Find Out Where They Are

By Leslie Maniotes

Standard Operating Procedure: Be Human

About eleven years ago, I read a news article about a robot teacher in Japan (Kato 2009, Akiba and Yokoyama 2009). She looked very professional, and it really scared me. I thought, "There is no way a robot could do this job."

With the continual development of artificial intelligence (AI), it's interesting to think about what can be automated and what cannot. And now, after reading the book *Running with Robots*, my fear has turned to hope. AI, in the future, will definitely change the learning landscape in interesting and complex ways, but what's human about our profession cannot be replaced (Toppo and Tracy 2021).

Inquiry and Research Require a Human Touch

Over the past year, I've been working with many educators adopting Guided Inquiry Design® (GId). GId professional development is providing a clear pathway for teachers and librarians for designing units of inquiry with research. This year, GId teams have won collaboration awards, humanities awards, and curriculum awards, and teachers are saying, "I wish I had known about this process years ago!" (GId website)

There's lots to gain with a complete adoption of GId for your school or district. But, the lessons we've learned from Guided Inquiry Design® can be applied to any library, during any research process.

The Problem of Traditional Research Projects and Not Knowing the Phases

Carol Kuhlthau (2004) clearly described the phases of the research process, but because most *teachers* don't read research from the library field, they default to that old research assignment (Maniotes

and Kuhlthau 2014). With that assignment, the teachers expect student research to be fairly straightforward. The truth is, students need our guidance and may not know it! What happens is the students' expectation of what they should be doing when they come to the library, and what they should be doing are completely off. They think that they should be gathering information. In reality, they are in an earlier phase of the inquiry process. They immediately get off balance.

In the inquiry process, each phase is nuanced and requires a different mindset and accompanying work. When students are not mentally prepared for the phase that they are in, they can easily get frustrated, feel overwhelmed, and procrastinate to the point of failure. But, all is not lost. There are a few things you can do when they come to the library to shift that dynamic, even within the context of a traditional assignment.

The best thing you can do is find out where they are.

Find Out Where They Are

Scenario – A class comes into the library for a research time. (Any class, any content, any grade 3–12)

Instead of just letting them gather information, the savvy librarian starts the library session with an inquiry stance, quick reflection, and student self-assessment.

First, the librarian hands out a notecard to each student as students enter the library.

Quick Write - The students start with a "quick write" about their topic on the notecard, using the simple prompt, "What are you researching?" After the quick write, the students discuss what they wrote with a partner.

Turn and Talk - Students ask each other, "What are you researching?" Students take turns talking using a simple protocol.

Simple Protocols can effectively facilitate equal sharing. Ask students to pair up and choose either A or B. Then, set a timer for A to speak. When the timer sounds, it's B's turn. This way, you are sure everyone gets equal time to share. As a result, students begin to value each other's contribution. They'll also appreciate the structure you provided giving them equal time to contribute.

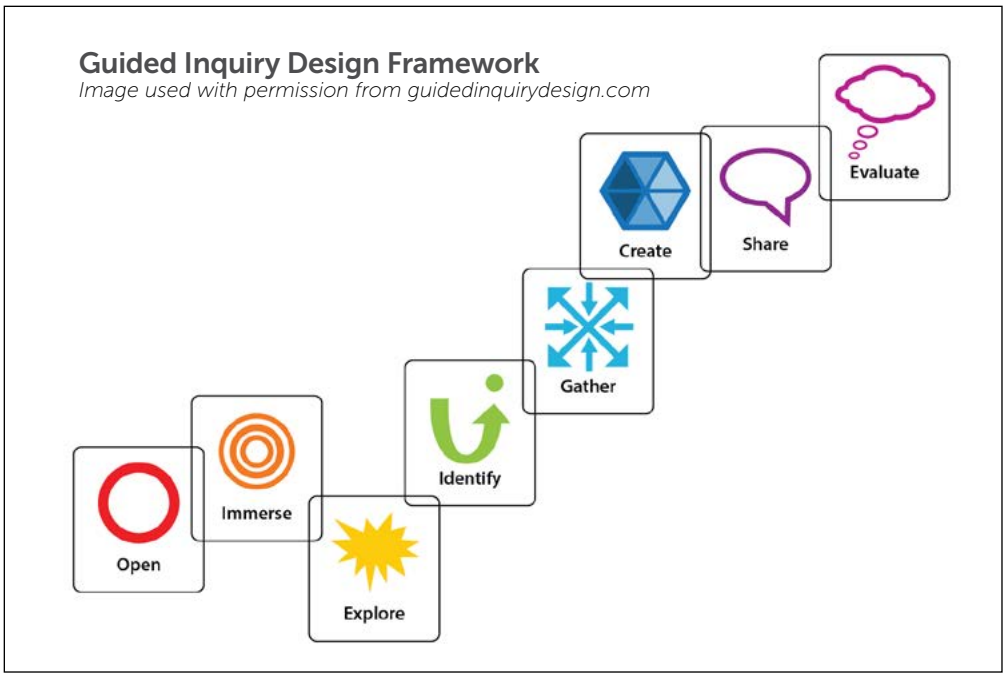
Take Appropriate Action

Evaluate – Next, the students ask themselves, "How clear am I about the direction of my research?" evaluating the clarity of their topic. A windshield metaphor provides a visual to help students describe their position: they choose crystal clear, bugs, or mud.

All students will need assurance that everyone is right where they need to be today, no matter how they describe their standing. An awareness of where they are in the process will greatly help to drive productive action during this valuable time in the library.

GId Process Can Help

The Explore and Gather phases of GId are two very different phases of research. It's important for students to assess where they are in the process because the thoughts, feelings, and actions look different in these two phases.



For example, in Explore a preliminary search supports them where they are, to generally find out about the topic, versus really gathering information to understand their question.

Students in the Explore phase are guided to look around to see what their topic could be. Guided Inquiry Design® recommends the Stop-and-Jot technique at this phase as a format to support a browsing mindset (Kuhlthau, Maniotes, and Caspari 2012). Rather than take notes, students in Explore browse sources to see what is interesting and then move on to see what else is out there until they find their focus.

In this library time, the savvy librarian guides students differently depending upon their response to the prompt above.

Crystal clear

If what they are researching is really clear to the student and their partner, then they are in the Gather phase. These students are directed to write down some search terms they might use, to think about where they will begin to search for information, and be released to begin their search.

For the students who aren't sure or have no idea, they are most likely in the Explore phase. They'll need guidance for taking a different direction than they may have thought.

I'm not sure. It's looking a little buggy. Or NO, It's mud, I can't see through to what I'm doing at all.

If these are the responses, first, they need to know that it's okay! It is perfectly normal to be unsure at this point. They can physically look around and see that they are not alone.

Students in the Explore phase need to slow down. They should not take notes but instead browse a variety of resources to find out what's out there on the broad topic, until they have a clearer idea of a focus. Librarians guide students in this way to take them from where they are into productive searching, appropriate for the phase that they are in.

The big idea here is, don't assume where the students are in their research. Give them time to settle in, let them reflect, evaluate where they are, and be open to a variety of responses. Once they evaluate where they are in the process, guide them to take the appropriate action whether it's browsing in Explore, charting to Identify a focus, or ready to Gather sources, information, and take notes on their topic.

These are the human aspects of what we do. We connect, build relationships, have real conversations, and guide people to learn about process. Being helpful is part of our professional life, the important part, that will never be replaced by a machine.

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See also the Guided Inquiry Design® in Action series, Libraries Unlimited.

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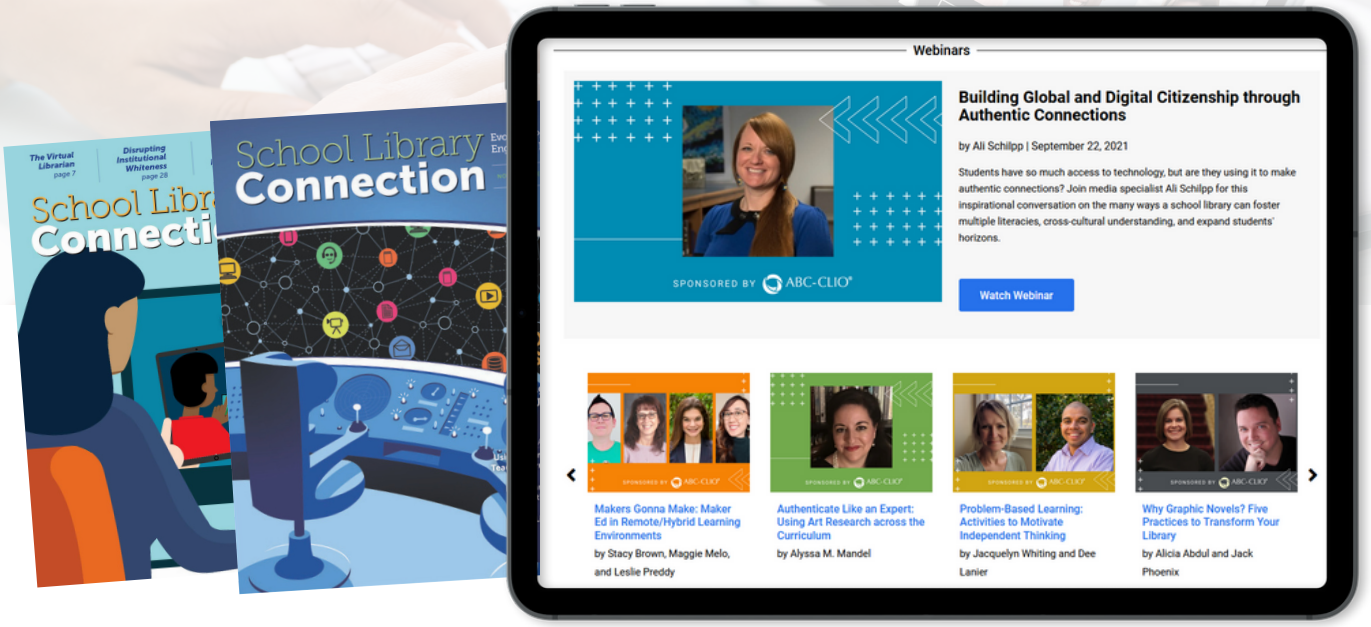

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