

## Virgil E. Varvel Jr. Notes

Alexandra Weinbaum, David Allen, Tina Blythe, Katherine Simon, Steve Seidel, & Catherine Rubin (2004). *Teaching as inquiry: Asking hard questions to improve practice and student achievement*. NY: Teachers College Press & Oxford, OH: National Staff Development Council.

From classtime –

Introduction

- They provide us with a definition of what they are trying to do.
- Key on the opportunity that they saw versus how others would have seen the situation

Teaching as Inquiry discussion centered on the following

- discussed breaking up discussion based upon questions presented in book and how the real guts were at the end. What is on the table in each sample provided? I think we should add why was the given sample added, or at least our impressions on such.
- Is it really teaching as inquiry or inquiry as a part of the teacher's practice that may not be centered on inquiry and may not even be always collaborative even though that is emphasized on page 1.

Teaching as Inquiry quick presentation notes. Will also take the time to add all of my notes from the book here too, but quickly jot some notes below for starters to help me in the presentation.

From my chapter:

What is on the table? – what are the questions and data

Who is at the table? and how is it formed

What happens at the table? – sets norms and structures inquiry

How is the table supported? – resources, partnerships, and value

At this school collaborative inquiry drives school-wide dialogue and decisions. Administrative support. Here we are looking at the English teachers' group. They present questions, share within the group. Functioned also as a celebration.

School as progressive, willing, sometimes bandwagon, most importantly supportive, flexible, and effective.

Sheltered English Team's inquiry process at Melrose Elementary. New district mandated literacy curriculum ran contrary to the program they were using of whole language. Principle allowed them to pilot it in just the dimensions that they could fit in and then continue to fit it in over time.

p. 148 why do we do what we do  
why do we do it the way that we do it  
how might we do it better

Required Aspects

- An inquiry stance
- collective responsibility
- mastery of technical aspects of inquiry
- variety of methods
- leadership and resources for inquiry
- time for inquiry and support

## **Introduction: Turning classroom experience into teaching expertise. 1-12**

Consider a mandate as an opportunity to reconsider and discuss long-held beliefs.

In initial example, 2 key features made a difference in how teachers and the school accepted a mandate

1. Principal who saw collaborative inquiry as a way for teachers to engage deeply with their own questions.
2. A history of collaborative inquiry [but of course, this could be completely useless if a new principal came in who saw things differently.]

[They saw inquiry as the best answer to their problems, but the book doesn't tell us what other responses are possible.]

Defining Collaborative Inquiry:

2 – “the process by which colleagues gather in groups to pursue, over time, the questions about teaching and learning that the group members identify as important.”

[We are really looking just at inquiry here, rather than action research if you look just at this definition.

Furthermore, this doesn't really address the title of the book. It should be called collaborative inquiry in the schools rather than teaching as inquiry. At no time is it self-evident that teaching requires inquiry or collaborative inquiry. It is shown that it can have a positive effect in the situations given, but without triangulation or discussion of possible alternatives. In a few cases later on, I will directly address some possible alternatives.]

They define the inquiry process as a straight line with new questions being generated. This is somewhat different than the spiral in which a given question is refined and readdressed.

Why they value collaboration –

- Teachers have experience and knowledge that is useful when shared.
- Teaching and learning are not dichotomous. Advancing teaching advances learning, understanding teaching is to understand learning.
- Each school context is unique. [while I like the other two valuations, this one doesn't really seem to fit.]

What makes collaborative inquiry unique?

- It enables colleagues to explore issues that they themselves identify as important? [In what way does that make 'collaborative' inquiry unique though?]
- It enables teachers to overcome concerns about making their work public. [through peer review first would be an argument, but they are more looking at it as a support mechanism.]
- It provides teachers with the opportunity to obtain fresh perspectives on their students, their students' work, and their own work. [here we see more the collaborative aspects rather than the inquiry aspect.]
- It renews teachers, providing them with opportunities for intellectual growth and engagement. [So does just about any form of professional development].
- [They leave out that it seems to really be the culture that the schools develop that really make it unique and in the cases presented, effective.]

Research behind this book.

7 – “the Academy for Educational Development, the Coalition of Essential Schools, and Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education - each embarked on its own project in partnership with various schools and/or districts to establish, support, and document collaborative inquiry groups in schools.”

9 – They share, “analyses that grew out of our 3 years of work in facilitating and researching collaborative inquiry groups in schools.”

## **Part I - Making the Case**

## Ch. 1: Foundations for Inquiry: Reviewing the Research, 13-30

### Purpose of this chapter

- Present research supporting centrality of inquiry to effective teaching and student learning – and organizational learning as well. [Although I never actually saw research in the chapter supporting the centrality argument]
- Discuss the values and culture of a school in which collaborative teacher inquiry is a habit. [This is done very well by this chapter and book as a whole]

### Barriers to inquiry:

- Time – needs to be valued in order to time to be made available.
- Lack of research on inquiry – in addition to a brief citation, a major part of the rest of the chapter addresses this.
  - Learning and inquiry
    - 3 key activities to deep understanding according to How People Learn:... include identifying or ‘surfacing’ preconceptions
    - Relating new facts to a pre-existing conceptual framework
    - Monitoring and assessing learning
  - Teacher professional development and collaborative inquiry
    - Teacher learning must parallel that of the students [but in what way. This section didn’t really tell me much]
    - Inquiry groups as valuable.
    - Developing an inquiry stance
  - Reflection and inquiry
  - Emotional dimension of inquiry
    - 20 – “Because learning requires the recognition and understanding of preconceptions and sometimes substantial rethinking of previously held ideas, it has a strong affective dimension.”
    - Uncovering hidden assumptions and norms – 21- “[I]t was much safer to study student behavior in the lunchroom than to study individual classroom instructional practices for their effects on student achievement” p.707 of Allen, L.A., & Calhoun, E.F. (1998). Schoolwide action research: Findings from six years of study. Phi Delta Kappan, 78 (9), 706-710.
  - Organizational learning and inquiry
    - 23 – “Organizational learning is dependent on people making mental models explicit in order to develop new, shared models.”
  - The culture and values of inquiring schools have been studied.

### Needed aspects of inquiry

- An inquiry stance
- Collective responsibility for learning
- Mastery of the technical aspects of inquiry – data processing
- A variety of inquiry methods used [although they are mainly providing a variety of sources rather than methods]
- Leadership and resources for inquiry [sort of a pre-existing administrative support]
- Time for inquiry and sustaining inquiry over time
- Trust – to be able to share with others

## **Chapter 2: Critical considerations for starting inquiry, 31 – 58**

Knowing your question is not as critical as knowing that you need one and that it will change.

31 – “In collaborative inquiry, unlike more traditional forms of staff development such as workshops or courses, purposes are not fixed, but dynamic.”

Purposes will:

- Get defined and refined
- Be reflected on and communicated

Lessons about purpose

- Variation – One purpose will not fit all
- Perspectives – voices
- Relevance – to student learning and understanding
- Serendipity – inquiry not linear, but may mull about before hitting a cord
- Get going – get started before purpose is fully articulated.

A Table of Decision Points – Questions to ask

- What is on the table
  - what will the group focus on?
  - what questions will the group focus on?
  - What kinds of data will the group look at?
- Who is at the table
  - how are groups formed
  - Will participation be required or voluntary
  - Will groups be across grade level, discipline, etc.?
- What happens at the table
  - how are norms set
  - how is the inquiry cycle attached to inquiry and structured.
  - How is inquiry facilitated
  - how is inquiry documented
- How is the table supported
  - how are resources such as time provided
  - Roles of partnerships
  - Incentives offered for participation
  - Community involvement and communication
  - How can it grow

## **Part II: An Inquiry Casebook**

Next are four chapters giving cases in point. I only read the last one.

**Ch. 3: Beginning with one teacher: Inquiry at ASCEND, Elizabeth Radin Simons, 65-79**

**Ch. 4: A district initiates: Inquiry at Maxson Middle School, Alexandra Weinbaum & Karl Nelsestuen, 80 – 99**

**Ch. 5: Tracing a whole-school evolution: Inquiry at The Harbor School, Tina Blythe, 100 – 121**

**Ch. 6: Engaging Equity and district mandates: Inquiry at Melrose Elementary School, Tom Malarkey, 122 – 138.**

122 – “In this school, collaborative inquiry drives school-wide dialogue and decisions on critical issues and provides a powerful strategy for addressing equity issues facing the school.”

The ‘Sheltered English Team’ which met once a month after early release school days. The team spans all grade levels and came from a variety of ethnic backgrounds with a wide range of experience teaching. 128 – “The meetings became a ‘space’ that supported frank and difficult conversations about questions of equity...”

Action Research aspect – They presented their observations, issues, and questions to their group. It functioned both as a celebration of work and a forum for learning [and action ideas]. They started with initial questions such as ‘Why don’t African American parents participate as other parents do?’ [But as we will see the brunt of the chapter is more on how they eventually implement a mandated program to the students].

Impact –

125 – “For the teachers, the inquiry led to an appreciation of the importance of providing explicit instruction of English and provided them with a theory and shared vocabulary about language development to guide their instruction. It also led to changes in instruction and curriculum.”

“Most importantly, the teachers on the team began seeing different student results.”

The cycle of inquiry – 127 – “teachers taking conscious action in the classroom, collecting data on those actions, reflecting on the results, and making meaning through dialogue with colleagues – which, in turn, generates learning and new or refined action.”

The school could be described as progressive, willing, sometimes bandwagon, most importantly supportive, flexible, and effective. They decided to construct their own professional development plan for example.

In the second year of the group, they were challenged with a new curriculum that ran contrary to the whole language approach they were using. The school’s response was that the team was encouraged to study the new plan and “pilot the dimensions of the curriculum that seemed most important and that fit with their existing instructional approaches, and see what they could learn from it.”

Final impact was a partial implementation that was successfully fit into a modified version of what they were doing in a way that would fit into the school itself. It eventually grew into an organization impact and change in student reading levels.

Commentary on the case

- Inquiry helped the teachers and administrators to discuss a controversial topic. [I’m not so sure it was inquiry itself so much as the inquiry mindset.]
- Inquiry into a mandated curriculum providing an opportunity rather than an impass.
- Outside support played a role, using the fact that this book was written by outside support providers as an example.

### **Part III: Toward a culture of inquiry**

What do we need to make this happen in our context?

#### **Ch. 7: Milestones and discoveries: A cross-case commentary, 141-145.**

Key points or developmental milestones

- Finding the right questions.
- Going public with classroom artifacts
- Taking ownership to shape and monitor the inquiry
- Addressing issues of equity through inquiry [although this was a milestone in the cases studied here, I don't necessarily think that is has to be for all.]
- 'Closing the loop' for classroom and school-wide practice

Discoveries and transformation along the way. [Take by questioning cause/effect v. correlation though]

- 144 – “A greater sense of efficacy for teachers coupled with improved outcomes for students.”
- “A lens for examining and adopting the best of reform and curricular initiatives.”
- 145 - “A method for addressing both personal teaching challenges and school-wide practices and decision-making.”

#### **Ch. 8: Toward a culture of inquiry: Reflections and policy implications, 146-155.**

Questions to ask from the viewpoint of professionalism and inquiry stance. [finally getting to the hard questions]

- Why do we do what we do?
- Why do we do it in the way that we do it?
- How might we do it better?

The path from insight to action

149 – “There is another reason for our confidence and our commitment. We are convinced that institutionalized and well-supported opportunities for reflection and inquiry offer schools the best opportunity – perhaps the only real opportunity – to break the pattern of lurching from one ineffective ‘quick fix’ to another, a pattern to which so many schools fall prey.”