Teacher Inquiry: The Catalytic and Collaborative Role of a Canadian Teacher Union

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Introduction

The purposes of this paper are to:

- explore how this teacher union Inquiry approach fits within current literature on teachers’ professional learning and autonomy
- examine and share the perspectives of teachers involved both as facilitators of teacher research and as members of teacher research groups
- discuss the nature of systemic collaboration which supports teacher research involving the teacher union and school districts

This paper session is presented by a teacher union researcher, a teacher facilitator of Inquiry Groups, and a teacher participant in an Inquiry Group. The term ‘teacher inquiry’ is used to reflect a number of approaches such as teacher research, action research and appreciative inquiry. Thus ‘teacher inquiry’ is an umbrella term allowing for a range of methods of reflective and collaborative inquiry. The union’s teacher inquiry focus is influenced by the current literature on professional learning.

Reflecting on the current BC context

The British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (BCTF) is the only teacher union in the Canadian province of British Columbia representing all teachers who work in the K–12 public school system. The BCTF’s approach to inquiry was articulated in a paper written in 2008: Teacher Inquiry in the BCTF: A Focus for supporting teachers’ professional development. This foundational document provided a basis for the continued development of teacher inquiry planned and delivered by teachers for teachers. One key feature of all efforts to build Inquiry since 2008 has been the partnership between local teacher associations and the (provincial) BCTF. Most applications come from the local teacher association office, the only exceptions being smaller, single school projects with less funding provided. This partnership has created a stronger interest among local association executives for teachers’ professional learning through Inquiry. In addition, all projects require school district funding contributions to match those provided by the BCTF. This has a dual purpose: to engage union and management in collaboration, and to send a message to teachers that the Inquiry projects have both union and management support.

In the BCTF, every local teacher association has a Professional Development (PD) Chair. PD Chairs are members of the local teacher association executive. In some school districts, the local teacher association has control over the district’s PD funds. In recent years there has been a significant shift in the role of PD Chairs, from what was essentially a ‘gatekeeper’ role in which funds were dispersed to teachers for professional development. In this role, PD Chairs were acting in a largely administrative role. The shift in some locals has been that PD Chairs have been taking a greater role in exploring and articulating new directions for teachers’ professional learning. For several PD Chairs, this has included an increased interest in teacher inquiry. The roles of those PD Chairs were explored in earlier research, and five qualities were discovered and analyzed:

2 http://bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/Issues/Teacher_Leadership/AERA2010.pdf
• a strong interest in understanding and extending experiences of professional development
• interest in the professional literature and discourse and how to apply both in pursuit of goals
• passion in terms of wanting to support teachers’ professional development
• “system navigators”, well able to negotiate school district and local/provincial teacher union tides and currents, with expanding circles of influence
• “people persons” with strong communication and empathic skills, used to be responsive to needs but also to articulate new directions
• reaching a plateau and needing to find new opportunities and challenges

It is these qualities of professional enthusiasm, skills, and navigation through frequently difficult landscapes that have built the local/central connections and built a solid base for Inquiry. One strategy that has been used by several PD Chairs is to strategically plan for developing Inquiry, with consultations within the local and with the district, then offering a day where the central teacher association’s research staff members introduce Inquiry literature, methods, and examples, and follow-up with the PD Chair and others initiating processes to form Inquiry groups. Where this has worked best, the process may take several years, but once established it appears to have a better chance of sustainability because it builds on local capacity, is voluntary, and has both union and management support.

Another strength of the union’s Inquiry approach is the creation of a provincial facilitators’ group and network. Eighteen facilitators service the various Inquiry groups (15 this year) across the province. All their costs are paid by the BCTF and do not come from grants paid for the establishment of groups. They meet twice a year for two days each time, sharing experiences and strategies, and extending their facilitation skills. A project Wiki allows for the sharing of ideas and articles relevant to Inquiry, reports on strategies that have worked well, and problem-posing with a collective input to suggest strategies. In addition, the facilitators group meets virtually once a month using Blackboard Collaborate. Some sessions have operated as a Book Club, with moderated discussions on Inquiry-focused texts. Other sessions have spent time sharing experiences with groups and also discussing short articles on Inquiry, including a recent paper on leading deep conversations in Inquiry groups (Nelson et al, 2010).

**Reflecting on the literature**

In scanning the overall evolution of the literature on teachers’ professional learning, there are arguably five visibly current trends, some dominant in specific jurisdictions, others competing whether in conceptual or contextual spaces:

• A push for greater alignment of teachers’ professional learning with managerial and system goals—common in much of the USA and England (and now emerging in British Columbia) —neither systems showing improvements despite massive managerial control.
• System support for teachers’ professional learning (including teacher inquiry) through government funding but with less managerial control—perhaps epitomized in Canada by the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI)³. Alberta has consistently reported high levels of student learning.
• The creation of ‘Standards’ of professional learning such as those produced and promoted by Learning Forward, the former NSDC,⁴ an organization producing some excellent resources

³ [http://education.alberta.ca/admin/aisi.aspx](http://education.alberta.ca/admin/aisi.aspx)
⁴ [http://www.learningforward.org/standards/standards.cfm](http://www.learningforward.org/standards/standards.cfm)
over time but with apparent and current inclinations to widely influence both managers and teachers with proselytizing and recipe-laden approaches to professional learning.

- Dichotomous approaches to Professional Learning Communities—one largely prescribed (Dufour, 2006) and others more organic and self-organizing (Hargreaves, 2007).
- The promotion of collaborative and autonomous professional learning in which teachers as professionals engage in teacher inquiry and other self-directed approaches, an approach which has built on the legacy of Action Research.

The above trends reflect our initial thinking about teachers’ professional learning based both on the literature and on our experience. The above distinctions also clearly reflect a personal bias towards the last of the five trends.

Teacher Inquiry has an approximately seventy-year history, but has a variety of labels, from Action Research to Appreciative Inquiry. It has a rich and varied international literature which is well documented elsewhere, and shares some common features:

> Inquiry, as a basis of teaching or a way of learning is well established in the literature (e.g., Dewey 1938; Schwab 1967; Wells 1999). However, it is a complex idea that can mean different things depending on the context or perspective involved. In relation to teaching and learning, some common notions associated with inquiry are learner-focused, question driven, investigation/research, communication, reflection, and collaboration. (Chapman & Heater, 2010, p. 448)

The wider field of teachers’ professional learning, also long a focus, is currently under renewed examination as teachers and education systems grapple with rapid changes in pedagogical approaches such as personalized learning using technology, while also operating in shifting community and system contexts:

> The ongoing challenge for teacher education and professional development for teachers is how to explore new ways of teaching and working with students that suit both the local context and the community, and that contribute to quality learning and high standards. Educators are realizing that teachers (pre-service, beginning or experienced) do hold implicit theories about students, the subjects they teach and their teaching responsibilities, and that these implicit theories influence teachers’ reactions to teacher education and to their teaching practice. The extent to which experienced teachers’ conceptions and beliefs are consistent with their practice depends, to a degree, on the teachers’ opportunities to critically reflect on their actions and consider new possibilities for teaching. Through this critical reflective process, teachers may be able to develop coherent rationales for their beliefs and classroom practice and may even become more aware of viable alternatives rather than proceeding on impulse and intuition. The continuum of teacher professional learning experiences begins in teacher education. Throughout their professional lives, teachers will continue to engage in ongoing professional development and learning. (Carrington, Deppeler, Moss, 2010, p. 2)

Carrington et al. stress the on-going continuum of teachers’ professional learning throughout career stages and explicitly link it to critical reflection in contexts where education is changing rapidly, a position supported by Webster-Wright (2009) in a paper which explored professional learning across a range of professions, including education, and who stated:
During the past two decades, empirical research has demonstrated that effective professional learning continues over the long term and is best situated within a community that supports learning. (p. 703)

She makes a case that across many professions there is a tendency to direct learning rather than recognize that professional learning is best when self-directed:

First, the term PD is part of a discourse that focuses on the professional as deficient and in need of developing and directing rather than on a professional engaged in self-directed learning. This discourse, and the professional context of control and standardization that perpetuates it, are rarely questioned in research or commentary about PD. (p. 712)

Deficit-model thinking is one part of the current government’s legal and contractual efforts in the province of BC to take greater control over teachers’ professional development and thereby reduce teachers’ autonomy, with explicit control articulated in documents written by the BC government’s bargaining agent, the BC Public School Employers’ Association (BCPSEA), that state that teachers are ‘employees’ who should essentially do what the employer tells them to do in terms of professional learning, rather than exercising autonomy. Their view that teachers are ‘lesser professionals’ and their belief that professional learning can be controlled within their parameter of master-servant relationships flies in the face of a wide range of literature and even ignores current business literature which has moved well beyond the narrow managerialism of BCPSEA. Analyses (Naylor, 2011a, Naylor, 2011b) of the BCPSEA positions have been written and are accessible on the BCTF website.

Prior to BCPSEA’s stance, which aims to wrest greater control over teachers’ professional learning, a range of authors had set the stage for greater teacher autonomy in professional development. Elmore (2004) argued that the best professional learning was collegial and discursive, reflecting with peers rather than having teachers pressured into directed learning:

The problem (is that) there is almost no opportunity for teachers to engage in continuous and sustained learning about their practice in the settings in which they actually work, observing and being observed by their colleagues in their own classrooms and classrooms of other teachers in other schools confronting similar problems. (p. 127)

Hargreaves (2007) also reinforced the need for teachers to control their own professional learning:

Teachers will be the drivers, not the driven—using objective evidence to help them improve, but never undervaluing their own experiential knowledge because of it. Professional learning communities will not be places for devising quick-fix solutions to disturbing data exposed by test score results, but places where wise and critical teachers engage with each other over their accumulated (though not unquestioned) knowledge using a wide range of data (not just test scores) to devise more powerful strategies that help all children learn. (p. 37)
The BCTF argues that teacher inquiry supports teacher autonomy because it provides a space and a process for self-directed professional development. Teacher participants decide the focus of their Inquiry while process facilitation is provided by the union, with school districts also contributing money for teacher release time. The union’s view of autonomy is close to that of Hall (2009), who stated:

Recent research into teachers’ careers, beliefs and professional practice (Day, Stobart, Sammons, & Kington, 2006) suggests that a resilient professional identity is supported by a degree of autonomy in how teachers practise and the extent to which they are allowed to exercise their professional creativity and develop their craft. (p 672)

Hyslop (2010) also stressed the need for professional autonomy as a counter to neo-liberal managerial control of education systems stressing accountability while also arguing that with autonomy comes responsibility:

Professional autonomy enhances rather than undermines teacher responsibility by situating educators as the primary authors of their own success or failure. This professional personal responsibility encourages teachers to take ownership of their teaching and assume greater personal responsibility for student academic achievement. Contrary to current neo-liberal assumptions focused on increased teacher accountability to administrative authority, then, we argue for the importance of teaching becoming an autonomous professional vocation. (p. 2)

These authors speak to explorations of practice in communities of peers to maximize learning through professionally-focused conversations in environments with high degrees of autonomy, an approach which fits within the teacher union philosophy of supporting teachers’ self-directed professional development while avoiding bureaucratic and imposed form of professional learning.

Some recent analysis of teacher inquiry has also focused on the power and utility of conversations in Inquiry groups. Robinson (2010) stated that, “Inquiry stimulates a qualitatively different conversation about improving teaching and learning in the school,” (p 13) indicating that teachers not only valued the conversations but that they also enabled collaboration and focus on meeting students’ needs in active and participatory ways:

Teachers felt collaborative inquiry supported a conversation that valued teacher perspectives on student learning needs and potential responses. They noticed that teacher voices were shaping the focus and pace of inquiry meetings. “In the inquiry team, there are just more teachers talking,” one teacher said. Many teachers shared that they felt freer to talk during inquiry time and saw more opportunities in the process to express opinions and ideas about their classroom practice and work with targeted inquiry students. (p. 14)

Robinson also connected teacher inquiry to teacher autonomy, arguing that inquiry processes encouraged greater teacher autonomy:

(Teachers) reported more control over their teaching because Inquiry helped them address, in concert with others, persistent problems of student learning in their classrooms. One teacher explained, “Inquiry is an opportunity for teacher leadership because it gives you more control over your own teaching. It gives you ownership and more autonomy in the classroom. It makes you want to do more
and make your colleagues do more because you see the benefits of it all and you see how it impacts the students in a positive way.” (p. 21)

Nelson, Deuel, Slavit, and Kennedy (2010) differentiated between ‘congenial’ and ‘collegial’ environments, and the forms of professional conversation taking place in the latter. They argue that congenial spaces preserve the status quo, protecting norms of privacy in terms of practice, while collegial spaces open up practice to peer scrutiny, recognize differences and accept challenges. They list four key elements to enable the shift from congenial to collegial:

- asking and answering probing questions about the reasons for, impacts of, and evidence that supports implementing specific instructional decisions;
- recognizing the value of cognitive conflict as a way to gain a deeper understanding about the complexities of teaching and learning;
- being intentional about and accountable for the nature of the dialogue in collaborative group work; and
- accessing and using tools (e.g., protocols and question prompts) to support a shift from congenial to collegial conversations. (p. 178)

Another feature of some recent literature (Loughran, 2010) involves the concept of inquiry ‘framing’ and ‘reframing’ practice and issues in practice. Loughran describes this as “seeing the same event from different perspectives,” (p. 400) a possibility enhanced through conversation and discourse with peers. Thus, the forms of Inquiry explored by Loughran are essentially collaborative, moving away from the concept of reflection as individualistic and isolated. The nature and importance of collaborative processes were emphasized by Nelson et al (2008), who stressed attention to facilitation and effective processes to support Inquiry. The role of the facilitator in Inquiry groups was also explored by Avgitidou (2009), who articulated four factors in terms of the role of the facilitators which positively impacted the Inquiry:

… joint responsibility, knowledge construction and control of the project’s development are affected by four factors: timing of collaboration, the context and purpose of meetings and discussions, the ability to share and exchange understanding based on prior situated knowledge and the ability of the facilitator to focus on questioning, reflection and empowerment of teachers rather than to impose ideas and practices. (p. 597)

This range of literature suggests an awareness of both contextual and process factors required to build collaborative inquiry, but also stresses the necessity to facilitate participants’ thinking and exploration rather than impose ideas or solutions. The literature also suggests that Inquiry takes place within organizational and political contexts, and that Inquiry, as an approach that builds autonomy through collaboration and discourse, is political in itself, so that while supported by teacher unions it may be less overtly welcomed or subject to greater monitoring and control by some school districts and governments, an argument supported by Elliot (2005) who stated that teachers have and will continue to struggle against controls that reduce autonomy, and limit reflection and peer discourse:

The space for the exercise of such (teacher) agency will not come simply as a gift from government. It will be wrought out of a political struggle, by teachers and others within society, to create the material conditions for a free, open and democratically constructed practical discourse to emerge as a context for professional action. (p. 363)
Data sources

Three sources of data were accessed in addition to a review of the literature. The first consisted of interview data with teacher inquiry facilitators and participants. Interviews were conducted, with data transcribed and analyzed for key themes (Miles & Huberman, 1984) using ATLAS-ti software for qualitative data analysis. Second, documents were retrieved and analyzed, including Inquiry planning documents and reports. Documents can provide valuable data in qualitative research (Schumacher & McMillan, 1993; Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995). They allow for a consideration of events over time, and for a variety of documents to provide diverse data to inform analysis. The third source of data collection was the Inquiry project Wiki which has been used as a source of communication and reflection by Inquiry managers and facilitators over several years. The Wiki contains a wealth of data including recordings of on-line book club discussions using web conferencing, and an exploration of ‘dilemmas’ in Inquiry facilitation which have been posted for reflection and discussion.

Results

Linking teacher union Inquiry to the literature on Inquiry and professional learning has proven of considerable interest and utility in our efforts to build effective Inquiry approaches. Accessing the literature generates reflection and discourse, and has allowed our learning community to explore a wide range of perspectives and research in order to connect it to the work of others who engage in teacher inquiry, and to consider our stance in terms of Inquiry, which is similar to that stated by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009):

> Fundamental to the notion of Inquiry as stance is the idea that educational practice is not simply instrumental in the sense of figuring out how to get things done, but also and more importantly, it is social and political in the sense of deliberating about what to get done, why to get it done, who decides and whose interests are served. Working from and with an Inquiry stance, then, involves a continual process of making current arrangements problematic; questioning the ways knowledge and practice are constructed, evaluated, and used; and assuming that part of the work of practitioners individually and collectively is to participate in educational and social change. (p. 121)

Discussing and referencing the current literature helped to build credibility within the union membership, and with partners in school districts and universities. The union’s stance on Inquiry has a basis in the literature, one open to discussion with members and potential partners. In terms of contributions to the academic community, this presentation is one of many AERA and Canadian research conferences at which our work and thinking is shared. In terms of contributing to the literature, our publishing is largely through the union’s web site rather than in academic journals. Papers on this site include analyses of literature (Naylor, 2007), and a range of conference papers (Naylor et al, 2010). In addition, facilitators (Filleul, 2009) have written for journals, thereby moving beyond the spaces of Inquiry within the union to contributing to a wider understanding.
In addition, three components of the Inquiry are explored and discussed below.

- **‘Going deeper’ in professional conversations and in community to better understand practice**

One primary goal of the union’s Inquiry approach is to encourage in-depth reflection and discussion of practice, to move beyond the superficial so that in ‘going deeper’ participants are looking critically at their own teaching while ethically and respectfully (but also critically) considering the teaching of others. Such reflection and critical thinking is possible with the greater time possible in Inquiry meetings (generally three hours per session and five or six sessions during the school year) and by a combination of attitudes and skills towards extending professional conversations so that they become richer and more focused than an exchange of pleasantries or a simple sharing of teaching strategies.

Much has been written of differences between conversation and dialogue, mostly differentiating the more mundane and uncritical discussions as conversation and more meaningful exchanges as dialogue. Yet both Gadamer (1979) and Burbules (1993) stress the depth of exchange possible. It is this increased depth of discussion about practice that is being explored here. Gadamer (1979) said:

> (Conversation) is a process of two people understanding each other. Thus it is a characteristic of every true conversation that each opens himself to the other person, truly accepts his point of view as worthy of consideration and gets inside the other to such an extent that he understands not a particular individual, but what he says. (p. 347)

Smith (2001) quoted Burbules (1993) as saying that dialogue was “but at heart a kind of social relation that engages its participants” entailing certain virtues and emotions. **concern**: In being with our partners in conversation, to engage them with us, there is more going on than talk about the overt topic. There is a social bond that entails interest in, and a commitment to the other.

- **trust**: We have to take what others are saying on faith - and there can be some risk in this.
- **respect**: While there may be large differences between partners in conversation, the process can go on if there is mutual regard. This involves the idea that everyone is equal in some basic way and entails a commitment to being fair-minded, opposing degradation and rejecting exploitation.
- **appreciation**: Linked to respect, this entails valuing the unique qualities that others bring.
- **affection**: Conversation involves a feeling with, and for, our partners.
- **hope**: While not being purely emotional, hope is central. We engage in conversation in the belief that it holds possibility. Often it is not clear what we will gain or learn, but faith in the inherent value of education carries us forward. (Smith, 2001)

These ‘states of mind’ impact our professional discourse, and become part of the union’s Inquiry thinking about how to take conversations deeper. But in addition to such states of mind we also utilize and build on skills and techniques which promote more in-depth discussion. Inquiry groups use dialogue/conversational tools such as NSDC resources on conversation and dialogue, in particular Graybill (2008). Such resources enable us to consider what it means to ‘go deeper’, as well as why and how this can be encouraged.
Within our Inquiry groups, we are learning more about how conversation can extend thinking, and about how probing questions might enable deeper understanding. While the groups rarely engage in discussion about the nature of conversation/dialogue, they have commented on the fact that the discussions within Inquiry groups are often substantively different from other conversations they have in schools. They report that the Inquiry conversations have more time, are better focused and are well supported by facilitation. When the facilitator group meets (twice a year), we also reflect on and share ideas about building in critical challenges, in ways similar to Nelson et al.’s (2010) descriptor ‘cognitive conflict,’ which we take to mean that one might offer different perspectives and critical challenges to the thinking of another without losing a sense of professional etiquette or respect.

Facilitators are encouraged to reflect on their experiences. One facilitator stated:

In conversation with my colleagues, and with the other facilitators, knowledge deepens. The opportunity to have shared conversations is so rich.

But what makes a conversation ‘rich’? The data suggest that participants felt that conversations were rich when they extended their thinking and occurred over time, not geared to an immediate action but generating deeper understanding, perhaps having explored different ideas, even going down a few dead-ends. But both facilitators and participants stated that specific techniques and protocols utilized in Inquiry enabled them to ‘go deeper’.

In addition to considering the positive applications of ‘cognitive conflict’ we have also progressed with an approach which we term ‘cognitive reflection.’ This occurs when, within a group, a person (either the facilitator or a participant) uses a strategy such as an extending series of questions. With two facilitators, one might pause the conversation and ask for reflection on what happened. The group reflects on the extending questions (or a perceptive question, a challenge, etc.), and considers their utility in terms of the subsequent discussion. This allows participants to build on skills to be used in extending thinking and discourse by recognizing the moments when they happen and by making the recognition explicit. Thus, skills are made overt and can be applied by any in the group.

We are also building on the collaborative conversation model by the use of protocols to support Inquiry discussions. These have included ORID or a range of techniques promoted by Lipton and Wellman (2003). Nelson et al (2010) have considered the use of protocols and have suggested they may have positive uses and negative consequences:

A shift from congenial to collegial conversations can also be supported by using protocols that provide processes for eliciting ideas and feedback from all group members… Also, teachers frequently tell us that these formal protocols feel artificial and awkward, as if they were trying to speak in a newly studied language. (p. 177)

Thus, ‘going deeper’ and enjoying richer conversations stem in part from explicit strategies and from the skills of facilitators in applying those strategies. Techniques such as questioning, probing, extending, and connecting conversations and themes allows for different dimensions to emerge, for new understanding of practice to evolve both for the individual and for the collective. Our research indicates that the individual’s focus on a specific Inquiry question is enhanced through conversation but we are also finding that the group as a collective benefits from shared thinking about practice. The evidence for changing individual practices has been

http://oqi.wisc.edu/resourcelibrary/uploads/resources/Facilitator%20Tool%20Kit.pdf (page 14)
presented at several ‘celebration and sharing’ sessions (each group is required to share their progress in whatever ways they choose), where participants spoke of their changing understanding through reflection and discourse. Many also spoke of how the conversations generated interest in the topics and focus of others, so that even when there appeared no direct connection, the discussion of aspects of teaching and learning benefitted all the participants.

Facilitators who discussed their experiences with the union’s Inquiry projects stated that they had often been active in school district initiatives, such as Appreciative Inquiry, or within their union, as Professional Development Chairs, a union role but one involving considerable dialogue with school district staff as well as union members. So as a precursor to facilitation of Inquiry, their skills of dialogue had been enhanced by their experiences in these roles.

They also supported Nelson et al.’s (2010) argument in mentioning that, while protocols had their use, they felt that with greater experience they could take a more intuitive approach, pulling facilitation strategies from a wide repertoire. They saw their role initially as building safe spaces for conversation and dialogue, so that participants could share stories of experience, perhaps showing where practice was not always perfect, and where some vulnerability might be exposed. But as groups progressed they stated that they initiated more constructive challenges, or created an environment where others might do the same.

Inquiry facilitators also said that conversations allow for exploration and for scaffolding of ideas so that Inquiry participants, by using active listening and probing skills, can extend their own thinking and the thinking of others. The use of professionally-focused and facilitated conversation allows for exploring the nuances of practice and links to recent literature on professional learning (Webster-Wright, 2009) which stresses moving from prescribed and controlled professional development and towards professional learning which recognizes authentic learning concepts. It does so because conversation, while facilitated in Inquiry groups, is not controlled, so that outcomes are undefined and dependent on the individual and group processing of the discourse.

- **The crucial role of facilitation in supporting teacher inquiry**

Initially our structure allowed for two facilitators per project, both of whom had support as and when required from a union staff mentor. In pairing facilitators, we aimed to link veteran and rookies. Co-facilitation proved to be pivotal to the initiative’s early success. It allowed a new facilitator to observe the skills of one more experienced, and provided some ‘down’ space (when one was facilitating and the other observing both the facilitation and the group’s dynamics). It also offered an immediate learning community of two, where planning and reflection could occur in community. The role of the union ‘mentor’ became that of an ‘as-needed’ consultant, with contact usually initiated by the facilitators, able to offer ideas on facilitation techniques, provide articles or simply to be a sounding board for considering new ideas or addressing problems within groups.

While the dual facilitation model of training new facilitators appears costly up-front, it reaped dividends in just one year of implementation, when the newest members reported feeling confident and ready to lead an inquiry group the next year. This has proven a viable model for building capacity among new and experienced members of our Inquiry facilitators.

The role of a facilitator was broadly considered as including:

- offering and managing a process while participants control the content;
- managing time and focus;
• ensuring generally equal participation;
• extending and deepening the learning through supportive processes and challenging questions.

In many ways the role of a facilitator closely matches the selected qualities of a ‘critical friend’ described by Swaffield (2004) as someone who:

• builds and maintains a relationship of trust
• brings a breadth and depth of relevant knowledge and experience, to a specific situation which he or she seeks to understand
• establishes, and adheres to, clear foci and boundaries for the task in hand
• balances friendship and critique, through personal support and professional challenge
• motivates and reassures
• is facilitative rather than directive, operating particularly through asking question and providing feedback
• seeks to enable those he or she works with to become more self-sufficient and skilled at self improvement
• from a transactional analysis viewpoint, seeks to operate with adult-adult relationships
• can be viewed as an educational connoisseur and critic. (p. 5)

Thus the role of facilitator within the Inquiry groups is seen as both logistical (time management, equal participation) and ensuring that the overall process works in a way that engages and extends the thinking of participants within a supportive and collaborative group. It’s a mix of trying to build the group’s sense of safety and encouraging participants to take risks. The facilitator ensures safety by adhering to a series of processes that are sufficiently explicit yet also flexible enough to meet a range of contextual and participants’ needs. The facilitator also encourages but manages risk by encouraging participants to explore areas of practice where they may have concerns, thereby moving to some extent outside the comfort zone but within the safety of the group. But how to develop such safety?

One example is a discussion early in the duration of an Inquiry group about individual learning needs focusing on the following three questions:

• What do you need in order to learn?
• What are you willing to contribute to others learning?
• How do we want to be together as a group?

The third question deals with the development of ‘norms of behaviour’, where group participants first brainstorm then decide on which ‘norms’ will govern their participation and discussion. These might include the following norms which were developed in one Inquiry Group:

• Offer a positive approach
• Be a part of the structure to support or facilitate sharing in between the sessions
• Be honest: open up to speak about my practice and what does or does not work
• Share my experience—failures and successes and how failures turned into success
• Provide affirmation and validation to/from each other
• Show inspiration: I like to fire people up—offer ideas and get people fired up in their passion
• Resource each other—depend on others and use each other as a resource
Find each other’s skill sets and share them to work as a team
Share each others’ strengths/weaknesses, goals and passions.

By discussing and agreeing on norms, the group builds a space for communication through articulating how each person wants to act within the space. Because these norms are explicit and documented, they can be referred to at any time that groups are together, and become a focus for further reflection and discussion.

Early in the Inquiry process, facilitators use processes to narrow participants’ focus in order that they can explore a specific area, yet as the sessions evolve other facilitation strategies are used to widen and extend thinking. In the ‘narrowing’ phase, participants are encouraged to limit the scope of their Inquiry to focus on a question that which is within their control to address, which focuses on their practice rather than the practice of others, but which is also sufficiently open-ended to allow for exploration and discourse. In the ‘widening’ phase the probes, extensions, and challenges build a wider frame for reflection, data collection, discussion, and action. One facilitator likened the process of widening the focus to ‘peeling the onion’—layers uncovered and opened up by the use of effective facilitation. In translating the metaphor of layers into specific layers of discussion, the following were identified:

- An articulation of the question being addressed, with a rationale for the specific focus. This was largely exploratory and with very limited challenges but with questions for clarification.
- Discussion concerning data collection: what data might be collected to provide greater insight to the question being addressed? While a range of options might be considered in this stage, the discussion is more practical than critical, more planning than reflecting.
- Individual reflection—perhaps through silent writing or considering data. This might be considered an ‘internal discussion,’ giving a participant time to gain perspective, better understand practice, and better prepare for further discussion.
- Collective discussion on the focus, data, and individual reflections in the company of Inquiry peers, allowing for questions to be asked, connections and/or challenges to be made, whether by other participants or by the facilitator/s.
- Presentation or sharing of the Inquiry allows for both a reporting of the Inquiry by the individual or group and also for a discussion engaging participants, facilitators, and invited guests—trustees, district staff, school administrators and other teachers in the district.

Facilitation is also encouraged in the ‘spaces between’ Inquiry sessions, yet we feel we have some ways to go to improve this. The progress to date has been that either facilitators have generally e-mailed or responded to participants or union staff have engaged facilitators through the use of Blackboard Collaborate sessions, including an on-line Book Club. Contacts have often been limited, yet we feel we need to improve on the utilization of the spaces and times between Inquiry. With facilitators, on-line attendance at Blackboard sessions has been limited and sporadic, and with participants, the pressures of school work and lives tend to reduce the priority and importance of keeping (virtually) connected to Inquiry facilitators. To improve this, we aim to encourage the use of space as communal rather than initiated by those perhaps seen to be in control of the process. By encouraging communal space we hope to engender more communal participation and sharing of strategies and ideas, encouraging others in groups to take leadership in discussion in the spaces between sessions, perhaps posting data or an interesting article they may have accessed. There may still be some residual patterns of thinking from ‘one-off’ PD in which the norm was that ‘whatever happened, happened on the day’, and not in the ‘spaces between’ as such spaces did not exist. In contrast, we are now thinking that, based on the
experiences with the Inquiry groups, on-going professional learning sometimes requires consideration of contact and communication in the spaces between the actual meetings.

- **How collaboration and partnership with school districts and universities have contributed to establishing and building credibility for Inquiry**

The projects have acted as a catalyst, fostering debate about professional development within the union and between union and management in school districts. For a teacher union, supporting teachers’ self-directed professional development projects models Inquiry, thereby opening up the approach for consideration by teachers and by school district staff, engaging union members while also creating and extending partnerships with school districts.

At the outset of a local/district inquiry project, one district administrator commented, “This is an exciting initiative which fits well with the district focus on collaboration and our strong history regarding teacher involvement in action research.”

In most of the districts where Inquiry groups occurred, union staff engaged in both formal and informal discussions about the establishment, operations and reflections of the Inquiry group with superintendents or senior district staff. One superintendent, during a presentation by inquiry-group participants to district staff and trustees, stated, “Personally, I believe that this is the best kind of pro-d there could be, so we will do the best we can to find whatever funds we can find... let’s make it happen.”

Local union leaders stated that this project gave them a professional development leadership opportunity with their Board. It allowed them to initiate a union/board professional learning experience, represented by shared resources, inclusive group participation, and common interest in a topic of mutual concern to the district, teachers, and benefiting student learning.

Distributed leadership has also occurred within the Inquiry projects, as facilitators become champions for Inquiry in their locals and school districts, new facilitators gain the confidence to lead, and some participants offer leadership skills within group process. All of these skills of leadership benefit both union and school district management, especially where, as is common, Inquiry facilitators are active in both union and school district communities.

In one teacher inquiry project where the teacher union collaborated with both the school district and a university, one teacher-participant in an Inquiry group (Zubke, 2010) stated:

Support of outside agencies, like university and teachers’ union, provide school teachers with:
- professional support for professional development
- affirmation of one’s work
- encouragement to write and present findings (p. 128)

She saw the three-partner collaboration between the union, university and district as sending a strong message to those inside and outside the Inquiry—that support and encouragement existed for teachers engaged in professional learning and that such support was stronger because it straddled organizations that at many times had very different styles of discourse and at some times (at least in terms of the district and union) were in conflict.
Conclusion

This paper’s exploration of the union’s Inquiry approach has accessed a range of current literature, analyzed data provided by Inquiry facilitators and participants, and considered the value of systemic collaboration. The combined analysis has brought us to a space where it is possible to state that the BCTF has a solid foundation for building teacher inquiry as a form of professional learning that values the autonomy of teachers while also reaching out and building partnerships and collaborations. We now better understand Inquiry processes, and are engaged in learning how to better focus and deepen professional conversations that support teachers’ learning needs. Much of our work is an ongoing process of learning and inquiry, constantly reflecting on our practices and structures while also linking our work to the work of others through the literature on Inquiry and professional learning. This work is catalytic in the sense that it builds one union-led platform to support teachers’ professional learning which encourages increasing numbers of teachers to engage in Inquiry.

The British Columbia Teachers’ Federation is hardly well known as a silent partner in any endeavour. But in its Inquiry approach it has offered what could perhaps be termed quiet leadership, promoting, funding, and staffing Inquiry in ways that enable both local and provincial initiatives to occur. Its approach to working with districts has been overt and unequivocal. Its partnerships have been based on the principles of Inquiry stated in its Teacher Inquiry report (BCTF 2008), have been fully facilitated at BCTF expense, and require only a matching grant from school districts to provide for some release time and meeting expenses.

The collaboration between school districts and teacher union may be a focus of review within the coming year. Current government initiatives and legislation aim to ‘align professional development with teaching needs’ (Section 6.2.c.ii of Bill 22, the controversial ‘Education Improvement Act’ which has been passed by the BC legislature). We argue that teachers’ professional learning must exist as an autonomous entity; if it is subsumed into managerial models, then it loses its autonomy and its purpose. With the government aiming to ensure greater managerial control over teachers’ professional learning, it remains to be seen whether autonomous and teacher-union facilitated teacher inquiry will be deemed appropriate by those aiming to exercise greater control. Conversely, it may be highly unlikely that the union will want its Inquiry approach subject to district and government ‘approval’ before it is authorized. Either way, there is some uncertainty surrounding the future of collaborative teacher inquiry in the province of BC, a situation reflective of current and significant differences and conflict between the union and the provincial government.

Teacher unions in many countries are often considered reactive rather than pro-active organizations (Naylor, 2002). Their engagement in bargaining entails building and defending positions to improve teachers’ pay and working conditions. Inquiry offers a different dynamic in that teachers make their own practice problematic and open to their own scrutiny in a community of peers. Engaging in Inquiry has moved one area of teacher union work from reactive to pro-active, constructing teacher inquiry approaches, training a cadre of facilitators, and building partnerships with school districts and universities. The significance of this study is that it extends the potential of teacher unions to engage differently both with their own membership and within a wider educational community. By building partnerships and collaborations, the union moves itself into a more ‘public space’ (Coulter, 2002) in which its ideas contribute to discourse and are open to challenge, which moves teacher unions out of isolation, and into proactive engagement. We hope this may continue.
The better we can understand such shifts within teacher unions, the more prepared we are to engage in a wider community of learners. To reflect on this work is one base from which we adapt a future journey of Inquiry. We do indeed ‘not know enough’, as the AERA conference theme states, but we hope to continue to learn more through this approach to Inquiry and collaboration.

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References


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