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Feature

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Teaching as inquiry – a refresher



To inquire effectively, we have to be open-minded, persistent, self-critical, reflective, and empathetic to the positions of others; we have to allow ourselves to be uncertain, to stand back and examine our own practice, and then use what we find as a basis for change. When it becomes obvious, through observation, assessment data, or a hunch, that what we are already doing does not equal progress for our learners, we need to ask ourselves three reflective questions:

- Why? Why, if we are using sound pedagogical practice, are some of our students still floundering?
- What? What impact is what we're doing (or not doing) having on the students in our classrooms?
- How? How can we change what we do in ways that truly support learning outcomes?

Teaching as inquiry as a process is all about being willing to take risks, to be wrong, to fail in your endeavours and then change direction and start again. It is about reflecting on what you do and then changing your practice – sometimes in a small way, sometimes much bigger. Teacher inquiry is not necessarily a response to the hard data that may be showing low achievement results. Sometimes, it is simply to address issues of participation, or engagement. You may change your practice for a small group of learners, target or priority learners for instance, or you may focus on the whole class.

1. HOW DO I IDENTIFY MY GOALS FOR TEACHING AS INQUIRY?

Although pedagogical change will often be sparked by research findings or the experience of an expert, sometimes your inquiry might address a hunch that you have – a feeling about what is wrong and your intuition about what might make it right. Conversely, sometimes an inquiry is sparked by something that is working really well and you want to find out why, and how this can be transferred to other areas. The most important part of choosing an inquiry goal is that it is in direct response to the needs of the students in your class.

2. WHAT KIND OF FRAMEWORK SHOULD I USE?

The key to effective inquiry is that it happens in a systematic and continuous manner, and that it leads to changed and improved thinking and teaching. It is a daily occurrence, seeing where the students are right now and how you can change

things for them straight away, so that you don't miss out on the opportunity to immediately make the classroom a more successful place. Your school may have its own framework and action plan, or you could use one of the two below:

The teaching as inquiry cycle

The New Zealand Curriculum has developed a framework for teaching as inquiry. It is cyclical by nature and involves three main components:

- In the focusing inquiry, teachers identify the outcomes they want their students to achieve.
- In the teaching inquiry, teachers select teaching strategies that will support their students to achieve these outcomes.
- The learning inquiry takes place both during and after teaching as teachers monitor their students' progress towards the identified outcomes and reflect on what this tells them. Teachers use this new information to decide what to do next to ensure continued improvement in student achievement and in their own practice.

INNOVATION AND THE SPIRAL OF INQUIRY

This model (go to: <http://goo.gl/LdsyF0>) is a spiral of inquiry, illustrating the constant revisiting and questioning that characterises an effective inquiry. It allows for interventions not to work and the need to keep trying until you find the things that stick. The central questions of the spiral of inquiry are “What’s going on for our learners?” and “How do we know?”

By observing students (scanning) and then deciding on a focus area to change (focusing), teachers can check their intuition about what has led to the current situation (developing a hunch) and look to relevant research (learning) to help guide their actions of change (taking action). An important check (checking) is carried out during and after a course of action: “Have we made enough of a difference?”

3. IS IT BETTER TO INQUIRE AS A WHOLE SCHOOL OR INDIVIDUALLY?

Some of the thinking around inquiry is changing as schools begin to plan and teach in a much more collaborative way. This often means that syndicate or schoolwide inquiries are more likely to take place, with collaborative thinking, observation, and reflection. Innovation and the spiral of inquiry proposes a fresh rethink on the structure of teaching as inquiry. While it still stresses the importance of using teacher inquiry in the classroom, the framework is modified in the hope that the result will be the design of new, more effective and powerful learning systems to cater for 21st century learners. This model proposes that inquiry be implemented across a whole school or even a cluster of schools, where change is likely to be more powerful, rather than in single classrooms.

With inquiry strongly linked to the practising teacher criteria and appraisal systems in many schools, inquiry has become part of professional development for most teachers. Whether you are carrying out an individual inquiry, or a whole-school approach, the critical factor is that you are always inquiring into your own practice, with your own class.

4. DO I NEED TO COLLECT SPECIFIC DATA FOR MY INQUIRY?

Student achievement data, in the form of standardised tests and OTJs, can be a valuable and fast way of deciding who needs more or different instruction in order to gain success. This is not the only measure that can be used. Anecdotal evidence gathered from observations, evidence from formative assessment tasks, and student or parent voice are all valid ways of identifying areas where students may need modified instruction.

Gathering evidence about student achievement serves several roles in a teaching inquiry.

It helps to identify who the students are, what their learning needs are, and which modifications to teaching and learning approaches might work best. It is also a means to monitor and measure the actual impact on different students, and adjust and adapt practice accordingly.

5. WHAT ROLE DOES LEADERSHIP PLAY?

“Innovation floats on a sea of inquiry and that curiosity is a driver for change. Creating the conditions in schools and

learning settings where curiosity is encouraged, developed, and sustained is essential to opening up thinking, changing practice, and creating dramatically more innovative approaches to learning and teaching.”

Timperley H, Kaser L and Halbert J. A framework for transforming learning in schools: Innovation and the spiral of inquiry. Centre for Strategic Education, Seminar Series Paper No. 234, 2014: p.4.

A key driver of the inquiry process is school leadership. Schools can follow a standard model of inquiry or adapt it to suit their needs. It is school leaders who are able to foster a culture of inquiry across the school and provide the space, time, and mentorship for teachers to inquire and reflect on their practice and be able to make changes. In some schools, the teacher inquiry process is built into the teacher appraisal systems, formalising the process and acknowledging its importance for teacher practice and student achievement. While inquiry needs to be tailored to specific students and the pedagogy of a specific teacher, it will be more effective if led across a school context, where real change can be enacted.

This story was originally published on nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz

FURTHER READING AND LINKS KEY RESOURCE

NZC Online has recently launched a new teaching as inquiry package, outlining practical steps that you can take when inquiring into your teaching practice. The package offers tools for inquiry, useful resources and research, and school stories that show inquiry journeys undertaken by New Zealand teachers from a variety of schools.

Teaching as inquiry at Epsom Girls' Grammar

www.goo.gl/o1WwDC

In this video, Claire Amos from Epsom Girls' Grammar explains the development of teaching as inquiry at her school. The video outlines the process and framework for developing a teaching as inquiry model, and how reflection on the outcomes of the first cycle of inquiry can help to develop future teaching as inquiry plans.

Appraisal and teaching as inquiry

www.goo.gl/h5uHcb

Documents and links that provide some examples of ways that schools can look at the conjunction between appraisal and teaching as inquiry.

Teaching as inquiry

www.goo.gl/g8Mgak

In this video, teachers share reflections on the action research within their classrooms for themselves and their students. This story highlights the ways teacher inquiry increases knowledge of the learners and enhances the depth of learning conversations across the school.

Enhancing learning with assessment

www.goo.gl/dfDO19

In this video, James Rasmussen discusses assessment for learning at Newlands College. James challenges educators to look at assessment in schools, and if this is really getting to the heart of the teaching as inquiry cycle.

Developing schoolwide inquiry

www.goo.gl/kq7ija

Based on her experience at Newmarket Primary School, Wendy Kofoed shares some key messages about building inquiry approaches into school practices.

Leading inquiry at a teacher level: it's all about mentorshipwww.goo.gl/EqLWom

This article contains practice-based strategies for how inquiry can be made to function in schools at both a strategic and operational level. Mentorship of those facilitating the inquiry process is seen as key to it being initiated and sustained.

REFLECTING ON TEACHING AS INQUIRY AT YOUR SCHOOL**GUIDING QUESTIONS****For leaders**

- How do you foster, embed, and sustain a culture of inquiry among the teaching staff at your school?
- What kinds of evidence do you gather to develop a target group of students across the school?
- What are some of the challenges you face when setting up teacher inquiries and how can these be overcome?
- Do you include a teaching inquiry as part of your teacher appraisal processes?

For teachers

- What kinds of support do you need before starting a teacher inquiry?
- What do you immediately identify as some of the greatest areas of need for your students?
- What is one thing you can do differently in the classroom today that could address that need?

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