**Personalizing Your Inquiry Model**

**Blue Sky Paper on Customizing Inquiry Models to Fit Your School**

Barbara J. Smith

Many schools adopt a generic inquiry model, but few personalize them to fit the culture of a school. It can be argued that the personalizing of curriculum can be a value-add when implementing new academic initiatives. There is plenty of talk about the importance of inquiry and project based learning, but few schools make further adaptations to a given framework. Teachers can be workshopped into using cookie-cutter programs, each providing their own graphic organizers. Such resources may seem easy to implement in a classroom, but many have been designed based on assumption that all schools and classrooms are the same.

My interest in inquiry came about at the same time as my fascination with critical and creative thinking and project-based learning. While I understood that they could be featured in every subject-based classroom, I thought it might be valuable to have a separate class dedicated to inquiry at least for one semester.

At the Sterling Hall School for boys in Toronto, Canada, we created the SHARK Inquiry program for students in Grades 3 to 5. S-H-A-R-K stood for:

S = Sterling

H = Has

A = Action

R = Research

K = Kids

The inquiry process was collaboratively designed by the Technology Director, the school Librarian and the VP, Academics. We reviewed existing models and customized the program for each grade with 12 inquiry actions, each relating to goals of helping nurture our students’ critical and creative thinking skills. We also worked with the Visual Arts teachers, to link at least one art project as a way to express their understandings of their inquiries.

 One grade was guided to study a mystery of the world of their choosing; in another grade the students had to choose a community in our province the school could move to and make an argument about the strengths and limitations of the choice. Another grade examined new inventions. The students were required to find primary and secondary sources to support their claims. In one situation, the mayor of a nearby city asked if he could come and make a pitch to the class to move our school. Even though the school was not moving anywhere, the students found out about their province in an authentic and meaningful way. Furthermore, they shared their findings, so everyone had a much more intimate view of various communities.

 Not only did this project coordinate the efforts of the school librarian, technology teacher, and the academic leader, two homeroom teachers from each grade plus one special education teacher all split the classes, so students who worked on their own or in pairs, had one person dedicated to supervise and support their inquiry. No one had more than 6 students in one grade at a time. The SHARK Inquiry Program integrated the technology, library, social studies and science curriculum. Rather than have separate programs competing for the students’ time, the coordination of the skills required in tech and library were integrated into the context of what the students were already studying in their classes. As well the school was able to use the collaborative project as a way to renew the emphasis on critical and creative thinking, ideally so that teachers would introduce such rigor into their regularly scheduled classrooms.

 The SHARK Inquiry program was featured at ASCD and the students in the program took the lead when they presented their experiences at the International Boys School Coalition Conference. The experience was as powerful as it was memory-making.

 High school students at a leadership-focused school in Detroit, Michigan, and elementary students at an arts school in Washington, DC. took part in a Research &Technology class that was also integrated with the library, technology and special needs programming. At a Leonardo DaVinci-inspired school in Virginia, students worked on inquiry projects with five phases in mind, each begin with the letters: V-I-N-C-I. This inquiry model provided some rigorous actions for project-based work at the school.

V = View (sketch; label; observe; explore)

I = Immerse (ask questions; narrow focus; make predictions; plan/propose

N = Notice Patterns (hunt and gather data; summarize and print from on-line texts; transcribe interviews; examine surveys; make graphs; examine and note meaning of artifacts; label observations)

C = Create (conclusions; recommendations; acknowledge limitations; generate new questions; evaluate theory-making)

I = Influence (teach others; move others to positive actions)

The VINCI Inquiry Model gives students a quality template for guiding project-based work. Establishing a common language for inquiry in a school helps students, teachers and families have a common understanding of expectations. The mission of this school was to support students to ‘become like Leo’. The inquiry model was therefore aligned with the mission of the school and the behaviors of Leonardo Davinci.

By generating a model and making room in the school schedule for a concentrated research study, students and staff in each school came to see the value of such experiences. Adding the course to the school report card, also helped the whole community to see the importance of such student-directed inquiry.

In a Model UN-focused school, middle-school aged students took part in a rigorous class that involved looking at the 17 Sustainable Goals of the United Nations, and determining which one they were going to research and make recommendations for during a Model UN Conference. The course was designed as a three year course, culminating in participation in a local conference. Who says all course work needs to begin and end within 180 days? Unfortunately, in this school example, COVID surfaced so the rich arguments prepared by each student did not reach an authentic audience. Integrating a Model UN program within an globally-focused school is a powerful way to demonstrate commitment to understanding world issues. Teaching world languages can be a wonderful complement to such a school and giving all students a chance to experience Model UN, is indeed a value-add. An academic leader willing to team teach such a course with an English and Social Studies is an ideal way to integrate such quality curriculum into an academic program.

The ’ENGAGE’ Inquiry Model evolved from all these experiences with teachers and students.

E = Explore

N = Narrow

G = Gather

A = Analyze

G = Generate

E = Educate

 To action of ‘Exploring’ involved browsing images and artifacts; searching through books, newspapers, magazines and websites. To ‘narrow’ required students to determine a focus of interest, brainstorm on their own or with others, and think about the value of the project. ‘Gathering’ involved gathering data, immersing in books and websites, summarizing notes from informational texts, design interview questions and conduct interviews, and consider design items for surveys and questionnaires.

To ‘analyze’ their findings students had to compare informational text with expert quotes and perceptions. Toward the end of the inquiry students needed to ‘generate’ their findings by forming conclusions, making connections, theories and symbols to represent their understandings. This action also requires that students admit their limitations and biases as well as make recommendations and speak about future research possibilities.

Finally, in the ‘educate’ phase students can express their understanding through an art form (music, visual arts, drama or dance); create an inquiry report published so that others can reference the work in the future; generate a media presentations to present to others, and perhaps develop a quiz to check for audience understanding following the presentation. Inquiry can be a tall order.

When personalizing any model, it’s not a simple matter of finding an acronym and filling it with inquiry words. In the determination of what words to choose, there is a rich opportunity to explore expert inquiry research, such as that promoted by Habits of Mind and the importance of multi-intelligences. More recently, Kyler Wagner’s work in Australia, has much for teachers to examine. The task of formulating a personalized inquiry model can be a gateway to professional learning. If we want to students to construct and co-construct ideas, then we need to model this, too. Personalizing an inquiry model is one way to empower educators to become curriculum designers, and this can only be a good thing!