

Inquiring Minds

Saskatchewan School Library Association

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Participants at the 2012 Saskatchewan School Library Association conference were treated to a lively and interactive presentation from guest speaker Dr. Jeffrey Wilhelm. Dr. Wilhelm is a Professor of English Education at Boise State University and has authored or co-authored over twenty books about literacy. His research focuses on the value of inquiry for improving literacy and achieving deep understanding.

His conference presentation, entitled “Inquiring Minds Learn to Read and Write!”, explored the inquiry model for instruction and emphasized the reasons why inquiry is the ideal method for assisting students in gaining a deep understanding of content and procedures that are transferable to the real world. Inquiry learning meets two conditions that Wilhelm believes are crucial for student learning: conditions of flow and the contract to care.

Dr. Wilhelm discussed that students need the conditions of flow to exist in order to be engaged in classroom learning. These conditions include a clear purpose and goal with immediate feedback, an appropriate challenge for skill level, a sense of control and developing competence, a focus on the immediate experience, and a social aspect to learning. When teachers provide this environment, students are more likely to be involved and motivated.

Dr. Wilhelm also added that a contract to care needs to exist between student and teacher. Through his research, Wilhelm found that students benefit from a positive relationship with their teachers. This contract to care includes getting to know students personally, recognizing them as individuals, caring about them both as a person and as a learner, attending to their interests in some way, helping them to learn, not giving up on them, and being passionate, committed, hardworking, and knowledgeable. Students, particularly those considered to be struggling or reluctant learners, improve their results when they are learning in this type of environment.

Because inquiry meets both these conditions, Wilhelm believes it is an ideal method for teaching and learning. His research showed that students prefer learning that is immediately relevant, that allows them to express their identity, that expresses or develops their interests, and that is edgy or debatable. Inquiry allows opportunities for this type of learning while helping students to gain a deeper understanding through sustained engagement. Inquiry focuses on the procedures, or the how, and allows for differentiation and collaboration.

The conference participants spent a majority of the afternoon working through the inquiry process. Dr. Wilhelm shared examples of essential questions, frontloading, and culminating projects. The participants had time to discuss ideas for potential inquiry units.

To view Dr. Wilhelm's presentation, please visit:
http://www.ssla.ca/conference/conference_2012/InquiryEngaging.ppt

Dr. Wilhelm has also published a number of books on literacy and inquiry, many which are published by Scholastic. These books include:

- *Engaging Readers & Writers with Inquiry: Promoting Deep Understandings in Language Arts and the Content Areas with Guiding Questions*
<http://education.scholastic.ca/product/9780439574136>
- *Inquiring Minds Learn to Read and Write: 50 Problem-based Literacy & Learning Strategies*
<http://education.scholastic.ca/product/9781554486069>