

INQUIRY-BASED LEARNING

What the Heck Is Inquiry-Based Learning?

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Inquiry-based learning is more than asking a student what he or she wants to know. It's about triggering curiosity. And activating a student's curiosity is, I would argue, a far more important and complex goal than the objective of mere information delivery.

Nevertheless, despite its complexity, inquiry-based learning can be somehow easier on teachers, too. True, it's seemingly easier because it transfers some responsibilities from teachers to students, but it's really easier because releasing authority engages students.

Teachers who use inquiry-based learning combat the “dunno” -- a chronic problem in student engagement.

Let's face it, when you ask a student something like, “What do you want to know about _____?” you are often met with a shrug, or a, “dunno.” Inquiry-based learning, if front-loaded well, generates such excitement in students that neurons begin to fire, curiosity is triggered, and students can't wait to become experts in answering their own questions.

In all honesty, however, what inquiry-based teachers do isn't easy at all; it's just hidden, and some people confuse the two. By hiding a teacher's strings (the strategies used to investigate inquiry), teachers encourage inquiry, and the students develop their own skills as content-area experts.

Learning Something New

Triggering inquiry is about learning something new, and triggering curiosity is no small feat. It takes modeling enthusiasm; and learning something new generates our own enthusiasm, even if it's something new about the content we've covered for years.

Think about it. Let's say you're clicking through your Twitter or Facebook feed and you stumble on a link in your content area. You realize it's a new factoid, a new perspective on an age-old topic. Maybe it's a new TEDTalk or graph with statistics, something that makes a concept more concrete. Maybe it's an infographic or a photo, something that startles you to furrow your brow and say, “Whaaa?!”

By the way, I think one of the reasons why the whole world seems to be losing its mind over the Broadway production of *Hamilton* is because it presents a fresh take on a story we've all heard before. The power of learning something new is undeniable.

You have to bring that love of “whaaa?!” into your own classroom. You have to model your own curiosity quotient. Our curiosity quotient is a hunger to learn that defines how we advance our knowledge of the world. According to the Harvard Business Review (<https://hbr.org/2014/08/curiosity-is-as-important-as-intelligence>), a higher curiosity quotient can indicate more flexibility and help build a greater ability to handle complexity.

So think about your content area. What is a new take on a topic that you can bring to your classroom? What new piece of information might help you trigger your own enthusiasm that can then, thereby, trigger your students' curiosity?

The 4 Steps of Inquiry-Based Learning

So you've discovered something that generates your own inquiry, and you've recreated that moment for your students when your curiosity was triggered. So what comes next in inquiry-based learning? This can be answered in four basic steps that should represent the outline of a simple unit. Lessons on literacy, researching, informational writing, for example, should be embedded into each of these steps.

Here are examples to make it more concrete:

1. Students develop questions that they are hungry to answer. Writing tie-in: Have them develop a problem statement that requires them to pitch their question using a constructed response, further inquiry, and citation.

2. Research the topic using time in class. It's crucial to have some of this be classwork so students have access to the head researcher in the room -- you. You aren't going to do the work for them, but you are going to guide them and model methods of researching reliably. Internet literacy tie-in: Show them Instagrok (<https://www.instagrok.com/>) for a more visual browser at the start of the research process. Instagrok is great as a starting place, and it's also great for our English language learners because it's so visual.

3. Have students present what they've learned. Students should create and present a culminating artifact. When I have my students present what they've learned, I use a rubric that uses “Able to Teach” as the acme of what to reach for. After all, many people can understand content, but can they communicate it? Students can develop a website using Weebly, or perhaps a slideshow using Google Slides.

4. Ask students to reflect on what worked about the process and what didn't. Reflection is key. And it isn't just about asking them to think back on their opinion of the topic. It's about reflecting on the process itself. That's where you can work in metacognition. Thinking about thinking. Thinking about **how** they learned not just **what** they learned.

In terms of your content area, imagine a classroom where different kids are presenting their findings on a single, simple aspect of the content. You'd have a classroom that, overall, learns deeper and wider than ever before.

In terms of student achievement, the power of their question should help drive the research, the writing, and the presentation. It should help motivate them to become experts in their self-described field. And the more often a student gets a taste of what it feels like to be an expert, in however small a concept, the more they will want that feeling later on in life.

It all starts with finding your own enthusiasm, your own excitement, and your own curiosity. Trigger yours and you'll be heading towards a classroom built on inquiry.

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