Embedding Student Inquiry in the Learning Commons

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Inquiry is at the forefront of learning and a key component into the curious nature of our students. Wonder and intrigue are vital to the young entrepreneurs of tomorrow and are required for a diverse and competitive economy to prosper. Inquiry enables all of our students to participate at an entry point that is appropriate for them, differentiating their learning according to their capability and inquisitiveness.

Inquiry is at the centre of everything we are doing to increase student achievement, close gaps in student achievement and increase public confidence, as per the Ontario government's initiative. With the recently renewed goals focusing on achieving excellence, ensuring equity, promoting well-being and enhancing public confidence, we are becoming well-equipped to move our students forward ("Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario", 2014). Teachers have been learning about inquiry as a means to fulfill these robust goals.

In the Greater Essex County District School Board, many Vice-Principals also fulfill a teaching capacity. As a Vice-Principal administrator with the GECDSB who also teaches, I am privileged to be able to implement and share some of the wonderful professional development learning opportunities because of this dual position.

Senior Administration in our board strongly support self-guided professional development for all staff. An opportunity arose for Administrator Learning teams to collaborate on school goals. As learning leaders, my colleague Anne and I decided to work together with the focus on deepening our understanding of inquiry, in conjunction with an increase in technological use by our students. Both of our school cultures and teaching assignments closely mirrored one another and enabled us to come to a common vision. Student-led inquiry in the Learning Commons with embedded technology became the focus. As curriculum leaders we would be able to share and guide our staff through our learning opportunity, giving them the necessary resources to enhance or introduce their inquiry journey along with their students. Staff at both our schools were at many different places among the inquiry continuum of learning. My school was specifically focused on inquiry in math. Our common vision was the need to increase student-driven inquiry learning and be able to use inquiry in cross-curricular lessons, enabling the Learning Commons to be embedded throughout the school.

We began our journey by viewing ministry monographs from the Capacity Building Series to thoroughly reacquaint ourselves with our knowledge of inquiry. What is inquiry?

> Inquiry is an approach to learning whereby students find and use a variety of sources of information and ideas to increase their understanding of a problem, topic or issue of importance. It requires more than simply answering questions or getting a right answer. It espouses investigation, exploration, search, quest, research, pursuit and study. It is enhanced by involvement with a community of

> learners, each learning from the others in social interaction. (Kuklthau, Maniotes, & Caspari, 2007)

“Inquiry-based learning describes a range of philosophical, curricular, and pedagogical approaches to teaching. Its core premises include the requirement that learning should be based around students’ questions" (Daniels & Harvey, 2009). Through the inquiry process, students are posing questions/developing their focus; exploring and seeking out resources; interpreting and analyzing their learning; and sharing and reporting using a variety of technological modalities. Educators need to be able to assess throughout this learning process, at times learning along with students, and guiding them back and forth through the steps in this process for reflection.

The integration of the Learning Commons in the inquiry process enables students to read and write for different purposes, evaluate texts, navigate and create texts in a variety of formats, interpret media texts, interpret media images and graphics, think deeply, and build knowledge interactively ("Together for learning," 2010). We were aware of an overwhelming need to consolidate the vast amount of information into an accessible place that staff could access on their time schedule, fulfill their inquiry needs at either a beginning, middle or enhanced entry point, and reflect on how they were going to use this theory-based system in their classrooms with students.

Along our journey we were invited into a neighbouring school where inquiry was already established in using the revised ministry curriculum document for social studies in grade four. Students here had been previously taught how to ask pertinent, strategic, synthesized questions to direct their focus of learning in a collaborative environment. Intentional and guided intervention was applied when necessary to scaffold their learning using real-world examples and encapsulating provocations. The three-part lesson was a useful tool in the minds-on, action (inquiry/research) and consolidation process. The Imagine the Learning document provided the research tools that our students needed to be taught (Toronto District School Board, 2006).

Following this we were able to meet with an experienced library coach within our board who introduced us to a program called Symbaloo (“Symbaloo,” 2014). This product provided a one-stop shop where information could be introduced, researched and consolidated within a structure that provided a template-format for individual pace. In addition, a Symbaloo could be colour-coded so that these categories represented stages of progress. Tiles could also be labeled with either the icon from the internet, or custom labeled by the creator. Images also helped personalize the tiles for ease of use. For example, initial pink tiles could be the minds-on component, yellow might be the research/inquiry area, and the final consolidation/presentation that the students might produce could be purple. The visual colour-coding could provide another method of differentiation for tracking student progress along their topic of inquiry.

In my situation, the Symbaloo was created to be a hands-on tool for teachers to have an access point to information at their fingertips for wherever they were on the inquiry continuum of their professional learning. The green tiles were TED videos, inquiry information from various resources throughout our board, the Together for Learning document (“Together for Learning,” 2010), YouTube videos, a direct link to our school library, information from both the Alberta and Saskatchewan libraries, mathematics inquiry (as per our school improvement focus), and any other resources that could provide staff with a place to help guide their learning. The middle tiles were pink and provided possible ways in which students could demonstrate their inquiry through technology using Educreations, Doceri, Piccollage and Prezi. The final turquoise section of tiles showed examples of inquiry assessment and evaluation in the form of a rubric, pedagogical documentation from the ministry, and other examples from a variety of sources.

Our exploration of inquiry in this technological format also helped to overcome teacher apprehension in their understanding of inquiry and how this could be used with students. Through the use of this Symbaloo for staff professional development, we were also reaching staff who learned using a kinesthetic or visual approach to learning. The additional bonus was that was learning that they could take with them and review when necessary, on their time schedule. Using Symbaloo also provides a controlled area for students so that they are not aimlessly searching on the internet or on non-approved sites.

With transmission-teaching of the past on a decline, staff would be able to develop a similar Symbaloo product that can guide student inquiry learning, either subject-specific or cross-curricular, by utilizing the staff Symbaloo that was created for their professional development of inquiry. Teachers who were previously unable to vary

their method of instruction could now use this new resource to broaden their teaching repertoire. We are continuing to guide our teaching through the eyes of our youngest constructivist learners who are exploring and nurturing their wonder and excitement in the world around them, by guiding their questions, and developing their natural curiosity.

> The *process* of student learning, more so than the teacher's focus on 'covering the curriculum' is paramount. The inquiry-based approach is not a rigid methodology or set of procedures. Rather, it entails an overall mindset...teachers enable students to deepen their understanding of the content in a manner appropriate to their needs and developmental stages. ("Natural Curiosity," 2011)

A Learning Commons is "A flexible and responsive approach to helping schools focus on learning collaboratively. It expands the learning experience, taking students and educators into virtual spaces beyond the walls of a school" ("Ontario's School Libraries," n.d.). The Canadian Association for School Libraries states that school libraries should, "provide guidance for the development of library programs that will support students as they take their place in a learning society". "Active learning environments, student learning centres, gateways to the world, resource-based teaching and learning, [and] collaborative teaching and learning" are all fundamental principles that school libraries should adhere to ("Achieving Information Literacy," 2006).

Inquiry learning based teaching builds life-long skills that stimulate curiosity and help develop skills for the future. Integrating the Learning Commons into this journey of cross-curricular inquiry solidifies the imminent need for the guidance and collaboration of teacher-librarians. With the variety of programs and applications that exist, it is paramount that we choose out technological avenues wisely. The Learning Commons is not time to randomly spend exploring the virtual playground. Instead, we should preserve the value of this collaborative partnership. It is an educational opportunity to provoke, enhance and demonstrate technology to our students that will serve purposeful learning – now and into the future.

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