

Inquiry Learning Vs. Standardized Content: Can They Coexist?

- [Inquiry Learning Teaching Strategies](#)

By
Thom



Flickr: umjane do

Markham

As Common Core State Standards are incorporated from school to school across the country, educators are discussing their value. It may seem that educators are arguing over whether the CCSS will roll out as a substitute No Child Left Behind curriculum or as an innovative guide to encourage inquiry rather than rote learning. In reality, as time will prove, we're arguing over whether content standards are still appropriate.

Everyday there is less standardization of information, making it nearly impossible to decide what a tenth-grader should know. Beyond the core literacies of reading, writing, computation, and research, the world-wide culture of innovation, discovery, multi-polarity, interdisciplinary thinking, and rapid change depends on the explosive potential of the human mind, not entombed truths from the past. Increasingly, any standards-based curriculum is at odds with the outside world.

There is only one resolution to the debate. Sooner or later, inquiry-standards will take precedence over content-based standards. Education's core task is to prepare young people to generate new ideas, filter them through a net of critical analysis and reflection, and move the ideas through a design process to create a quality product, either as an idea or a material object. Students need information, facts, and specific knowledge for a successful outcome. But that information must be gathered during the process of creation, in a usable, just-in-time format not found in "subjects."

If you're a teacher in tune with the needs of your students, you sense the disconnect between the curriculum

and reality. You'd like the freedom to respond more directly to student needs, but standardized information and testing remains a barrier to innovative teaching.

So how can you, as a teacher, help move the dialogue forward? First, you can focus on becoming a highly-effective project based learning (PBL) teacher. When done well, PBL is the most effective method education has at the moment to introduce and practice inquiry-based education.

But PBL is the near-term solution. The ultimate destination is to align education with the requirements of a process-based world. This means we need to invent and agree on a set of clearly prescribed methods that promote inquiry, permeate the learning environment, and become as embedded in education as the current content standards. The move to integrate 21st century skills into the curriculum is a start. But to really advance the cause, the following ideas will need to take root.

REDEFINE RIGOR. As the Google-age fully blossoms, the fundamental shift is from information to attitude. The instant, ubiquitous availability of knowledge puts enormous responsibility on the individual, as they try to sift through, discern, apply, and share information. This is not a simple cognitive exercise. Success in this environment requires a mix of self-awareness, empathy, and collaborative skills, as well as grit and self-direction. Eventually, the measure of student performance will be the demonstrated ability to use personal strengths to move gracefully through a connected world. We've started along this path, by the way. Portfolios measure personal growth and achievement; the best collaboration and teamwork rubrics assess empathy; many PBL teachers have found work ethic rubrics to be a great tool for measuring attitude and productivity.

BLEND CRITICAL THINKING, SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING, AND OTHER VALUABLE SKILLS. In the search for better inquiry methods, the gaming industry has much to teach education. A case in point is a recent article by [Mark Prensky](#), a leading games and learning advocate, who suggests reorganizing the curriculum into four areas that blend inquiry and performance. Let's call these the 4 E's: Effective Accomplishment, including portfolios, content mastery, tests, and assessment; Effective Action, including goal setting, persistence, and work ethic; Effective Relationships, including communication, teamwork, and empathy; and Effective Thinking, including critical thinking, creativity, and content acquisition. There are several advantages to developing this framework, chief of which it recognizes that the foundation for today's skills is emotional balance and self-awareness, and it integrates valuable skills into the curriculum core, rather than extending their current status as an add on to academic work.

TEACH INQUIRY SKILLS. Creativity, problem-solving, design thinking, and critical analysis are learnable skills that benefit from intentional instruction. The options are many, starting with exercises in creativity and brainstorming, regular use of protocols to practice sharing and giving feedback on divergent ideas; and consistent assessment of the inquiry process using high quality performance rubrics for problem solving, design or creativity. We've also made inroads here. The eight Mathematical Practices accompanying the CCSS math sequence is an impressive guide to inquiry skills. But so far it's been difficult to locate a missing link: A performance rubric for students that defines their level of performance on each practice.

MAKE COHORTS AND TEAMS THE PRACTICE, NOT THE EXCEPTION. Probably the most deeply embedded norm of industrial education, originating from the 15th century, is the ideal of the individual scholar. The default mode is to aim teaching at a single student, and assess and recognize accomplishments gained through individual performance. But we must shift this towards

[team learning](#). The collaborative world succeeds through interaction and exchange, and it's important to move towards deep, peer-driven learning and performance. A supportive team that meets regularly during the course of a unit will provide feedback and help each student produce a better individual product. In an inquiry-based classroom, this should be standard practice.

SEE THE BALANCE BETWEEN INQUIRY AND CONTENT AS A DYNAMIC. This dilemma—

THE CIRCLE OF CONTROL. The chief obstacle to an inquiry-based system is us. To give up a content-based curriculum, with its deep traditions, proven techniques for controlling behavior and outcomes, and dominating, standardized regimen, feels like giving a 14-year old the keys to the car and a full tank of gas. It's scary. The shift into the next, non-industrial phase of schooling is a psychological issue, not just a logistical one. The world that is opening up requires faith that something new, and better, is being born, but in the short term, it can feel like it's falling apart. But I'll leave you with two thoughts. First, it's happening, whether we agree or not. Second, we'll need good minds to figure it out, meaning more of those young people in your classroom who have been well trained in the art and skill of inquiry.

Thom Markham is a speaker, writer, psychologist, school redesign consultant, and the author of the [Project Based Learning Design and Coaching Guide: Expert tools for inquiry and innovation for K-12 educators](#). To download the tools for inquiry, go to the PBL tools page on www.thommarkham.com.

Explore: [Common Core State Standards](#), [inquiry learning](#), [project-based-learning](#)

Previous Article « [Can a Toy Spark Interest in Engineering for Girls?](#)

Next Article

[Flipped Classroom 2.0: Competency Learning With Videos](#) »