

What Makes a Thoughtful Inquiry?

A Thinking Guide for Inquiry in BC Schools

A clear focus on deep learning

“This will make a difference for our learners.”

Classroom based

“What we do together in our classrooms will make the difference.”

Important

“This area and question really matters. The area is important (not trivial).”

Do - able

“We will know within this school year what difference we are making.”

Interesting

“We are genuinely curious and motivated about what we will discover.”

Evidence is classroom based

“We understand, own and use this information.”

“The use of criteria for quality are a central part of our work.”

The Whole School is the Focus Over Time

“We know we need to get started with a few key people but we are designing our inquiry with an impact on the whole school in mind.”

Learning About School Inquiries from the BC Network of Performance Based Schools and from International Networks of Inquiry

Your **school wide** inquiry has more learning power when it is...

RIGHT SIZED

It is “right sized” – it is not too complex or too broad.

Some schools make their inquiries too big or too complicated or inquire about too many areas at once.

Advice: Develop an inquiry that is big enough to be interesting to you and yet is also focused enough that you can make good progress in a school year.

Examples:

- Will the identification and team teaching of specific grade-appropriate reading strategies increase student learning in reading?
- Will the direct teaching of the social responsibility quick scales result in a) Deeper student understanding of what it means to be a socially responsible citizen? b) More socially responsible student behavior?
- Does the teaching of specific stylistic tools (adapted from an organized writing improvement program) have a significant impact on student writing and are our students able to articulate their thinking regarding exemplary writing practice?

LINKED

Your inquiry is connected to your other school learning work – it is not a question in isolation from your ongoing work. It fits with your overall thinking about what matters.

Advice: When you make student learning in a VITAL AREA a focus of your inquiry, it helps to create coherence, motivation and meaning for learners and teachers.

Examples:

- When teachers use the performance standards for numeracy, will students become more aware of the importance of strategy, approach, application, and communication? Will student work show improvement in these four areas when performance standards are used to evaluate numeracy projects in both Science and Math?
- Can we improve writing performance by teaching students the content of the BC quick scales in writing and assessing learner work against the fully meeting criteria in seven school-wide writing opportunities this year?

EVIDENCE-BASED

It is based on a strong evidence foundation – from both research and practice. Inquiry is not an evidence free practice.

Advice: Build your inquiry on the best of what we currently know professionally from BOTH practice and research – and then design a question that suits your context and school culture.

Examples:

- Will student learning in literacy/reading improve if all the learners in our school receive uninterrupted literacy instruction until recess daily?
- Will the use of performance standards for first peer and then self-assessment deepen learner awareness of personal strengths and areas for growth and improve the quality of persuasive writing?

DEEP

Your question deals with the deeper areas of learning – it is not a shallow, surface issue. Learner meta-cognition will result – the learners will be able to explain their own thinking using the language of the performance standards criteria for quality.

Advice: Choose a question that is important and tough – one that will require you to think about new practices and, possibly, unlearn old deeply

habitual routines. Make sure you plan for deep, ongoing teacher learning support on an immediate, annual and long-term basis.

Examples:

- How does the use of a research-derived individual set of strategies improve critical thinking skills during mathematical problem solving?
- Will teaching and modeling math language improve the understanding and problem-solving ability of primary and intermediate students as measured by the numeracy performance standards?
- Does teaching students to self-evaluate their problem solving strategies actually improve their ability to tackle higher-level mathematics problems?
- Does student daily self-assessment of writing, using guidelines for writing based on the performance standards, improve their writing?

FAIR

Your work considers the importance of moving learners out of the “not yet” group. Network members believe that educational fair play means that we will make sure as many of these learners as we can possibly reach move into the approaching and meeting and exceeding levels of learning. By sharing improvement strategies that work with these learners quickly province-wide the Network intends to make a contribution to both equality and quality of outcomes for BC learners.

Advice: We now have strong evidence from formal research and practitioner scholars in the Network that cross-grade work that is well structured makes a big difference to learners in the areas of citizenship, reading, writing, math problem-solving and active health/social responsibility. This evidence base must be put to work in our inquiries as it has provided such strong learning for both the older and younger learners.

Examples:

- By setting individual reading goals, working closely with senior tutors (our own students) and thoughtfully focusing free reading time, can we move 90 per cent of our students to the meeting and exceeding levels in the reading performance standards? (From our current level of 73 – over two years)
- In a rapidly changing school, will teaching common reading strategies and using the performance standards for reading school-wide lead to all our learners meeting expectations in reading comprehension as measured by several strands of the performance standards as well as by the performance-standards based district reading assessment?
- How will the direct instruction of specific reading strategies improve students' reading comprehension skills - particularly with students who are not currently meeting expectations?

PRACTICAL

Network members understand from their own experience with inquiry that it is challenging to develop a good question to get you started – and this work is based on a form of action learning that asks whether what you learn will be informative as well as whether it will help you make improvements in learning success for your students.

Advice: Read the questions from other schools like yours – ones that have a similar context and interest. Generate and refine an initial question and get started on assessing where your learners are – the starting point. This is not formal research – this is inquiry-mindedness with a strong action orientation. Over time, groups of staff working with curiosity and an interest in classroom learning, evidence and sharing ideas will make a difference. So – get started and refine your thinking as you learn more.