

Teaching as Inquiry

Ask yourself the big questions

Teaching as inquiry is an important aspect of effective pedagogy. WAYNE ERB reports

Eight students in Chanda Pinsent's class hadn't done as expected when learning paragraph structure so she knew she had to try something different. The Gladstone School teacher moved from a whole-class approach to work with the eight as a group. The subsequent conversation revealed crucial information: one girl said she simply did not understand what was expected of her.

Chanda had shown written examples to the whole class but now she showed another student's writing as an exemplar of actual student work, explaining its features before giving the group another go.

The underlying process that Chanda went through – checking where her students were at, choosing an appropriate strategy and finding what happened as a result of her teaching – is an example of teaching as inquiry, which also takes more in-depth forms.

For example, teachers in the Quality Teaching Research and Development programme used student data and research evidence to develop effective ways to meet identified needs of their Māori and Pasifika students.

Teaching as inquiry places importance on teachers prioritising what and how they teach, based on the needs of their students and making evidence-informed decisions about strategies that are most likely to work in meeting those needs, then checking how students responded to the teaching. It is a critical aspect of effective pedagogy as described in *The New Zealand Curriculum*.

That section of the curriculum document is getting attention – Chanda says the effective pedagogy pages, including teaching as inquiry, have always stood out to her.

“When I first looked at the curriculum a couple of years ago I thought this was the most challenging page as it challenges us to do something different from what we've done before.”

Dr Claire Sinnema from the University of Auckland's Faculty of Education helped to write the curriculum's description of teaching as inquiry. The model is based partly on findings from the *Effective Pedagogy in Social Sciences Best Evidence Synthesis* which she co-authored with Associate Professor Graeme Aitken.

She says inquiry is important because teaching strategies work differently for different students.

“The key thing underpinning teaching as inquiry is that context really matters, that while you need to pay attention to evidence about what is most likely to work, you can never be certain about how that will work with the learners in your classroom.”



Teaching as inquiry involves three key inquiries. First is the ‘focusing inquiry’ about what is most important given where your students are at, their interests, and the local and national curriculum aspirations.

It requires teachers to establish priorities given the time constraints they face. Next is the ‘teaching inquiry’ – determining what strategies are most likely to help your students learn.

Attention to evidence about what has worked for others is important since it increases the likelihood that what you do will work. The teaching inquiry is also informed by practitioners’ expertise – both matter, says Claire.

After teaching takes place, comes the third inquiry – the ‘learning inquiry’, when the teacher investigates what happened as a result of the teaching and what implications this has for future teaching.

Inquiry can be something teachers think through during a lesson, she says.

“It can be that moment-by-moment decision-making where teachers establish what is important in the next two minutes, decide how to address that, and see how effective that was.”

It can also involve more in-depth inquiries that occur over the course of a unit, a term, a year, or longer and use the full array of evidence and student data.

Teaching as inquiry can be carried out in a range of ways – by teachers individually or in collaboration as a department or a syndicate, across the whole school or across a cluster of schools.

Claire’s research into the implementation of the NZC shows that teaching as inquiry is a familiar concept to most educators but some have conflated it with inquiry learning, which is not the same thing.

On that note, primary school teacher Raewynne Hill says teaching as inquiry as an explicit concept was fairly new up until a couple of years ago but it will continue to become more recognised and formalised through practice.

“I think the more *The New Zealand Curriculum* is being implemented in schools and used as a working document then more and more people are going to become aware of teaching as inquiry.”

Claire adds that school leadership has an important role to play in establishing a culture that encourages and enables inquiry by teachers.

“If you have a school culture that fosters inquiry-mindedness, that is definitely going to help.”

Key points

Teaching as inquiry is a critical aspect of effective pedagogy as described in *The New Zealand Curriculum*.

It is important because teaching strategies work differently for different students.

It involves three key parts: the focusing inquiry, teaching inquiry, and the learning inquiry.

It can be used during a lesson or take more in-depth forms over longer periods of time.

An important difference

‘Teaching as inquiry’ is when teachers inquire into: what is most important; what strategies or approaches are most likely to work; and the impact of teaching on students.

‘Inquiry learning’ is just one approach teachers might use (but don’t have to) in which students learn about learning, investigation and research as they explore topics of interest.

Digital stories from The New Zealand Curriculum Online

“Tukutahi has developed from reflection and investigation into what works best for our students as we seek to personalise student learning and ensure that we build on the skills and knowledge they bring to school.” – Prue Kelly, principal of Wellington High School.

Teachers are working together to investigate a more collaborative and integrated model of teaching:

<http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/Digital-stories/School-stories/Wellington-High>

Teacher Corinne Walsh is using action research to explore how the key competencies look in her mathematics and statistics classroom:

<http://keycompetencies.tki.org.nz/School-stories/Digital-Stories/College-Street-Normal-School/Mathematics-and-statistics>

Other resources:

A suggested teaching as inquiry cycle for teachers of te reo Māori:

<http://tereomaori.tki.org.nz/Te-reo-Maori-curriculum-guidelines/Teaching-and-learning-te-reo-Maori/A-suggested-teaching-as-inquiry-cycle>

Source: <http://www.edgazette.govt.nz/Articles/Article.aspx?ArticleId=7880>

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