What Makes
Good Inquiry Learning?

In some ways trying to answer this question is like trying to answer the question "How long is a piece of string?"
However it is a very important question for any school implementing Inquiry Learning as a school-wide approach to consider.

Different people will have different ideas, and different 'experts' will all push their own theories and ideas. It would be foolish to think that I would be any different, so the following material comes with an **'Opinion Warning'**. The ideas expressed here have been formed over seven years of working with schools as they implement Inquiry Learning. They are based on experience, but are still opinions and as such need to be weighed carefully in the light of your own experiences, knowledge and understanding, and compared to what others are also saying.
I believe there are a number of aspects that are essential to be considered as you form your own answer to this question.(**Goals**, **Celebration of Found or Celebration of Understood**, **Resources**, **Student Driven or teacher Directed**, **Individual or Collaborative**, **Wonderings and Wanderings**)

Goals:

What is you purpose or goal for implementing Inquiry Learning as a classroom approach?
This question, on the surface, may seem to unrelated to the issue of quality Inquiry Learning, but it is a crucial question because good
inquiry for you as a school (or as an individual teacher) must ultimately be measured in terms of the outcomes. If you have a clear reason and purpose for implementing inquiry learning then 'good inquiry learning' is that which helps you to effectively achieve those goals.

The two most common reasons I hear for implementing Inquiry Learning are "As a means of curriculum integration" and "Developing independent learning skills in students".

Curriculum Integration:

This response concerns me, because the underlying issue is usually a curriculum rather than a learning issue. Most schools and teachers feel increasingly under pressure to meet growing societal demands and pressures, their curriculum is becoming crowded, and there is not enough hours in the day to cover everything people now want to hold schools responsible for. The major issue is curriculum quantity and you cannot fix a curriculum quantity issue by changing classroom methodology. If you want to address curriculum quantity in a powerful and effective manner then you need to go back to your school vision, clarify your core learning goals, and then re-develop your curriculum to meet those goals. Implementing inquiry learning as a way of integrating curriculum is a fallacy. What tends to happen is the creation of an approach where students are exposed to an increasing number of aspects in shallow formats, and the pressure on teachers is increased.

Developing Independent Learners:

This is the response that I look for and long to hear. These are the schools that I look forward to working with because this goal fits my philosophy and sits comfortably with my understanding of what inquiry learning is really about. In fact if this is not a school's prime goal for implementing inquiry learning then my advice is to find some approach other than Inquiry Learning to achieve their goals because Inquiry Learning is not easy to implement well into a school. If the development of independent learners is a prime goal then 'good inquiry' is that which actually helps you to achieve that goal. Of course this opens other issues like assessment.

Celebration of Found or Celebration of Understood:

These two concepts were coined by by Dr Ross Todd (2003) in his discussions of how a learner goes through a process where they connect with, interact with, and utilise information to build new knowledge and understanding. He stresses that the process should "celebrate the understood" rather than "celebrate the found". Many models and processes include stages where learners 'communicate' or 'share' what they have found. when I examine or critique inquiry tasks in schools one of the first questions I pose is **"What are the students being asked to do with the information they have found?"** Many inquiry tasks I see in schools simply ask students to feed back in some way the found information. An approach is also criticised by Kuhlthau's (2001) who raised concerns about classroom practice that is based on the transmission approach of finding and reproducing an answer. As I examine inquiry tasks I look for tasks that require the students to find information within the context of some form of need or problem and then requires the students to apply that information. when these students share the outcomes they celebrate their solutions, their decisions, their thinking, the outcomes they have created and the understanding they have developed. To me this is 'good inquiry learning'.

Resources:

If we are are trying to equip or students with the skills of learning then we need to make sure that success is a major part of their learning experiences, for nothing will disenchant young learners quickly then hours of frustration and failure. A major aspect, I believe, is that of information resources. It is very easy to construct, or negotiate with students, wonderful sounding inquiry learning tasks that end up walking our students into deep black holes where there is no relevant, applicable, useful information that is at a level they can comprehend.

Any Inquiry approach that allows this to happen on a regular basis has to be challenged. A 'good' implementation of inquiry learning is one that deliberately sets out to ensure that students have access to sound sources of information at appropriate levels of difficulty.

Student Driven or Teacher Directed:

This is an issue that can be contentious, for many people believe that 'good inquiry' is pupil directed. I believe that 'good inquiry' will take students through three main stages on their journey towards being skilled learners.

Teacher Directed: The first step is where teachers craft high quality tasks, tasks that target 'celebration of understanding', where students are expected to apply and use the found information in some way, and tasks that are fully supported by quality resources at levels appropriate to the students' skills. Students who have worked through a number of such tasks, been supported with extensive scaffolding, have developed their own understanding of 'good inquiry', will have built and developed some foundational inquiry skills and will have experienced success.

Negotiated: The second step is for students (who have demonstrated a range of foundational skills) to move into tasks that they negotiate with the teacher. These tasks will bring with them more issues in terms of availability and suitability of information, less scaffolding support, and require skills at a more advanced level. Students will be supported to negotiate high quality tasks that target application of information and 'celebration of understanding'.

Pupil directed: This final stage is the ultimate goal of 'good inquiry', these are students who have developed a sound set of learning and information skills and are equipped to work as independent learners.

Individual or Collaborative:

Effective independent learners are not people who work in isolation, but rather are learners who realise that their own learning is often enhanced by collaboration, for it is in the meeting of minds and communication and discussion of ideas that the majority of insights and understandings are nurtured and developed. I am a firm believer in the concept of 'collaborative inquiry' and generally have students working together in groups of three. I find that there are a number of powerful dynamics in threes.

- Three seems to be a good size for open communication
- Decisions are easier than with larger numbers
- If one student is absent then the group can still work

- Three is a very easy number for teachers to monitor, 'passengers' and 'dominators' are very easy to identify.

Wonderings and Wanderings:

No matter how well a teacher constructs, designs and scaffolds an inquiry unit, students will find all sorts of tangents that grab and fascinate them. I believe there are two ways of handling these, and 'good inquiry' should have enough freedom in the process and structure to allow teachers and pupils ability to choose appropriately between the two responses to these tangents.

Wonderings: These are the tangents you encourage students to pursue in their own time as forays into independent learning. Students will not have the support and scaffolding and may well walk into some frustrations and problems with resources. ensure that there is opportunity for students to share back their findings and new insights, celebrate their successes and critique supportively their frustrations. I suggest a large wall chart where students' wonderings are recorded during the main inquiry unit.

Wanderings: These are more complicated and take more teacher involvement, support and management. the concept off a 'wandering' is where you have a student, or group of students, who have become fascinated by a tangent and want to pursue it through abandoning the original inquiry. Teachers will need to make some judgement calls and probably do some preparation themselves before they allow students to 'wander'. A good 'wandering' is one where the students will find relevant information at suitable levels, be able to find a natural application to the information they find and can celebrate their understanding at the end. A 'Good inquiry' approach is one that allows teachers the freedom to let this happen and gives them, and their students, the freedom to make these decisions.

References

Kuhlthau, C. (2001). *Rethinking libraries for the information age school: Vital roles in inquiry learning.* Keynote paper, The 2001 IASL Conference, Auckland, New Zealand, 9-12 July. Retrieved 3 February, 2003, from http://www.iasl-slo.org/keynote-kuhlthau2001.html

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