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Authentic Learning Is Not Just for Students: It's for Librarians, Too!

by Joyce Yukawa and Violet H. Harada



Traditional professional development efforts are often ineffective because they fail to translate into practice. Typically, such initiatives are one-time events such as lectures or formal classroom instruction that are focused on information delivery rather than interaction needed for understanding. These events are generally conducted outside the school using generic exercises or independent practice without guidance and with little or no follow-up after the training. Learning focuses on action rather than reflection, on answers rather than inquiry. And school librarians are often not included in teacher professional development activities.

Paradigm Shift

Decades of research and experience are leading a paradigm shift toward a practice-based model of learning (Ball and Cohen 1999; Darling-Hammond et al. 2009). A recent National Staff Development Council report states that “studies have shown that teacher success can be fostered through high-quality professional development—professional development that is sustained, connected to practice and school initiatives, focused on academic content, and supportive of strong working relationships among teachers” (Wei et al. 2010, 8). This approach is significantly more effective at fostering real change because professional development is grounded in the questions and problems that emerge within an ongoing process of curriculum design, implementation, and assessment situated in practice.

Ready answers are rarely a perfect fit for the complex, ambiguous problems that arise. Self-analysis and revised action are part of the reflective practitioner’s strategies for improvement (Schon 1993). A community of practice strengthens this effort through collaborative reflection among those who share similar goals and purposes, use the same tools, have a common vocabulary, exchange ideas over time, and collaborate on solutions (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). Mentoring and coaching also aid practitioners who are tackling immediate problems, as well as seeking perspectives for long-term solutions.

Librarian-Teacher Inquiry Partnerships

“Building Inquiry Partnerships” was a yearlong professional development course conducted in 2005-2006 that put these ideas into practice through incorporating practice-based training, reflective practice, and developing communities of practice. This article describes the goals, design, and implementation of the course and summarizes the short-term and long-term results.

The course emphasized an inquiry approach to learning, improving skills in instructional design, and nurturing

librarian-teacher partnerships. The Hawaii State Department of Education, the University of Hawaii, and the Hawaii Association of School Librarians jointly sponsored the training. The course developers came from these agencies with a depth and breadth of expertise in teaching and technologies for learning. The participants were a diverse group of twenty-seven teachers and librarians from K-12 schools who formed the elementary, intermediate, and high school teams. Some were new to teaching or librarianship, and others were seasoned professionals. Some teams had already collaborated, while others were teaming for the first time. The teams worked toward the following goals for their respective classrooms:

- ▶ Design an inquiry-based unit that connects to content standards and information literacy standards.
- ▶ Determine essential questions through focusing on a generative theme and transforming standards into learning objectives.
- ▶ Foster the inquiry process through student performance tasks that measure the learning goals and strategies that motivate curiosity, call for higher-level thinking, and support problem investigation.
- ▶ Achieve assessment-driven decision making through collecting formative and summative assessment data and analyzing the data to inform instruction.

The course developers/mentors modeled the facilitation of inquiry learning as they guided participants. The mentors followed seven principles to foster inquiry, reflection, and community building: engage the learner, introduce new learning, provide for application and transfer, allow for independent practice, promote interaction, provide continuous mentoring, and build critical reflection and co-reflection. They encouraged teams to connect learning to prior knowledge, question, and demonstrate new concepts and skills. They provided timely feedback for the site-based, work-embedded implementation of new learning. They encouraged collaborative curriculum planning, cross-school dialogue, sharing of products, and ongoing assessment of

progress and reflection on planning and implementation experiences.

As a team, the mentors also modeled the collaborative reflection they hoped to foster among the school-based teams. Throughout the year, the mentors engaged in open reflection, shared their self-examinations and rationales for adjustments, and revised plans and activities in response to the needs of the participants.

The librarian-teacher teams also used texts and tools created by the senior mentors to integrate new concepts and guide their work (Harada and Yoshina 2004; 2005). Templates for the unit and lesson plans, a checklist for a generative topic, and a performance task template provided concrete guidance for important tasks.

Face-to-face meetings and ongoing online dialogue provided sustained support. The course began with a three-day, face-to-face summer institute that introduced key concepts, provided opportunities for questioning and practice, and initiated the process of community building. The teams continued curriculum development and implementation on site. Two other face-to-face activities were a midpoint reunion focusing on assessment (also offered via videoconferencing) and team presentations of their work at the annual state E Conference. Mentors also conducted site visits on request.

Online dialogues took place through monthly individual reflection logs via email, monthly team reports posted in workspaces on a university Web site, and buddy responses to the team reports. The mentors also provided continuous online mentoring in the workspace and via email.

The culminating product for each team was a learning portfolio that included evidence of an inquiry-based unit and assessment-driven decision-making unit and lesson plans, rubrics, concept maps, worksheets, student self-assessment tools, formative and summative assessment tools, student work samples with teacher and librarian commentary at different levels of proficiency. Teams also provided evidence of reflective practice—cumulative team reports, individual logs, and final reflections.

The rest of this article highlights

school team accomplishments during and after the course. The authors compiled and analyzed the information from the participants' self-reflections, interviews, and actual unit plans, along with exemplars of student work.

Outcomes and Insights

All teams demonstrated growth in incorporating essential questions as the focus for student learning, practicing data-driven decision making, challenging students to achieve higher level thinking, and designing units that were connected to the real world and relevant to students' lives (Yukawa and Harada 2009).

Building inquiry as the focus of learning

Each team designed and implemented an inquiry-focused unit lasting from several weeks to an entire semester. The themes and issues ranged from kindergartners working on what is a living creature in science to seniors in a foreign languages class conducting a cross-cultural study of teenagers in Japan. For most, developing essential questions was a "brain frying" experience—to "identify the underlying concepts and overarching themes" and "pin down the question that would cover all the important content in a meaningful and authentic way." The key was transforming topical questions into thoughtful thematic ones, such as those shown in Figure 1 (below).

Creating essential questions opened teachers' eyes to the boundary-crossing

power of these questions. One teacher who was "feeling anxious" about the time spent on one project stated: "I realized that I was focusing on the essential questions—the concepts that need to be addressed. I realized that I could connect whatever we were doing or talking about in the classroom, back to the questions."

Recognizing the importance of presearch and prior knowledge in an inquiry approach

Teachers became more keenly aware of the importance of allowing students the time to explore and raise questions before they focused on specific areas of investigation. By acknowledging what students already knew and encouraging exploration, the teachers and librarians saw how their instruction was "student-inspired."

Promoting ongoing assessment

All teams struggled with assessment issues, and formative assessment was new for most. The developers introduced strategies to incorporate assessment as a natural part of the learning experience. One elementary team was particularly successful with student self-assessments: "The students do self-evaluation using checklists and revise their work using the checklists. A gifted and talented student that was out of focus is thriving on this experience. So are the special education kids!" A high school librarian using pre- and post-assessment measures for the first time noted, "It gives us targets that we need to address, because we're measuring

how much learning it's going to take. It helped me be more conscious of what was going on, of what we were doing, and why we were doing it."

Allowing for student choice and real world applications

Many teachers admitted that they relied heavily on scripted curriculum, textbook-driven assignments, and drill exercises. It was a tremendous leap for them to plunge into learning that was inquiry-focused and shaped by students. Despite initial misgivings, the teams were generally pleased with students' responses. For example, a chemistry teacher and her school librarian "made over" a unit of study on the chemical properties of matter. Instead of traditional lab experiments, they challenged their students to explore the chemical composition of objects in their daily lives and explain how their lives were improved. Students shared multimedia displays of their findings with peers and guests from the community. For the team, it was "a difficult but most exhilarating experience. Like our students, we have stepped outside our comfort zones to experience what inquiry learning is about."

Providing for authentic performances and products

Instead of papers and tests, students presented their findings by designing Web pages, producing video clips and slide presentations, crafting brochures and posters, and authoring picture books

Figure 1. Questions transformed from topical to thematic

Focus	Original Questions	Essential Questions
Elementary school: Native American tribes	Can you name some of the tribes? Where did they live? What did they wear? What did they eat? What were some of their customs and practices?	How did contact with European explorers change their lives? Was this a positive or a negative change? Why?
Middle school: Migration of the Polynesians	Who were the Polynesians? Where did they come from? How did they come to Hawaii? When did this happen?	Why do people move? What is essential to survive such a journey? Why?
High school: Career choices	What career choices exist in our community? What qualifications and training are required? What are the major responsibilities involved?	How does this career contribute to the quality of life in our community? Why am I personally drawn to this career?

for younger children. A team working with special education middle schoolers on Polynesian migration challenged their students to create first-person narratives of a simulated voyage from Tahiti to Hawaii. To gain background knowledge, the students visited cultural centers and museums and combed through print and online resources. Students videotaped their narratives and critiqued their peers' performances during practice sessions. The team observed, "SPED kids have a learned helplessness because we traditionally don't have high expectations for them. We were thrilled when we saw how self-motivated they could be with projects like this."

Appreciating the power of collaborative planning and teaching

The teams unanimously reported that the partnership of teachers and librarians had the "greatest impact" on teaching practices. One teacher said of her librarian: "She has this wealth of knowledge about where and how to find information. She also lets us live through the inquiry process. She doesn't just spoon feed or tell us the information; she lets us figure it out for ourselves. She gave us ownership over our projects." A key change in roles was the degree to which librarians were integral to the entire process of planning, implementation, and assessment. As one librarian reflected: "I have been an instructional partner, a sounding board, teacher, student. I have contributed to the content of our pretest and other handouts (project overview, note-taking sheet, product rubric). I have also designed and implemented research-related lessons and participated in the development and ongoing modification of our unit plan."

Longitudinal Impact

The authors have continued to follow the teams through email exchanges and informal visits in the ensuing years. While there have been retirements and job movements for half of the teams, many of the teachers and librarians have expanded their collaborative networks. Six of the librarians have emerged as critical curriculum leaders.

Expanding networks

At least six teams have connected their work to school priorities and reform efforts, such as reading and writing programs and standards-based curriculum initiatives. Seven teams have involved other teachers within their grade level or department, reached out to faculty in other grade levels and departments, and collaborated with school learning specialists such as the curriculum coordinator and technology resource teacher.

Evolving leadership roles of librarians

Through the Inquiry Partnerships initiative, librarians have raised their visibility on campus as effective collaborators and instructional partners. At least six librarians have been tapped for major curricular roles in their schools. Two high school librarians are leaders of professional learning communities for improving teaching practices. One librarian is a key member of the elementary school's team to train faculty in assessing students' writing performance. Another high school librarian has offered workshops for her teachers on inquiry-based instruction. Still another high school librarian is a member of the campus vision team for senior projects.

Conclusion

Authentic professional learning requires opportunities for application, practice, reflection, and reinforcement. Such learning must be situated in site-based work that revolves around relevant issues and tasks. The approach should model the inquiry process. Mentoring support is vital. This learning is powerful when it is constructed in teams that leverage the expertise within the group. As one teacher summed it, the collaborative chemistry of professionals working together for student growth is the ultimate goal of professional learning:

It's an intimate but professional level of trust and guidance, which differs from other relationships such as facilitator, supervisor, team leader. I guess that's the ticket—the

idea that there is investment in this relationship, a sustaining partnership, and continual growth, which makes the effort definitely more valuable than a one-shot deal.

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