INQUIRY AND RESEARCH

A Relational Approach in the Classroom

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Igniting a Spark of Inquiry

Humans are curious creatures. Whether we realize it or not, we are always acquiring new information, looking for clues, and trying to find out details. We do this on the Internet and are on our phones constantly. Recently, I had a conversation with a friend, and I made a rather bold statement related to the subject we were discussing. The next thing I knew, she was looking down, typing as fast as her two thumbs could hit the buttons. "Huh! You're right," she said as I stared in shock. Not only had she failed to take me at my word, but she'd felt she needed to confirm the new piece of information *that very moment*. She was curious, and my point piqued her interest enough to delve further. Her enthusiasm led me to believe it was something she would continue to explore.

The encounter above is just a minuscule example of how we meet our information needs—a task that is relatively easy to accomplish in the technology-laden world in which we live. Answers seem right at our fingertips. One would believe that it is impossible for anything to be out of reach or to remain unknown to us. Educators know otherwise. We know that while information is abundant and more easily retrieved than ever, "the road to find out" is not always so simple to navigate. Students often misunderstand how to get their information needs met. Of course, there are exceptions, but I have long thought that many feel as though gaining knowledge is the same as finding

factoids and other nuggets of information. I call this mind-set "ask a simple question; get a simple answer." To truly satisfy the inquiry process, other questions must arise: How do you synthesize that information? How do you begin to understand it? What will you do with it? Most importantly, students must realize that the factoids they have found are the mere tip of the iceberg. The problem then becomes this: How much curiosity and effort will they put in to dig further and approach the problem with wide-open wonder—a spirit of inquiry?

What is a spirit of inquiry, and how can we, as teaching librarians, encourage it in our students? Many students feel a very distinct disconnect between their own lives—what is important and germane to them—and the many things that they study and must produce long and intimidating papers on. Librarians, unfortunately, get very little regular access to students. Unless we are embedded or have the good fortune to teach our own classes, we are on borrowed time to gain their attention.

The writing of this book is borne out of my frustration with my experiences walking into a classroom and seeing the dazed and confused looks of students before I even begin! I have cycled through assiduous and genuine reflection of my own teaching and have delved into reasons I think many students seem so disengaged. I strongly feel that students tend to be disengaged with what they are learning when they cannot seem to find any inherent or personally relevant meaning in the subject matter. We know that students learn best when we can attach what they already know to something they need to find out. Some might argue that many of us had to jump through hoops of fire while getting our degrees and that not everything we learn will have immediacy to our own lives. In fact, some things we may never use or see their relevancy. But I would argue that we can't stop trying to engage students in the process of inquiry. The beginning stage of learning is inquiry, which is so important because all other work is built on its foundation. It starts with curiosity, a question, a desire to know, and we move on from that point. My goal has been to maximize that small window of opportunity and to ignite a spark with the students I encounter. This is the way that librarians can enact the true spirit of the educator. We may have to think and

act differently than we have in the past, when, to justify expensive databases and such, we may have acted more like "resource support" than teachers. While some quibble at this assertion, it is very true. We have to stop and realize that, in reality, it is not at all difficult to learn a database—students do not have to tool around very long to get something. Even if a result is not exactly the right thing, students will use the shoehorn method and make it fit. So teaching them how to search databases isn't really an issue. Rather, the issue seems to exist even before they make it to the databases. How are they thinking about their topic? Have they looked at it from various angles and in different contexts? (Have they "poked it with a stick" to see what it does?) What questions have they formulated? What do they already know about the topic? What do they desire to know? What do they need to discover? Why?

Librarians have not been encouraged to take this tack in class. Professors often do not want us to engage in this process for a few reasons: they see it as too nebulous, they think it overlaps (or encroaches) on what *they* do in the classroom, or they cannot see what makes us qualified to engage the students this way. They want librarians to do what they, as faculty, understand as our job: anything that has to do with "tools" and "databases." It takes collaboration and communication before we enter a classroom to help faculty understand the whys and the hows of information literacy instruction and that it focuses on concepts rather than tools. It is my hope that this book will be the catalyst for many to take the first step in changing the approach to research from a tools-based focus to one in which thinking, curiosity, and the search for questions (not answers—at least initially) is the driving force in research.

Inquiry Is the First Step

The important thing is not to stop questioning.
Curiosity has its own reason for existing.

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

Most librarians understand the frustration of standing in front of a classroom full of students and trying to elicit simple responses about their topics in general and their research in particular. I have encountered this scenario so many times that I have come to think of it as the norm. Over the years, I have noticed that students are writing and turning in all manner of class assignments while staying on the surface of their topics. They stick to strictly linear routes in order to find the information they need; their focus is simply to do the assignment. While completing any assignment is not only admirable but necessary for a passing grade, the fact is that, for many, it is merely something they complete in order to check it off the list: done, done, and done. But what always strikes me is the lack of curiosity and the lack of deeper learning. We need to start talking about research in a different sort of a way—not as a product but as a process. While this seems on the face of it to be so fundamental a concept that it is ridiculous even to mention, it is not a given. How often have we heard or read the words "The research

shows that . . ." or "All of the research has indicated . . . ," giving the impression that research is a product that exists more for providing answers than for cultivating questions. The answers are important, of course, but students often skip the step of "thinking," taking the path of least resistance instead. They often have little or no tolerance for the messiness of research and the effort involved in thinking things through and letting curiosity take inquiry where it needs to go.

This resistance to fully diving into a topic is due to a number of factors, but here is one I find particularly critical: students don't know what they don't know. In fact, they tend to overestimate their knowledge (which in many cases is simply an uninformed opinion) on a given topic and are merely looking for database articles that confirm what they already know. When they encounter aspects of their topic that go beyond their own thinking (which is bound to happen), it frustrates their sense of "what they know." Suddenly, the process is not so linear, and we all know that straight lines are so much easier to traverse than circuitous ones.

INQUIRY

While much of the literature focuses on inquiry and its processes in the realm of both science and K–12 contexts, I propose that librarians can and should manipulate and expand the current and widely acknowledged definition of inquiry in order to potentially expand what is possible during student instruction. Of course we may have limited time—often we will encounter a class once and never meet those students again. This type of instruction encourages a sort of "knowledge dump" wherein the librarian stands up in front of the room, points and clicks, and deposits all that he or she knows into the heads of the supposedly waiting and receptive students. There is only one thing wrong with this scenario: while this result may be expected or hoped for by the faculty who ask us to their classrooms, it isn't really what happens—nor should it be.

Inquiry at its very essence is an active curiosity that puts one on the road to finding information. To inquire about something is to think more deeply in order to then gain more knowledge. It is an investigation and an attempt to know a thing from as many sides as

possible. But it does not end there, and it often is not as simple as it seems. I have begun to use the word *inquiry* in place of *research*, as I find it denotes a more active process and seems less daunting. The term *research* comes with heavy baggage and connotations of a thing so lofty that students often feel they are incapable of performing it. Students have told me on many occasions that they were simply "not good at research." But everyone can relate to the idea of being curious about something, of wanting to find out more; in fact, we may "information seek" countless times a day but not call it research. When I tell students we will begin a process of inquiry, I imply that this is the first of many steps, and it is a doable step, in fact, because our curiosity and our "need to know" can lead us in the right direction. But this curiosity needs to be ignited, mediated, and helped along. This sounds like simple instruction, but any librarian who has ever stood in the front of a bored and disinterested class can attest that it isn't. *Far from it*. Couple that with the fact that we encounter and engage students infrequently and for restricted periods of time. The subject matter and even the approach are often dictated by the professor in the class. Personally, this has always felt like a straight-jacket to me. Faculty can become impatient if you are not teaching "recognizable" skills—tangible know-how like searching a database or using the online catalog. But a lack of these so-called skills is often not what is preventing the student from doing decent research. One day, I was struggling to show how to use databases when an obviously bored student in the front row of a stuffy computer lab mumbled under his breath, "It doesn't take a genius." At the time, I remember feeling angry—I was there to help a disengaged class of students, and there was no appreciation for my expertise. But in fact, I can give credence to the student's statement: most students will use a relatively easy, straightforward method of searching that will satisfy basic research needs. The skill of searching databases is not the crux of the problem. If necessity is the mother of invention, then that class was my light bulb moment. I came to realize that I could not continue piling skills and strategies onto classes of students who did not even know the right kinds of questions to ask—their core difficulty was the lack of knowledge of how to even approach a thinking strategy, something that could take them even deeper into their chosen topic.

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