

## **Spheres of Influence:**

### **Can a teacher librarian make a difference? Part 2**

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Teacher-librarians can exert influence within their library learning commons, in classrooms and in the broader school community. However, can they inspire change, across the school board district? Through a brief description of three Teacher Learning Leadership Program (TLLP) projects, this writer explores the notion that a teacher-librarian can spark change and interest in the inquiry process and project-based learning. This is a continuation of an earlier report submitted to Treasure Mountain 3 entitled [Project Based Learning: A TLLP Project](#).

#### **Overview**

This inquiry began in November 2012 when I had just started as teacher-librarian at Assumption College Catholic High School in Brantford. Looking for ways to make a difference in a school where the library had been underused and was often closed in the morning, at lunch and immediately after school, I applied for a TLLP grant to fund an investigation into inquiry and project-based learning. Our question was: Can inquiry and project-based learning improve student success? During that first year, we hosted a project-based learning boot camp, facilitated by Carol Koechlin and David Loertscher. About 20 teachers from across the school board were invited to join our core team of four. We spent the rest of the year learning through professional development books and talking to other teacher-librarians. We surveyed teachers to find out more about their experiences with inquiry and project-based learning in the classroom. At the end of the year, we hosted our own boot camp for other teachers in both the elementary and secondary panel. At that time we recognized two key truths: we needed to change our question to focus on how we could help teachers understand and embrace inquiry-based learning and we needed another year to work on this.

Meanwhile, we had successfully applied for a second TLLP grant. This time we invited more teachers to join us as we learned more about implementing inquiry in the classroom. The plan involved meeting four times during the year as a large group of 20 and then meeting in focus groups an additional two times to share student work. As a group, we seemed to be gaining momentum but inquiry in the classroom was still an abstract concept for many. During the year, we learned about the Rotman School of Management's "I-Think" Program (University of Toronto,) and decided that the concrete structures Rotman uses to promote thinking in the classroom could help us with our quest to be more proficient implementing inquiry in the classroom.

Once again, we successfully applied for a TLLP grant to partner with Rotman to learn more about the school's integrative thinking techniques. This time, seven teachers – three secondary and four elementary – comprise the core team, which met with the Rotman team three times to learn more about the techniques. Then we co-facilitated a workshop for 20 other teachers from across our board in both panels.

## **Outcomes**

In the first year of our project we learned through our survey that teachers thinking about incorporating inquiry in the classroom identified six key areas of concern: time required; lack of access to technology; not knowing enough about how to teach using this method; the fact that it is skill and not content based; classroom management; and assessment. Some also raised the concern that parents may not understand what is happening in their children's classroom. (See attached survey summary). We also encountered many problems associated with technology at our school board. The Brant Haldimand Norfolk Catholic District School Board actively blocks Google – with the exception of the search engine. Consequently, when Koechlin and Loertscher were showing us how to create Knowledge Building Centres using Google docs, we were unable to create our own.

This first year whetted our appetite to learn more. Through the boot camp held in May, we were able to expand to a team of 20 elementary and secondary teachers interested in actively learning and collaborating on lessons involving inquiry in the classroom. We facilitated the large group sessions, using initially as a resource *IQ: A Practical Guide to Inquiry-Based Learning* (Watt and Colyer, 2014). Later we focused on ways to help students develop good questions, drawing on the question formulation technique developed by Dan Rothstein and Luz Santana. Coming full circle to the work of Koechlin and Loertscher, we practised using guided questions as a hook to set up inquiry units. Finally, we explored the notion of triangulating data to help assess the work of students engaged in inquiry. Then we recruited some system-wide teachers to help facilitate the small groups and keep everyone on track. The hidden benefit was that the system leaders learned along with us and were able to share their learning with even more teachers across the school board.

By the end of the year many teachers expressed a growing comfort with inquiry-based learning in the classroom. They noted that critical thinking is enhanced and that students push each other and learn from one another. Their advice to other teachers included focusing on the process and not the end result. A strong familiarity with the curriculum was identified as being important and teachers need to give themselves permission to slow the process. For the future, teachers wanted more opportunity to co-plan, more cross-panel work and more time to share. In short, they all wanted to the

work together to continue because they still wanted more tools in their arsenal to help implement inquiry in the classroom.

During the second TLLP project, I discovered two key resources, which are proving invaluable in our continued exploration of inquiry in the classroom. The first was Heidi Siwak, an intermediate teacher with the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, who was giving a presentation at a conference on her work in the classroom with the second, Rotman's I-Think Program. Rotman's integrative thinking strategies, seemed just what our group needed to help make the abstract concepts of teaching inquiry feel a little more concrete.

Now we are in the midst of our third project and have worked with instructors from the I-Think program and Siwak to learn as much as possible about integrative thinking, the ladder of inference and causal modeling. Our team of six teachers and one teacher-librarian was able to experiment in the classroom with what we learned. One teacher used causal modeling and integrative thinking to help her grade three/ four class design the best seating plan for the classroom. A grade nine geography teacher had students create a causal model to figure out how they earned their mid-term marks. She said it was the most engaged she had seen the class in a long time. We then co-facilitated with the people from Rotman and shared our experiences with a group of about 20 elementary and secondary teachers.

As an exit strategy from this one-day workshop we all shared our learning. One teacher's response stood out from the rest. He had been skeptical of inquiry in the classroom and often teased a colleague at the school who worked to change her teaching practice. He said he felt that the workshop was the most useful professional development he had experienced in a long time. He was grateful for the opportunity to learn, wanted to know more and regretted that he hadn't become involved earlier. Another teacher, who teaches grade eight at a school that feeds into Assumption College, contacted me the next day because he wanted to put together a proposal for TLLP funding so that he could continue to learn more about inquiry. Together we created a cross-panel proposal that explores the use of project-based learning to improve writing. I am included in the project as the teacher-librarian making the connection between the feeder schools and the high school.

### **Connections to Leading Learning**

Making connections has been my role throughout this TLLP project process. As the teacher-librarian, I was able to initiate the initial investigation into inquiry and project-based learning and inquiry. With each proposal, I was able to build a cross-panel team interested in co-learning, co-planning and sharing experiences in the classroom. As the main resource for the projects, I was able to find and entice experts to come to my

school library learning commons, which became the hub of all the learning involved in the TLLP projects.

The significance of my role as teacher-librarian was crystallized when we were learning about causal modeling from the Rotman facilitators. As a way to practice, the facilitator asked our seven-member team to use the strategy to determine how all of us came to be at Assumption College on that particular day. All the models traced back to me as the catalyst for all learning, which led us to find out more about Rotman's I-Think strategies.

*Leading Learning, the Standards of Practice for School Library Learning Commons in Canada* (Canadian Library Association, 2014). , highlights the importance of building a learning community, co-teaching for deeper learning and innovation for learning in its five standards, themes and growth indicators for school library learning commons. By taking advantage of funding opportunities created through the TLLPs, we were able to meet many of the benchmarks set out in the "Leading Learning Framework". (Canadian Library Association, 2014, p.10)

## **Moving Forward**

We still have several months left in our current TLLP project and plan to share our learning at several workshops for teachers across the school board. As a group, we are beginning to direct the conversation toward inquiry-based learning as an important way to engage 21<sup>st</sup> century learners and to debunk notions that it is an "airy-fairy" way to frame learning in the classroom.

I am waiting to hear if our latest proposal will be endorsed by our school board and subsequently submitted to the Ministry of Education's TLLP team for approval. Even if it isn't accepted, I will be continuing my work to promote inquiry-based learning beyond the walls of the library learning commons.

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