

The Role of the Inquiry Cycle in Changing Practice

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Six years ago my CFG made the decision to ground our work in inquiry. The significant consequence of this decision was that every action in our CFG became purposeful. Our actions were based on real questions about our practice—questions that nagged us about a unit, about instruction, about a student, about assessment. Once we had established questions, we looked at student work for a reason; we observed each other for a reason; we explored texts, we participated in protocols—all to explore each other's very real questions. This focus has energized us and sustains our work, year after year.

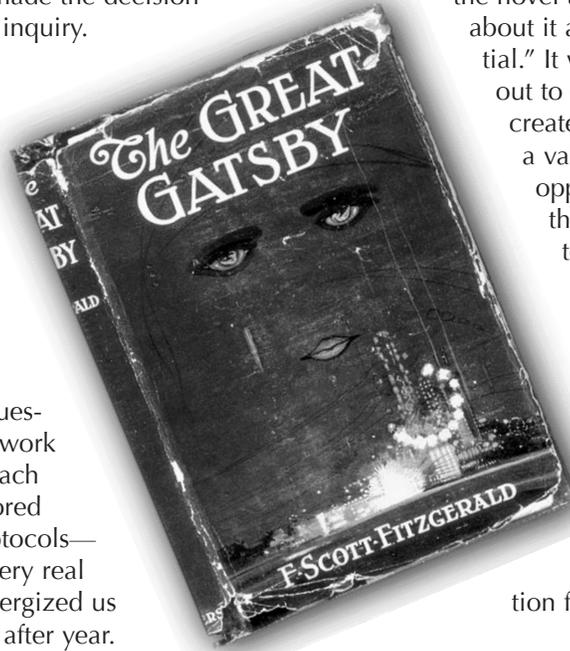
For my first cycle of inquiry, I chose to examine my practice around my unit on *The Great Gatsby*. My tenth-grade social studies colleague and I usually team-teach most units. However, when I began the study of *The Great Gatsby*, my partner was teaching an integrated economics unit with our math teacher.

Left to my own devices, I reverted to a traditional approach to the novel. I lectured, assigned study questions, and quizzed students daily. I paid absolutely no attention to the need to differentiate instruction for the wide levels of ability in front of me each day in our heterogeneous classroom.

My first homework check demonstrated that 30% of students had not attempted the assignment and another 30% had incomplete work. Classroom discussion was abysmal, and students were disengaged and disruptive. I countered with assigning the second chapter, eight comprehension questions, and a quiz the next day.

Well, they showed me! 40% of students got a zero on the quiz and 5% earned less than 50%. The other 55% received higher than ninety; clearly, there was no middle ground. Students who had the reading skills would do well, and those students with different areas of intelligence would not.

We continued in that vein for the entire novel. The final exhibition for that unit was to write an analytical paper addressing *The Great Gatsby* as the quintessential novel of the 1920s. Egads! What was I thinking—half of my students were unable to read



the novel and I am asking them to write about it and I used the word “quintessential.” It was almost as though I had set out to see just what a failure I could create. I eventually saw that I had lost a valuable teaching and learning opportunity. We all felt beat up by this experience. I could not afford to repeat this series of mistakes with future students.

I wondered how I could improve student engagement, creativity, and academic achievement while studying *The Great Gatsby* through the development of authentic curriculum. The following are the steps I took to establish a question for inquiry:

Step 1. *Create a vision for change.*

I examined my data:

- 30% no homework and 30% incomplete work
- Poor class discussion
- Daily quiz - 40% of students scored a 0
- Essay – How is *The Great Gatsby* the quintessential novel of the 1920s?
- 40% of students did not do the essay
- 90% of students indicated the *The Great Gatsby* was their least favorite unit

Step 2. *Formulate a research question.*

I needed to keep in mind that good inquiry questions are those that:

- cannot be answered yes or no
- do not begin with “why”
- could not be easily misinterpreted
- are not too narrow or too broad
- do not already have an answer

Step 3. *Turn the vision into a question.*

What would I like students to do differently; what outcomes do I want? I knew that I wanted this unit to be interdisciplinary in nature. I wanted students to have a clear understanding of the historical perspective this novel offered for a specific time period. In a conversation with a colleague, we noticed a parallel between art styles and writing styles in Fitzgerald's novels.

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students could explore new knowledge through art. We changed our essential question so that students would study the decade of the 1920s in conjunction with *The Great Gatsby* as a period of both light and dark images. For this exhibition, students would create an artistic work that captured the light or the dark aspects of an event from the 1920s or *The Great Gatsby*. We would encourage them to work through the process of creating a work of art, similar to the process used in writing a paper. Their final art piece would be the focus of a student art exhibition, open to school and community members. Students would write an abstract to accompany their artwork, describing the main idea they wanted to convey to the audience and explaining why they made the various choices of color, form, content, and style.

This work took months. I finally arrived at my question for inquiry: *How does the development and implementation of authentic arts-integrated curriculum affect student learning?* I next needed to establish what kinds of data would help me to explore this question.

Step 4. *Establish indicators to demonstrate what will signify improved student learning.* I would monitor student work, student feedback, homework completion and test scores. I would also ask members of my CFG to observe my work and offer feedback.

Step 5. *Design instruction based on an essential question.* The essential question for this new curriculum unit was, "How is *The Great Gatsby* a novel of 'light' and 'dark' images?" We watched film clips of the time period, we learned the Charleston, we studied different schools of art, and we studied the techniques artists used to create a message. We used various text-based protocols to explore the theme and characters.

Step 6. *Analyze the data.* After I had made the changes to this unit, 68% of my students reported that this was their favorite unit of study. 95% of them completed all homework assignments, and 100% of students completed their final exhibition. Students had remained engaged throughout.

Step 7. *Reflect on implications for changing practice.* While my focus for this unit was to create a visual art-integrated unit, I also wanted to appeal to as many of the multiple intelligences as possible, so my lessons and assignments were varied. As a result of changes I made to my practice, I learned that authentic curriculum promotes student engagement and investment in their learning; that students

develop critical thinking skills; and that students achieve at a higher level.

Throughout my period of inquiry, my CFG played a significant role in my learning. They helped me to formulate my inquiry question, tuned my curriculum, and conducted a descriptive review of student work. They observed my teaching, they pushed my thinking, and they motivated me with their questions and their comments. They then helped me to formulate my next question. My next cycle of inquiry was to examine how authentic curriculum and instruction improved student learning. My questions build on my learning from my first question.

There is nothing easy about this work. I spent two years digging at the question and searching for answers in my students' performance and achievement. I remember, however, the feeling of isolation I experienced when I lectured, piled on more and more punishing assignments, and watched my students fail. When I lean on my colleagues for help, I know that we are all in this together—all focused on improving student learning. When I know that my colleagues care about my work, it makes a difference. ■

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⁷ See Palmer, *Courage to Teach*, pp. 73–77, for elaboration on the six paradoxes of space.

⁸ For a detailed introduction to one underlying set of theories and assumptions about how our current behaviors, beliefs and assumptions are often linked to past memories and experiences that have been hurtful (e.g., racism, sexism, and classism), see Julian Weissglass, "Constructivist Listening for Empowerment and Change," *The Education Forum*, Vol. 54, No. 4, Summer 1990. ■

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