

What Is Inquiry?

By Sharon Friesen, Judy Martin & Michelle Bastock

I cannot think of a more fitting place to begin this short meditation on the question “what is inquiry” than with the words spoken by Wislawa Szymborska, winner of the 1996 Nobel Prize for Poetry. In her Nobel Prize address, “there is, there has been, there will always be a certain group of people whom inspiration visits. It’s made of up all those who’ve consciously chosen their calling and do their job with love and imagination. It may include doctors, teachers, gardeners -- I could list a hundred more professions. Their work becomes one continuous adventure as long as they manage to keep discovering new challenges in it. Difficulties and setbacks never quell their curiosity. A swarm of new questions emerges from every problem they solve. Whatever inspiration is, it’s born from the continuous ‘I don’t know.’ . . . “

Inquiry is born out of the continuous stance of ‘I don’t know.’ It is a restless realm of posing questions, of taking risks, and looking at what is not yet entertained. This restless realm is a dynamic process of being open to wonder and puzzlement and coming to know and understand the world and oneself within the world. It is based on the belief that understanding is constructed in the process of people working and conversing together as they pose and solve problems, make discoveries and rigorously test the discoveries. Inquiry is the way that knowledge is created.

Inquiry is not a new idea. It is as old as Socrates, who believed that knowledge was vital and could only survive in a dynamic environment of human inquiry. The Renaissance was born out of a renewed commitment to inquiry. While there are and have always been those who live their lives in the continuous ‘I don’t know’ which Szymborska speaks of, it seems that there are key times when inquiry steps forward and insists that more than a few pay attention to its demands. What is it that we, at this time, are being asked to question, to consider anew, to risk, to create? What is it in education that has not yet been entertained?

I have always resisted trying to wrap inquiry up in one tidy definition, not because it is impossible, but it is a little like trying to define the color ‘red’. It is easier to show inquiry than to define inquiry. It seems to defy short definitions. I have heard some say; well it is just about asking questions. And yes, that is true. But it is not just about asking and answering questions. Inquiry resists being captured in a few tidy terms, for tidy terms have a short shelf life that die early because there is always the danger of become over simplified. That said; let me try, for those who continually ask. Inquiry is a systematic investigation or study into a worthy question, issue, problem or idea. It is the type of work that those working in living disciplines actually undertake to create or build knowledge. Therefore, inquiry involves serious engagement and investigation and the active creation and testing of new knowledge.

In 1910, John Dewey presented a theory of inquiry for educators. He proposed that inquiry involves studying, pondering, considering alternative possibilities and multiple sources of evidence to change or support beliefs. Years later, Piaget claimed that children learn through asking questions and challenging and reworking prior understanding through active engagement. More recently,

There is a good deal of evidence that learning is enhanced when teachers pay attention to the knowledge and beliefs that learners bring to a learning task, use this knowledge as a starting point for new instruction, and monitor students' changing conceptions as instruction proceeds. For example, sixth graders in a suburban school who were given inquiry-based physics instruction were shown to do better on conceptual physics problems than eleventh and twelfth grade physics students taught by conventional methods in the same school system. A second study comparing seventh-ninth grade urban students with the eleventh and twelfth grade suburban physics students again showed that the younger students, taught by the inquiry-based approach, had a better grasp of the fundamental principles of physics (White and Frederickson, 1997, 1998).

Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000

Schools, as places where teachers and students come together to create knowledge and to understand, ought to be communities of robust inquiry that strive to foster intellectual habits of thought, meaning-making and discourse in all students, rich and poor, gifted and severely ordinary. Schools ought to be communities where students come to do rich, engaging work--work that inspires, develops insight and stirs the imagination.

Schools ought to be places of robust inquiry that:

- engage students and teachers in meaningful, purposeful, worthy work. Work that is authentic, intellectually and emotionally engaging
- respect and cultivate the dispositions that all children bring with them when they first walk through our doors: imagination, curiosity, persistence, and the drive to understand the world
- respect and cultivate the ability of all children to think-with their words, their drawings, their bodies, their heads and their hearts
- help students engage with, and understand, difficult matters
- help students uncover things that have been hidden, and bring to life new questions, ideas and abilities
- make school an intellectually exciting place to be, a place where learning is fun even when it is hard, perhaps especially when it is hard, and frustrating, and challenging

References

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