

Foreword

There is a wonderful Calvin and Hobbes cartoon I often share with teachers and parents. In it, the two characters are playing outdoors when they come across a snake. They are fascinated and begin to ask all kinds of questions: 'Why do they smell with their tongue?' 'Do snakes have eyelids?' 'How do they swallow something bigger than their head?' The friends eagerly decide to go home and find out more before suddenly realising (with some horror) they want to *learn*. 'But we are on vacation, we don't want to *learn* anything!'. They finally agree that, given no one is *making* them do the learning, it's OK to learn! The last frame of the cartoon depicts them pouring over a book to find out more.

This cartoon struck a chord with me. In my early years as a primary teacher, I learned much more about how to teach effectively *in* the classroom from watching children learning outside it. Back then, I was heavily involved in the environmental education movement. Observing children connecting with nature offered powerful and sometimes confronting insights into learning and teaching. I saw first-hand, the value of authentic contexts for learning, the driving force of great questions, the potency of curiosity and the true agency developed in children when teachers got out of their way. I was unsettled by the contrast between these experiences and the kind of learning that was, at the time, happening within the daily routine of my classroom.

Despite wanting things to be different, my classroom was not dissimilar to those in which I myself had been taught. Like so many of my colleagues, my identity as a teacher was acutely bound to my own memories of schooling. Our teaching was most often an act of knowledge transmission and that knowledge was presented as fixed and unproblematic with, as the authors

of this wonderful book put it, little 'tolerance for ambiguity'. We were diligent and caring and our classrooms were warm and supportive but we were the ones who decided what, how, when, where and with whom learning would occur. We were the ones who asked most of the questions. For the most part, our children were passive players in the game of school. School was about listening to the teacher, doing activities, doing the right thing and getting the 'work' done.

Like Calvin and Hobbes, what went on in the classroom seemed a long way short of what happened when we took the learning outdoors. I knew I had to bridge the gap. I needed to bring that passionate, curious, adept, creative approach to learning to *everything* we did. I needed to allow my students to be the inquirers I knew they could be! Even as a young teacher, this meant some rethinking and 'unlearning' of deeply embedded ways of seeing my role as a teacher, seeing curriculum and seeing my students. An inquiry approach offered me a way to turn my teaching around and place both my learners and learning itself at the centre. I've never looked back.

Several decades later, I find myself regularly engaged in vigorous conversations with teachers wrestling with the same dilemma. As I write, I am acutely aware of the gradual but necessary paradigm shift in education that raises important questions about what school is for. Now well into the 21st century, we are increasingly aware of the need to place learning processes at the heart of all we do. As Michael Wesch reminds us, our learners need to move from being simply knowledgeable to being *knowledge-able*. 'It becomes less important for students to know, memorize, or recall information, and more important for them to be able to find,

sort, analyze, share, discuss, critique, and create information.”

Our learners need to be inquirers.

While excited by the possibilities of this shift, many teachers I meet report feeling overwhelmed and under prepared for the challenge of using an inquiry based approach. Resources in the field are often highly theorised and inaccessible or over simplified and flippant – leading to shallow, ‘sham’ inquiry that can give it a bad name.

Not so this book. Like the other books in this excellent series, *THINQ 1-3* is a perfect blend of the theoretical and practical. The table of contents is a thorough summary of the questions teachers so often ask when grappling with this approach. The pages that follow lead us into elegant explanations that honour the complexity of the approach while making it abundantly clear and accessible. Research in the field is deftly woven into the text. The authors have been careful to acknowledge the comprehensive work that has been done in this field by many educators all over the world and their diligent reference to this background research gives the book depth *and* breadth. The photos, case studies, diagrams, charts and pull out boxes are fabulous provocations for the reader and provide excellent ‘go to’ reminders of the essential big ideas identified throughout. Whether a novice or experienced inquiry teacher, there is so much here for the reader to pour over, try out, reflect on, connect with and be inspired by.

Of course, one of the most compelling aspects of this book is the fact that it is written with a very specific target audience in mind. While inquiry can be used from K-12, it is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Its implementation necessarily evolves and changes as children progress through their schooling. Learners in their primary years are at a unique stage in their development. This is a

phase of strong identity construction. These are the years in which the child’s sense of *who they are as a learner* and indeed their view of learning itself are rapidly forming. The authors of *THINQ 1-3* challenge us to build this learner identity by focussing on key dispositions. Inquiry is not simply a process children use to explore their questions, it is a way of being for both teachers and learners. By consciously nurturing open-mindedness, hopefulness, curiosity, reflection and resiliency teachers can create a community of inquiry that is deeply committed to what Peter Johnson calls the ‘agentive dimension’ of the child’s identity. The examples so generously provided throughout the book mean that any teacher of primary aged learners can immediately find case-studies, explanations, strategies and resources for immediate application. Questions posed throughout the book provide a wonderful scaffold for collaborative teacher inquiry into inquiry.

Primary classrooms are habitats in which learning can either thrive or wither and in which curiosity and wonder are either nurtured or dismissed. It is the approaches we use as teachers (and our understanding of those approaches) that largely determines the health of that habitat. Young learners in contemporary classrooms deserve to learn and grow in communities in which their questions and interests are nurtured and valued. And, in turn, teachers need the kind of resources that help address *their* burning questions. This book, filled with such thoughtful, thorough guidance and the obvious wisdom of the authors’ experience, does just that.

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Wesch, Michael. (2014) From knowledgeable to knowledge-able: learning in new media environments. Retrieved from <http://www.academiccommons.org/2014/09/09/from-knowledgeable-to-knowledge-able-learning-in-new-media-environments/>