

Delving into Inquiry Learning in Teacher Education at the University of British Columbia

Explorer l'apprentissage par enquête dans la formation des maitres à l'Université de la Colombie-Britannique

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Article abstract

This paper discusses a series of inquiry-based seminars that are central to the teacher education program at the University of British Columbia. This teacher education program reflects the changing curriculum in the province. The new inquiry-based provincial curriculum is being implemented between 2015 and 2018 and the teacher education program is changing to reflect the practical needs of the teacher candidates. As teacher candidates become more familiar with the practices of inquiry, their professional practice changes as well.

DELVING INTO INQUIRY LEARNING IN TEACHER EDUCATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

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ABSTRACT. This paper discusses a series of inquiry-based seminars that are central to the teacher education program at the University of British Columbia. This teacher education program reflects the changing curriculum in the province. The new inquiry-based provincial curriculum is being implemented between 2015 and 2018 and the teacher education program is changing to reflect the practical needs of the teacher candidates. As teacher candidates become more familiar with the practices of inquiry, their professional practice changes as well.

EXPLORER L'APPRENTISSAGE PAR ENQUÊTE DANS LA FORMATION DES MAÎTRES À L'UNIVERSITÉ DE LA COLOMBIE-BRITANNIQUE

RÉSUMÉ. Cet article s'intéresse à une série de séminaires portant sur l'apprentissage par enquête et au cœur du programme de formation des maîtres à l'Université de la Colombie-Britannique. Ce programme de formation des maîtres illustre les changements de programme en cours dans cette province. Le nouveau programme provincial basé sur l'apprentissage par enquête est mis en œuvre entre 2015 et 2018. Par conséquent, le programme de formation des maîtres est adapté afin de répondre aux besoins concrets des futurs enseignants. À mesure que les futurs enseignants seront familiers avec les pratiques d'apprentissage par enquête, ils modifieront leur pratique enseignante.

Adjunct teaching faculty in teacher education provide the unique benefit of being immersed in the realities of practice, offering insight and expertise from the field, and connecting with community partnerships. A substantive portion of the Teacher Education Program at the University of British Columbia (UBC) is taught by adjunct teaching faculty who are seconded to the university for three to five days a week for between three and five years in duration. These faculty members have deep knowledge of practical contexts and are experienced with the professional realities of teaching in Vancouver.

While working at UBC, the adjunct teaching faculty see first-hand where and when learning happens in teacher education. As part of a community of practice, these faculty engage in inquiry into their own practice, often questioning what constitutes learning, knowledge, and understanding in a professional teacher education program. These adjunct teaching faculty, with varied responsibilities as instructors and course coordinators, have their feet in both the schools and the university. As adjunct faculty, they are responsible to coordinate, design, and instruct courses in the teacher education program. The teaching load may include courses in teaching methodologies, inquiry methods, and practicum supervision. As such, they are instrumental in helping to transform teacher education in response to the diverse demands on current and future teachers by bridging best classroom practice and educational research. This praxis is an example of the way that adjunct teaching faculty, as teacher educators, are shaping professional programs in response to the rapidly changing context and curriculum of education in the network information age.

Both of the authors have, at different times, worked as adjunct teaching faculty in teacher education at UBC. Claire has been involved with the teaching, and now program coordination and design, of the three Inquiry Seminars since their inception. Andrea facilitated a program, based in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), which created a community of practice for the adjunct teaching faculty. The program was designed to support the incoming adjunct teaching faculty and to encourage them to investigate their practices as teacher educators. This paper stems from our collaborative conversations about teaching the Inquiry Seminars.

Since 2012, teacher candidates in the 12-month Bachelor of Education program at the University of British Columbia have taken three required courses, Inquiry Seminars 1, 2 and 3. These courses are designed to immerse teacher candidates in an inquiry approach to their own learning about teaching and education (Carr, MacTavish, & Phelan, 2012). As guiding principles, the courses are grounded in research and current practice on teacher and student inquiry and embed inquiry as fundamental to the learning process (Falk & Blumenreich, 2005).

Although the focus of the Inquiry courses is on understanding and implementing teacher inquiry as an approach to deepening learning about education, an important focus of the course is to develop an inquiry mindset that teacher candidates can bring to their own teaching in their practicum classrooms and beyond. A focus on the inquiry process precedes teacher candidates' approach to lesson design and student engagement. For instance, a teacher candidate may take students to the playground for a lesson on measurement, combining real world application and authentic approaches to learning. The inquiry process allows both instructor and teacher candidates to delve into the elements of inquiry and, as Short (2009) states, both student and teacher learn

“in experience not just *from* experience” (p. 18). The experience of engaging in the inquiry project is as much a part of the learning process as the outcome.

The process is neither linear nor simple. Many of the teacher candidates have successfully navigated a fairly traditional educational system and have been successful in approaches to learning that value the “right” answer as opposed to problem-solving and diverse paths to knowledge. In inquiry learning, teacher candidates are invited to explore through inquiry, to problematize issues, and to problem-solve as opposed to receiving a prescribed set of skills or one right way to approach teaching. The course disrupts traditional ways of understanding and learning in higher education. This process can be uncomfortable and lead to some teacher candidates feeling “off balance” and “in tension,” terms Short (2009) uses to describe the experience of gaining new insights through the inquiry process. Students are asked to make a paradigm shift in the way they approach knowing and learning about teaching, from facts to concepts, from covering curriculum to deepening understanding, from common understanding to problematizing.

The Inquiry courses themselves have evolved and continue to evolve through teacher candidate feedback, instructor inquiry through the SoTL program, and adjustments to cohort foci at the elementary level. There are a variety of cohort focus areas including social and emotional learning, arts and creativity, Indigenous education, and problem based learning. Each elementary cohort is structured around a focus, which is adjusted to best meet the needs of the teacher candidates and in response to provincial curriculum changes. As a new curriculum in British Columbia, which places an emphasis on personalized learning, is now being implemented, the inquiry approach has become more evident and grounded in school-based practice. The redesigned curriculum places emphasis on core competencies in communicating, critical thinking, and social and emotional understanding. The Big Ideas are the key concepts in an area of learning at each grade level. They represent what students will understand and open the way for inquiry based and interdisciplinary learning connected to students’ interests (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2015). The inquiry process the teacher candidates follow is aligned with these ideas. The Teacher Education Office expects that teacher candidates will leave the program with a beginning teacher’s understanding of current practices in teaching and learning.

The Inquiry Seminars are based around three integrated courses that span the 12 months of the teacher education program. In the first Inquiry course, taken in the first term of the program, teacher candidates are introduced to an understanding of teaching as reflective, complex, and intellectually demanding. This process requires much discussion around preconceived ideas as the teacher candidates engage in three key aspects during the term:

- an understanding of teaching as a moral and intellectual activity requiring inquiry, judgment and engagement with multiple others – students, parents, colleagues, and the scholarly community.
- an appreciation of the importance of research in understanding curriculum and teaching and learning.
- a desire to engage in their own educational inquiries – to become students of teaching. (Teacher Education Office, n.d)

During the first Inquiry Seminar course, teacher candidates explore the concept and structure of what makes a good question. The inquiry topics are frequently based on questions that arise about their own schooling and learning or are about what they have witnessed in classrooms and other settings: the topics teacher candidates choose range widely and are usually, but not always, embedded in a school context. For example, teacher candidates may choose to explore ways of teaching about self-regulation, play-based learning, or embed outdoor learning in academic subjects. Their questions rise out of personal experiences such as understanding ways that teachers can support students in times of grieving or are prompted by classroom observations such as how teachers can use group work in a primary classroom or support children with anxiety. As teacher candidates select, define, and refine their questions, instructor support is ongoing and structured, just as it would be in school-based inquiry, and the focus is on process as opposed to final product. Instructors participate, as a critical friend, in the inquiry process and learn about topics alongside the students, modeling an approach in which there are no formulaic answers. Instructors engage in their own inquiry projects as part of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) and use inquiry approaches in their own teaching. Many instructors are teaching part-time in their own districts and exploring inquiry learning in their classrooms. Teacher candidates have the opportunity to share at conferences and share with colleagues in schools. This is an easier process for some students than for others: some struggle, at least initially, with the ambiguity and disequilibrium they feel as a result of the process of learning, without a set of prescribed set of how-tos or right answers. However, by the time they are immersed in the project in the second term Inquiry Seminar, most are deeply engaged in the topic and looking for ways to extend their learning into their teaching and understanding in classroom contexts.

Throughout the second term Inquiry Seminar, the teacher candidates' questions are further explored, refined, redefined, reflected upon, and discussed with other teacher candidates, instructors, and educators. Because the inquiry projects do not go through the ethics process at the university, students are not able to use their school experiences as evidence but are able to make personal connections and observations and connect informally with other educators and researchers in the field. There are opportunities to collaborate in small groups with teacher candidates looking into similar topics, time set aside for

one-on-one consultation and feedback from instructors and opportunities to engage in “living inquiry” sessions with other cohorts. In a very real way, teacher candidates create their first professional learning community as they investigate and deepen their learning through collaboration and discussion. Teacher candidates often express surprise and excitement at the transfer of understanding through teacher inquiry and begin integrating inquiry-based learning into their own practice with increasing confidence. In Claire’s journey as an instructor of these courses over the last four years, she has deepened her understanding of the inquiry process and ways of supporting students to take ownership of how they represent their learning.

To share their process – a key aspect of teacher inquiry – teacher candidates choose a personalized format, which can vary from drama to a small-group presentation, from short videos to song, or from a traditional class-long presentation to a TED talk format. They then begin the 10-week school-based practicum and continue with the reflective process that will enable them to live and build on their understanding. During this practicum, they teach at least four weeks full time in the classroom, with support from the teacher advisor.

For the third and final Inquiry course, the focus in the last three years has been to reflect on educational commitments and understandings, in a general way encompassing the whole year’s inquiry project. In the spirit of improving and adapting practice based on reflection and feedback, instructors are planning for a renewed focus on the informal documentation, by the teacher candidates, of the practicum experiences and the ways in which the inquiry project was lived during practicum, providing a rich forum for discussion and reflection in the final month of the program.

As with any new direction, there have been challenges and adjustments, but also many opportunities for new approaches and collaboration. Recently, the Social and Emotional Learning cohort, with which Claire was connected, took inquiry-based learning into the school setting, combining the social studies methodologies course and Inquiry Seminar 1 in a school-based project. Over the course of the term, 34 students worked in 17 classrooms at a collaborating school in a local district. With support from school administration and staff and UBC instructors, the teacher candidates were placed in 17 classrooms in teaching pairs. They sought student input to choose an area of interest in their classroom, held discussions, and, from these, developed a project plan with both a social studies and inquiry focus which they then implemented in classrooms from Kindergarten to Grade 7. Topics ranged from studying the history and functioning of toilets, to the respiratory system in the human body, to learning about Canada through Indigenous and immigrant lenses. At the same time, the students were planning for their own inquiry questions embedded in the rich environment of living student inquiry.

The depth of learning, engagement, and excitement has been palpable and many of the teacher candidates took up their inquiry topics during practicum. For instance, two teacher candidates exploring the value of the outdoor classroom, taught a series of lessons in the outdoors and were part of a panel discussing the value of the outdoor classroom at a teacher conference.

In response to feedback from teacher candidates and instructors, there have been changes in foci to the seminars to include a stronger focus on engaging in inquiry as a process as opposed to a project, a commitment to engaging in the inquiry topic during school and community practica, and in the final seminar, the option of an “exit interview” which may include developing a plan for professional growth to include further exploration of the initial topic or of a different focus that has emerged. In line with the cyclical process of inquiry, the design of the seminars is responsive and builds on experience. Instructors meet regularly to debrief and discuss on-going adaptations and ways to strengthen the links to practice.

Through the Inquiry Seminars, teacher candidates come to understand the value of an inquiry mindset in teaching and learning and course instructors have the opportunity to teach the same group through two, or even all three of the courses, and follow the progression of the inquiry process within a community of learners. As teacher candidates gain experience and knowledge through the yearlong program, their connections between theory and practice deepen and from the perspective of their own professional learning, they enter the profession grounded in an inquiry mindset and the value of professional learning through teacher inquiry.

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