INQUIRY IDEAS

Getting Started with Guided Inquiry

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Last summer, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction under the leadership of Nancy Anderson was awarded a grant to offer the three day Guided Inquiry Design Institute. Eight learning teams of teachers, librarians, and administrators representing a diverse group of school districts from all across the state joined me in Eau Clare at the Chippewa Valley Museum from July 20 –22. They gathered to learn and jump-start guided inquiry in their schools and districts.

I believe the Guided Inquiry Design Institute is a powerful professional development model. It is powerful not only because of the strength of the research-backed guided inquiry design, but also due to the consistent focused learning that occurs in three days of concentrated work. The time frame of three days provides participants with models for effective teaching strategies, personal and group reflection, and time for teams of librarians and teachers to soak up the new elements of the design and create units of study together. Learning something new and having the time to put the pieces into place in a concrete actionable plan sets people up for successful implementation. It’s not surprising that participants from past institutes have seen a shift in the entire culture of the school.

Over the past seven years, I’ve been facilitating learning teams of teachers, teacher-librarians, and administrators on guided inquiry. This year I returned to my community of past participants. They consistently report positive results and a profound impact on the learning environment of their schools. Learning about guided inquiry design in the three day institute not only changed their own practice, but changed the entire school culture and student learning. A middle school teacher from Greenhill School in Texas, Peggy Turlington, claimed, “Guided inquiry has changed the way we teach!”

They also report a renewed enthusiasm. The learning team from Jonathan Adler High School in Ohio after reflecting on their year said, “No barrier was a barrier for us!” They felt strongly that the work they did in those three days sustained their efforts to move them and their school closer to their vision of an inquiry community. This movement took persistence and drive on their part as they returned to school in the fall, but the vision they created together cultivated collaboration.

Getting started with inquiry can be overwhelming. Many schools and districts are beginning with professional book club readings and conversations. Guided Inquiry: Learning in the 21st Century, provides the rationale and full explanation while Guided Inquiry Design: A Framework for Inquiry in Your School, furnishes an explication of the phases of the design process and embedded tools. Together, these books provide the background needed to build a solid inquiry program including a multidisciplinary approach and authentic information literacy instruction.

Participants of the institute come away with a firm plan in place for implementing guided inquiry in the coming school year. When Wisconsin institute participants were asked what the institute helped them to do, Kathy B. explained, “I read guided inquiry design before, but did not totally grasp the phases until I came with a team and participated in the activities and work time.” The institute makes the book come to life with exemplars and authentic collaboration.

Liz B., library media specialist of North Crawford School District, reflected on the value of the collaboration time. “This institute gave me collaboration time with my team to develop a unit, time to develop my understanding of better lesson and unit designs, and strategies to support this shift in instruction! Our school has a 64% free or reduced lunch rate, which makes it challenging to overcome the disadvantages that poverty can present. This instructional approach meets students at their level, takes into account their cultural and intellectual needs, and gives them an experience with real academic and intellectual success.”

Once a common understanding about inquiry is developed and there is a desire to implement at a higher level, then powerful professional development can be just the thing to help inquiry take off in your school. Liz B. explained, “I got immediately useful strategies to shift my instruction and empower students to take charge of their learning and create...” I believe the Guided Inquiry Design Institute is worth the time and investment. It can shift practice in positive ways for students, teachers, and librarians alike. Wisconsin is one to watch this year as the teams move forward with the implementation of their unit designs.

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Works Cited

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