

Investigating Inquiry: A Workshop for Teacher-Librarians

Saskatchewan School Library Association

THE MEDIUM – FALL 2009

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On October 30, 2009, teacher-librarians from Regina Public Schools, Regina Catholic Schools, Saskatoon Public Schools, and Prairie Valley School Division converged at the Regina Public School Board Office to participate in a full-day workshop called *Investigating Inquiry ... A Workshop for Teacher-Librarians*. Dr. Sharon Friesen, founding partner and president of the Galileo Educational Network (www.galileo.org), delivered the morning's keynote address which focused on providing a framework for inquiry in an educational context.

In her address, Friesen noted that the concept of inquiry is not new. Rather, it is the resurgence of an old idea first espoused by the ancient Greek philosopher, Socrates, who believed that “knowledge was vital and could only survive in a dynamic environment of human inquiry” (Friesen, n.d., p. 4). In today's world, inquiry is defined as “an investigation into an idea, question, problem or issue. It involves gathering information, building knowledge, and developing deep understanding” (Friesen, n.d., p. 5). This opposes traditional educational practices but better meets the needs of 21st century learners who are expected to locate, assimilate, evaluate and apply information to construct new meaning.

Myths about inquiry in educational settings abound but Friesen successfully debunked these misconceptions. She noted, for example, that inquiry is not uncontrolled exploration but is carefully planned by a teacher who is familiar with the subject matter, is fully engaged, and coaches students through the process. Intentional teaching still occurs, and while collaborative group work is involved in some inquiry projects, it is not always necessary. Contrary to popular belief, robust inquiry does not lower standards and does not de-emphasize the basics.

According to Friesen, three approaches can be used to facilitate inquiry in the classroom. **Project-based inquiry** is organized around a central question, real problem or relevant issue. Students are responsible for making choices, designing and managing their work, and probing complex, authentic tasks. **Problem-based inquiry** is closely aligned with project-based inquiry, but in this approach, investigations are focused on ill-structured, real-world problems for which solutions are sought. **Design-based inquiry** is associated with disciplines such as science, technology, or the performing arts and involves defining, creating, assessing, and redesigning in order to create a new product. All approaches, however, have strong curricular connections tied to specific outcomes and require ongoing formative assessment. They foster in-depth understanding of limited topics that leads to the creation of new knowledge applicable to the world beyond the classroom.

How can the school library program contribute to inquiry learning? Friesen emphasized that teacher-librarians have an important role to play because they can create coherence among classrooms and can offer planning support and feedback to teachers. Teacher-librarians can scaffold teacher learning and can help their colleagues move beyond

their comfort zone to change up existing units. Since teacher-librarians are experts where information literacy is concerned, they can help students acquire abilities that will enable them to recognize when information is needed and how to use it effectively in an inquiry context.



FIGURE 1: DR. SHARON FRIESEN, FOUNDING PARTNER AND PRESIDENT OF THE GALILEO EDUCATIONAL NETWORK, DELIVERED THE MORNING'S KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Friesen's morning address was nicely balanced by two afternoon sessions offering practical ideas for moving inquiry from theory to practice. Hillary Ibbott-Neiszner, principal of Cupar School (Prairie Valley School Division), presented *Inquiry Circles in the Classroom: Comprehension and Collaboration for K-12 Students* and promoted the book *Comprehension & Collaboration: Inquiry Circles in Action* (Harvey & Daniels, 2009). Ibbott-Neiszner's enthusiasm for the resource was tangible, and she shared a sampling of activities contained within its pages. Clearly, the book provides valuable support to teachers who are new to inquiry or those looking for fresh ideas in this area.

Ibbott-Neiszner noted that the inquiry approach differs greatly from traditional approaches characterized by content coverage and teacher-directed learning. Inquiry provides students with voice and choice, allows them to participate in authentic investigations, and engages them in collaborative work. For teachers, inquiry can be freeing as it allows them to be models and coaches rather than disseminators of information who are responsible for extrinsically motivating students.

In his presentation **Inquiry Learning – from Theory to Practice: One Teacher's Reflection**, Luke Friesen, vice-principal of Albert School (Regina Public Schools), shared his journey toward inquiry. Early in his career, Friesen was fortunate to teach at an International Baccalaureate World School located in Muscat, Oman. It was here that he was introduced to a way of planning, teaching and assessing that was driven by inquiry.

When Friesen eventually returned to his home in Saskatchewan, he found it difficult to teach in an environment where inquiry was not the norm. Faced with stacks of curriculum documents, he wondered how he could marry his commitment to inquiry learning with the expectations of the province's Department of Education. For Friesen, the answer lay in compacting curricula and looking for authentic connections.

Friesen provided participants with a step-by-step template to help them develop units of inquiry with strong curricular connections. The template helps educators pinpoint the outcomes, indicators, and central ideas of the mandated curriculum, identify experiences that will engage student learning, and determine how student learning will be assessed. The final step involves teacher and student reflection on the unit as a whole. What worked? What needs revision? What changes must be made if the unit is taught again? It should be noted, however, that the template is a fluid planning tool as any of the steps can be revisited at any time.

Inquiry is a cyclical process involving questioning, investigation, and reflection. It has the potential to foster deep and rich understanding of topics of interest to students. Individuals who attended *Investigating Inquiry ... A Workshop for Teacher-Librarians* gained valuable insights that will help them develop inquiry-based units that meet the needs of 21st century learners.

REFERENCES

Friesen, Sharon (n.d.). *Exploring inquiry*. Retrieved October 30, 2009, from http://people.ucalgary.ca/~sfriesen/inquiry/exploring_inquiry.pdf

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