librarians from the Waterloo District School Board, which has created action research projects around student learning. You can check out its work here: <https://sites.google.com/site/tlpeepswrdsb/>. Susan Flanagan, one of our TLLP teammates, has been piloting an inquiry-based Civics course created by Oxford University Press. Theresa Wright, a Grade 7 and 8 teacher, has been experimenting with inquiry-based lessons in her classroom, and Carissa Engell, the fourth member of our team, has been collaborating with her Canada and World Studies department head to transform lessons so that they have an inquiry focus.

I decided to explore the problems associated with implementing inquiry and project-based learning in the classroom. If research clearly shows deeper engagement and learning, then why aren't more educators teaching this way? Inquiry is not really a new concept. To help with my investigation I put together a survey designed to discover how much teachers really knew about

inquiry, how many were using it in the classroom and to articulate the difficulties they faced. Of the 114 respondents to my survey, more than 85 per cent had some understanding of inquiry based learning and approximately 70 per cent had tried some form of this style of teaching in the classroom. They also highlighted six key problems: time required, lack of access to technology, not knowing enough about how to teach using this method, the fact that it is skill based and not content based, classroom management and assessment. Some also raised the concern that parents may not understand what is happening in their child's classroom.

I shared these findings at a Reboot Camp held at the end of April 2014. We had enough money left in our project funding to reunite participants from our first gathering and invite some new participants. This time the TLLP team facilitated, using a new resource published by Oxford University Press – **IQ A Practical Guide to Inquiry-Based Learning** (2014). We called on the participants to share their experiences. Agata Kowalski, a teacher at a neighbouring high school, explained how she used project based learning to get her diverse class of ESL students talking and writing. Many came up with potential solutions to the problems highlighted in the survey. And it was at this gathering that Erin Esposito explained the importance of a positive mindset.

Looking back, that is probably one of the key learnings from the first year in our collaborative inquiry on project based learning. I successfully applied for another grant to continue our research. Next year, most of the Reboot Camp participants will be working together to co-plan and teach inquiry-based lessons. We hope to gather data – video, student work, lesson plans -- so that we will have something more concrete to share. And I am confident that if we maintain this positive mindset we will achieve this goal.

The past year has felt like a long meandering journey with new destinations established along the way. But that is the nature of research. It doesn't always travel in a straight line. I have learned that teacher-librarians can make a difference in a school and even across a school board by making teachers aware of funding opportunities, bringing like-minded educators together and facilitating professional development. My goal for the future will be to do a better job of capturing this learning and sharing it with a wider community.

Bibliography

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