

# ***Leading Together for Inquiry Learning***

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Within the era of our provincial vision document *Together for Learning*, Ontario school libraries have been evolving into Library Learning Commons. In our large jurisdiction, the TDSB Library Learning Resources department has shared that vision with senior staff, school administrators, teacher-librarians and classroom teachers. The intersection of on-site collection renewal and Ministry curriculum revisions focused on inquiry has shone a green light on the Learning Commons shift. Dialogue about the learning commons is growing; very tangible changes are afoot.

The national standards of practice *Leading Learning*, offers guidance to transform school libraries to Learning Commons. Each of the standards and growth indicators helps to establish a commitment to change in learning environment that is not only the Learning Commons physical space, but also the virtual space and the school community as a whole. The design of the learning environment creates tangible places to generate excitement; cultivating effective instructional design is the critical focus to sustain the momentum.

School communities look to the print and virtual library collections for access to engaging literature and quality information resources for student learning. The simmering question about the place of the print book in our ultra-digital society has permeated the air in school libraries. Principals and teacher-librarians alike are looking to streamline their collection, to assess their titles with a gap analysis and curriculum matching, and to engage student reading with marketing techniques utilized by large book store chains. The request for support to 'weed' is often a call to action that generates a larger shift in the learning environment. It is the eternal value of the printed word and the visceral experience of turning the pages of a 'good read' that enshrines the coveted library collection. It is the power of reflective conversation with teacher-librarians, principals and Instructional Leaders that turns a collection renewal into library revitalization. It has been my experience that these collection renewals are 'tip of the iceberg' management projects that create opportunities for leading learning. This flow

of renewal often leads to the *Together for Learning* vision; the possibilities for transformation into a Library Learning Commons. As more teacher-librarians extend their professional learning through Additional Qualification courses that share the vision document and the learning commons concepts the leadership to transform learning environments grows!

It is my observation that as more school administrators explore digital resources the leadership to transform learning grows. With an ever-increasing focus on school-based decisions for hardware purchases and coordinated system tools such as Google Apps for Education (GAFE) and the Virtual Library, principals are turning to teacher expertise for selection and training of the best use of digital tools. Shared leadership for digital learning, professional and student, is happening! As we make the shift from dependence on desktop labs and singular 'lab teachers' all educators in the school building are called upon to collaborate in shared decision-making, maintenance and use of digital devices. As students naturally engage with digital devices with an ever-evolving independence, all educators are called upon to democratize the leadership in digital learning. Often the 'expert in the room' is a single student, or student group, who has explored and discovered how to use the digital tool! This powerful synergy of professional collaboration and student voice advances the use not only of hardware but also software and online resources. Learning Management Systems, apps, collaborative social networks, curated links, streamed video and subscription databases offer both the natural resources for learning and the landscape within which to navigate the learning! The transformation of the virtual learning environments advances the Learning Commons approach to a school-wide focus, a 24/7 offering beyond the school walls. This becomes the impetus to shifts in instructional design!

The stakeholder that has rooted the transformation of instructional design is the Ontario Ministry of Education. Revisions in the curriculum now focus on inquiry. There has been a shift in priority from primarily knowledge-based overall expectations to learning skills-based overall expectations. The revisions are fertile ground for the vision of *Together for Learning* and the standards of practice of *Leading Learning*, seeds for the principles of the learning commons. The Ministry's support publications of the *Capacity Building Series* prioritize the involvement and collaboration of many stakeholders to cultivate effective instructional design for inquiry-based learning. It is a delight to see that curriculum revisions reflect what we have always held central to instruction in the school library: inquiry and research! It is uniquely significant, unprecedented, that our regional association TALCO (The Association for Library Consultants and Coordinators of Ontario) and OSLA (Ontario School Library Association) have been commissioned to update resource supports for the *Capacity Building Series* monograph '*Getting Started with Student Inquiry*' with an addition of the role of the teacher-librarian in student inquiry. This supplement coordinates with the

already stated role of the classroom teacher and the student in inquiry. It provides a strong foundation to emphasize the integration of teaching and learning that grows out of progressive instructional design. The strength of this stand involves collaborative learning, teachers as colleagues, student voice and choice as central, peer reciprocity and involved administrators. The more recent *Capacity Building Series* monograph *Principals as Co-learners* augments the message that shared leadership for effective instructional design supports student learning. The Learning Commons team flourishes with such a foundation of vertical integration: from student needs to teacher supports, to Ministry design!

The big question is ‘How do we teach inquiry?’.

The corollary is “How do we fit in inquiry?”, meaning “How do we make the time for the collaboration, the development of skills that students will need, the professional learning that teachers need?” and “How does this fit with evaluation and reporting?”.

Our students move forward from a progressive Full-day Kindergarten curriculum that fosters a learning environment of inquiry and capitalizes on ‘provocations’. Compelling objects, shared experiences and prompted techniques light into the children’s natural curiosity. It is the professional imperative of our system to extend this inquiry teaching and learning throughout the grades. The surfacing of disciplinary thinking in the more recent revisions of curriculum offers a lens for Big Idea questions and Enduring Understandings that are the provocations for real-world connections and inquiry throughout the grades. Key terminology, integrated, intentional digital learning and choice give the student voice a grounded forum that provokes further learning and active engagement. Experiential learning and collaborative tasks tap into the social nature and affective learning of the students. The science and art of designing learning with provocations is a significant ‘how’ in the teaching of inquiry.

The design of learning arcs based on questions, both essential questions and scaffolding smaller questions, is at the core of the shift in leading learning. To emphasize questions is to lead inquiry through research that is not only information gathering but also knowledge construction. Teaching must be focused on learning skills that foster questioning. “As kids ask mini-research questions and search for answers, we can teach them important literacy, collaboration, and inquiry strategies.”(Daniels & Harvey, p. 143). As teachers build their own disposition toward teaching for inquiry they also observe the developmental progress of students growing into the inquiry stance across the year; teacher-librarians observe the progress of students practicing inquiry learning skills across the grades. The learning is a continuum for teachers and students alike! The more questions each of us has about the process and the disciplinary topics being addressed the more we begin to take notice of our own learning along the way. For educators and students alike “Questions evoke and expose thinking”(OME,

*Adolescent Literacy Guide*, p. 31). The mandate of the Ministry curriculum revisions to grow toward inquiry-based learning is the permission we need to allow ourselves to let go of the knowledge-based approach of long-established teaching practices. It becomes our imperative to develop the intention to shift our own individual practices. It is with this intention that we all assume instructional leadership!

It is my observation that the single critical natural spring for the shift in instructional implementation is the professional disposition for change, a growth mindset (Dweck 2007). It is that which cultivates effective instructional design, transforms the school learning environment to the learning commons paradigm and leads learning. The school culture that fosters professional trust, collaboration and shared learning is the foundation for wide spread professional growth mindset in a staff. Learning-focused conversations generate such a school culture. In shared leadership mode school administrators and teachers alike “flex between consulting, collaborating and coaching stances to develop [each other’s] capacities to reflect upon practice”(Lipton, *Mentoring Matters*, p. 21). From a system perspective this same trust for learning-focused conversations must exist for administrators, with their local peers and Superintendents of Education. From this branch of growth toward true adoption of inquiry-based learning we can see that there is a call for a common understanding about inquiry, the mandate of the revised curriculum and the intersection with Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting practices.

Teachers can proceed with their self-directed professional learning and collaborative teacher inquiry for these changes in instructional design by exploring a variety of learning strategies to elevate questioning, digital and learning skills that support inquiry. Such exploration is happening in many classrooms and Library Learning Commons! The growth indicators of *Leading Learning* highlight the primary role of the library learning commons leadership team and instructional partnership to establish effective instructional design and to lead into the future. It is my observation that administrative support in shared leadership is the soft landing that can unite not only the ‘change agents’ on staff but also the slow adopters. Intentional learning-focused conversations are needed to address the ‘messiness’ of inquiry-based learning, the non-linear, swirling learning curve. Even more critical is addressing the time crunch toward reporting periods, the need to revise reporting expectations. It is a call to action to establish a common understanding that “Teachers use a variety of assessment strategies to elicit information about student learning. These strategies should be triangulated to include observation, student-teacher conversations, and student products.”(OME, *Growing Success*, p. 34). Principals can lead the intentional shift by articulating how inquiry fits with Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting practices, the end in mind for communicating with parents. Administrators are well positioned to

emphasize the permission to assess process and not only product; they are in the position to liaise with parents to communicate the same common understanding. This democratizes the change agency and engenders the professional growth mindset.

With a school culture of professional trust there is opportunity for wider-spread adoption of inquiry-based teaching and learning. The collaborative professional inquiry of our Library Learning Resources and Global Education team has brought us through a journey to support inquiry-based teaching and learning. With revisions to current learning materials, design and facilitation of related professional learning and the design and composition of a professional guide we have refined our own common understandings about inquiry. We are currently field-testing the document *Implementing Student Inquiry: A Quick Reference Guide* in our system. Not only the 'why', but most importantly the 'how' of inquiry is laid out with cycles of teaching and learning and reference to evidence-based practices to inform effective instructional design, assessment and evaluation and implementation.

As is so observable in the growing shift toward teaching for inquiry the challenge is not just the learning of new or refined practices, it is often the unlearning of some established practices that can be so difficult. Such as it is with life's most genuine lessons so too is it in our professional learning! The parallel in the teaching and learning of inquiry is that the shift involves a focus not so much on 'covering the curriculum as uncovering the curriculum'. With a focus on procedural knowledge, questioning and learning skills, intentional digital integration, collaboration and experiential learning, disciplinary thinking rather than content, building new knowledge is central to the learning experience. The generalist Elementary teacher benefits from collegial collaboration to extend their understandings of the curriculum disciplines and 'Big Ideas'. The subject-specific teachers at the Secondary level benefit from collegial collaboration to extend their understanding of cross-disciplinary learning skill sets. The teacher-librarian in either setting collaborates with a shared leadership stance to cultivate effective instructional design that capitalizes on the learning through the Inquiry Cycle. It is my observation that learning partners who explore inquiry together experience a continuum of consulting, collaborating and coaching each other in shared leadership. In exercising the growth mindset, alone or with a learning partner " ... in essence, your own most important resource is your own willingness to experiment, your courage to take risks and your commitment to continual learning for yourself and your students"(Lipton, *Pathways to Understanding*, p. 99). The growth mindset disposition is our seed for shared instructional leadership, no matter our teaching assignment or leadership title.

The time is now for educators to explore and embrace inquiry; our teacher-librarian community welcomes everyone to our Library Learning Commons for inquiry-

based learning! As professional learning evolves with collaborative inquiry “a co-learning role enables principals to ‘drive transparent, collaborative reflection’”(OME, *Principals as Co-learners*, p. 2). The provocation for teachers and administrators alike is to be open to the uncertainty, curiosity and vulnerability that is inherent in inquiry. Not knowing how exactly the process will evolve is natural; designing a structure for exploration and learning is crucial. The [Inquiry Model](#) and the curriculum cycles of inquiry give shape to the instructional design. Structure is meaning. The [Model to Guide Collaborative Inquiry](#) shapes the dynamic iterative process of professional dialogue and action at the school level.



The Creative Process: *The Arts*, Gr. 1–8, p. 20, Gr. 9–10, p. 17; Gr. 11–12, p. 15 (OME, 2009)



The Inquiry Process: *Social Studies, History & Geography*, Gr. 7–8, p. 23, *Canadian and World Studies*, Gr. 9–10, p. 27 (OME, 2013)



Healthy Active Living: *Health & Physical Education*, Gr. 1–8, p. 8; Gr. 9–12, p. 8 (OME, 2015)



A [generic] Model for Inquiry (OSLA, 2010, *Together for Learning*, p. 23)

The one most salient point that arises from conversations with teachers implementing inquiry is that it is time-consuming. Reflective conversations to extend the professional learning of teacher colleagues reveal that guided inquiry is the necessary scaffold for early explorations into student inquiry. Blended or Open inquiry is better suited when teachers and students have had solid experiences with Guided inquiry. This point also notes that small inquiries, short time lines of 2-3 weeks, are an important scaffold to establish learning skills for questioning and to assess students’ habits or dispositions for inquiry. “These habits include curiosity, self-confidence in one’s ability to reason, flexibility in thinking, open-mindedness, perseverance, taking reasonable risks, and reflection.”(Watt & Colyer, p. 22). These habits of mind are explicitly ignited in

[MakerSpaces](#) that are flourishing in our Library Learning Commons, many of which are organized for free exploration in and around instructional time with teacher-librarians. The inquiry habit of mind is the foundation for other structures of exploration as well, for example the [Data-Driven Design](#) iterative process for entrepreneurial collaboration. These dispositions align with the Learning Skills evaluations for reporting. Frameworks of 'How to Model and Assess Inquiry Dispositions' are found in the text *IQ: A Practical Guide to Inquiry-based Learning* (Watt & Colyer, 2014, p, 137). Collegial conversations with inquiry implementers also highlight the assertion that inquiry-based learning does not negate direct teaching. In fact mini-lessons on questioning models and strategies and displays of anchor charts are exemplary practices to build learning skills for student inquiry. Noted supports to teach questioning skills and 'frontloading', to connect to background knowledge, are addressed in the works of Harvey & Daniels, Lipton & Wellman, Wiggins & McTighe and Wilhelm. These tweaks for student inquiry set a tone for viable success and inquiry habits of mind.

Forums for sharing professional learning advance the shared leadership in this teaching shift, growing the landscape of the Library Learning Commons. Teacher-librarians are active learners and early adopters of inquiry-based learning. Ongoing collaboration and coaching conversations have led to the design and implementation of a library learning commons showcase in TDSB. These 'trade show'-style events are an opportunity for teacher-librarian and classroom teacher partners to demonstrate not only their professional learning about inquiry, but also the student learning with inquiry! Visiting educators engage in one-to-one and small group discussions about student and teacher learning. In conversation with both the demonstrating teachers and visiting educators we have learned that all participants found that the greatest benefit gained from the experience is not just new ideas but intimate professional dialogue that fostered self-directed, personalized learning. Just as they'd seen their own students grow from experiential learning and dialogue so too did the host teachers learn from the experience of explaining and demonstrating the inquiry process! The digital archive of teacher and student samples sustains continual sharing and shared instructional leadership for the teachers in our system. These samples serve as learning objects for a Library Learning Commons leadership team.

As our department launches into the field-test of the professional resource *Implementing Student Inquiry: A Quick Reference Guide* we continue our own collaborative inquiry 'How can we support student inquiry and establish the library learning commons in TDSB?'. The corollary is 'How do we augment our own learning for and alongside teacher learning?'. One thing quite clear is that all educators can and ought to be leading together for inquiry learning; teacher-librarians, classroom teachers and administrators share instructional leadership in this journey.

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