Engaging Curiosity

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As a principal in a small K-9 school, last year I used the Learning in Depth program to begin delving into personalizing the learning in our school and to undertake an inquiry project as part of the Island Leadership Coalition here on Vancouver Island. Experienced with Dr. Kieran Egan of Simon Fraser University's 's Imaginative Education, I wanted to know if this way of learning could also ignite our learners' curiosity and imagination and help them take their learning even deeper. My questions were, "Will students engage with the learning?" and "How do I best support their learning?"

Learning in Depth, or LiD, is also the innovation of Egan and part of the Imaginative Education Research Group, www.ierg.net. The basic idea behind Learning in Depth is that in the first week of school, each learner is assigned an individual topic. They are given the freedom to learn about the aspects of their topic that interest them and how they present their learning is also an individual choice. They will continue to learn about this topic for the entirety of their elementary and secondary education, along with the usual curriculum. They meet regularly with their supervising teachers, who are there for guidance and support as the learners build personal portfolios on their topics. There are no grades given or formal assessments done for this part of their learning. These learners are given a unique opportunity to learn about something in great depth, while discovering more about their own strengths and interests as they do so.

Topics need to be broad enough and deep enough to sustain learning for a student's 13 years of school. The list of potential topics is large, and includes fairytales, submarines, birds, rodents, moths and whales among many others. Having known most of our learners for the previous two years, I assigned topics I believed they would enjoy early in September and immediately found an interesting pattern. In our primary classroom, K-3, I had only one learner unhappy with my choice. In our intermediate group, grades 4-6, I had three learners choose new topics, and in our secondary classroom, grades 7-9, five topics were switched within a few months in order to facilitate their engagement. The difference in effort was significant in all cases after the changes were made. This pattern agrees with Egan's later suggestion that older learners be given more autonomy in their topic choice.

From observations and conversations, we found many benefits for our learners, myself as their teacher, and our entire school.

I have observed our learners benefit from:

- being given the opportunity to learn very deeply about something, as opposed to the relatively more shallow knowledge gained as teachers try to cover the many learning outcomes for any given year

- high engagement levels as the decisions about where to take their learning are very personal

- knowing that they are accomplishing the learning on their own and seeing the confidence and pride in that knowledge

- learning to get organized as they are learning how to find, qualify, and sort information

- being given the opportunity to learn what their preferences and strengths are for learning

For myself as their teacher, I have and am enjoying:

- learning along with our students, modelling inquiry and enthusiasm for discoveries

- the removal of pressures from grading which frees up more time for supporting and coaching learning

- seeing the students excited about their learning, it engages me as well

- seeing the possibilities inherent in enabling our learners to become more self directed

The school as a whole is profiting from:

- having younger and older learners who have related topics, collaborating and mentoring each other

- the idea that the school will, over time, have learners who are very knowledgeable about a wide array of topics

- the enthusiasm, pride and growing confidence of the students

- the interest and professional learning it has inspired in our teachers, enriching the culture of the school

- the potential to involve mentors from the community and beyond with learners and their projects

Our library clerk graciously allowed LiD to quite take over that space with an ever expanding array of resources. Beyond the computers, books and magazines that you would expect to find in a library, this one now contains anything & everything from paint and paper mâché, to microscopes, batteries, electric and gas motors, glues guns, modelling clay, soil, seed and dust bunnies. It has become what many school libraries are becoming, unquiet and full of life.


The learners very quickly gravitated to their natural strengths. For example, we found we have a child in grade three who is a very talented at sculpture when she chose to show what she knows about farm animals through building a barnyard and fashion its residents. Another young learner who struggles with reading and writing has an amazing aptitude toward engineering discovered through his efforts at ship building using different mediums. We have story tellers and scientists as well as artists and engineers.

The learners also quickly began to show an interest in what their classmates were up to. There are occasional requests to help each other and this is allowed for short periods of time as the collaboration and enthusiasm is beneficial for both parties. Children who may not usually be a star in the classroom get a self esteem boost as they are sought after when they're working on a project others are curious about. I know I'll never forget all of us outside, willing to freeze in the cold, to watch the rocket engine experiment. We all wanted to see if it would ignite, which it did.

The primary age children are very enthusiastic about their LiD topics and projects. They require more time and attention than their older counterparts because they are not readers or writers yet. Teaching skills such as how to scan for information and tracing, and encouraging drawing, building, painting and collages are helpful. It is also clear for many children that adding to their portfolio stimulates their interest in learning to read and write.

The intermediate students are a lot of fun to support. They are more independent than the little ones because they have their foundational skills and a lot of natural curiosity and motivation to learn. This group rarely loses their focus on their projects, which are as varied as their topics.
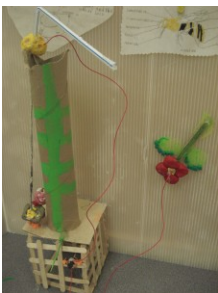
The secondary class has some interesting quirks. As well as being more determined to choose their own topics, they also struggle more with the freedom of choosing how to pursue their learning. From my observations and conversations with a few of them who had difficulty deciding on a project and staying with it, I believe that we have trained them very well over the previous years to be very dependent on their teachers for direction. There is also less variety in the types of projects they chose to complete, with Power Points and science fair type project boards being the standard, while the younger learners are creating stories, models, and conducting experiments. This September, I offered up a list of possible options and this seems to have helped. There are now also some simple computer games, Prezis (an engaging online presentation tool), and magazines being developed with the intent of linking them to their developing e-portfolios.

The secondary class is also the only place where I've been asked for a new topic from two students because they're "finished" with theirs now, after completing one project on it. A chat was necessary on what the depth part of Learning in Depth is all about. This hasn't been an issue at all with the younger students who were very eager to continue with their topics this September.

To answer the engagement question for my inquiry, I chose to survey the students to discover what their thoughts were. I used engagement measures proposed by Valerie Hannon and Tony McKay at 2010's BC School Superintendents Association conference, which are that the learner:

- **cares not just about the outcome, but also the development of their learning**

The results of the first question, put to them as, "You care about your learning, not just your final presentation," clearly indicate engagement from the primary and intermediate classes which is consistent with my experiences with them. Half of the secondary learners indicated never or sometimes, the other half often or always. Combined results show that the interest is strong, with 79% choosing often or always.

- **takes responsibility for their own learning**

I would also agree with the overall results of the second question, "You are taking responsibility for your own learning, not relying on someone else to tell you what to do and to do it. " Although not a single learner responded with never to this, there are a small number that struggle with it from time to time and need support and refocusing. I have found these few to be mainly within our older learners who I believe are unused to the freedom and lack of direction. For the most part, I am finding our learners willing and able to take on this responsibility and 78% indicated often or always as their response.

- **brings discretionary energy to their learning task(s)**

Given the results of the last question and my observations that tell me that the majority of our learners are engaged and productive as a rule, I am a bit puzzled by the results of, "You work harder on your LiD project than some of your other school work." While it's true that only two students responded with never to this statement, only 32% of all learners combined responded with often or always, the majority across the grades choosing sometimes. Maybe it needs to be looked at as significant that 90% of all students say that at least sometimes or more often, they work harder on their LiD projects.

- **can locate the value of their learning beyond school and wishes to prolong their learning beyond school hours**
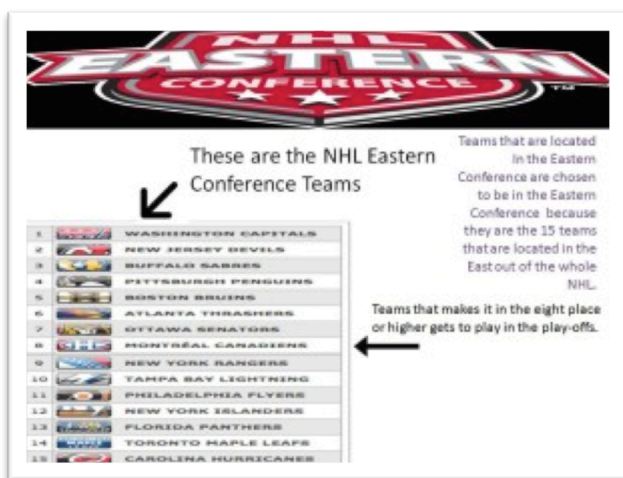

I would have liked to have seen stronger results on the fourth question, "You work on your LiD project outside of school hours." While only nine learners said never, only ten said often or always with the majority choosing sometimes. This may be a fault of mine for not clearly setting this as an expectation and following up on it regularly with students and parents. Still, three times as many students as not have worked on their projects somewhere other than school. Not bad for not having any assigned homework!

The answer to my second question of "How do I best support this learning?" has been suggested by others who have claimed that the teacher's role in the 21st century will increasingly become that of tutor, mentor, & coach along with expert. I am finding that to be the case as I use my own observations and informal conversations with learners to find out what was and is important in my role as teacher in this endeavour. Learners have told me that what helps them the most is asking them questions about their learning and where they're going next, helping to keep them on task, and always, always, by providing them with the resources they need.

- I use Imaginative Education's cognitive tools such as binary opposites and rhyme, rhythm and patterns for the mythic crowd in the primary classroom, extremes and limits and heroic qualities for the intermediate romantics and the drive for generality and the lure of certainty for the philosophics in the secondary classroom. These ideas from Egan help me generate ideas and ask engaging questions that appeal to our learners when they become stuck for ideas of their own. There are also a number of useful resources on the LiD website that support the teacher in helping the learners to push deeper and wider into their topics (http://www.ierg.net/LiD/teacherschool-resources/).

- There is still a place for direct instruction, although I'm finding it more likely to happen in small groups or even one on one. Skills such as scanning for information, using the library's numerical system, creating a Prezi, power point or animation, checking an internet source's reliability, and mixing paper mâché paste still need to be taught.

- Finally, listening and sharing in the excitement over a new idea or something they're learning has an important place in this list.
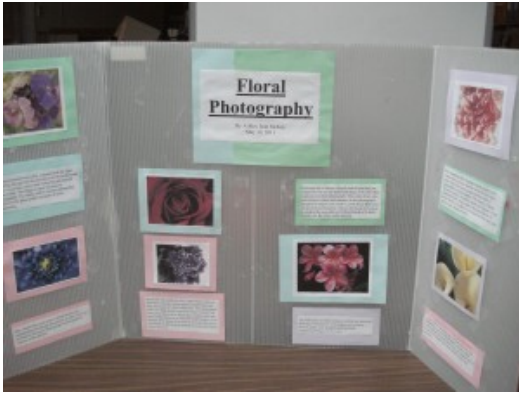
I am finding Learning in Depth to be time very well spent. I have watched our learners develop pride and self-confidence along with their knowledge about how they learn best and about their topics. I am reassured that our learners still have a lot of natural curiosity and that it is highly rewarding to support them as they learn to trust their strengths and dig a little deeper.

*Note: I am no longer at this school, having accepted a new position in a middle school in the Gulf Islands, British Columbia, in November. However, LiD is still going strong at my previous school as it is strongly supported by the learners, classroom teachers and parents there and, of course, I already have it underway here for the learners in my new school.