

Creating Classrooms We Need: 8 Ways Into Inquiry Learning

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If kids can access information from sources other than school, and if school is no longer the only place where information lives, what, then happens to the role of this institution?

“Our whole reason for showing up for school has changed, but infrastructure has stayed behind,” said Diana Laufenberg, who taught history at the progressive public school [Science Leadership Academy](#) for many years. Laufenberg provided some insight into how she guided students to find their own learning paths at school, and enumerated some of these ideas at [SXSWEdu](#) last week.

1. BE FLEXIBLE.

The less educators try to control what kids learn, the more students’ voices will be heard and, eventually, their ability to drive their own learning. But that requires a flexible mindset on the part of the teacher. “That’s a scary proposition for teachers,” Laufenberg said. “What do you mean I’m going to have 60 kids doing 60 different projects,’ teachers might say. But that’s exactly the way for kids to do interesting, high-end work that they’re invested in.”

Laufenberg recalled a group of tenacious students who continued to ask permission to focus their video project on the subject of drugs, despite her repeated objections. She finally relented — with the caveat that they not resort to cliches. In turn, the students turned in one of the best video projects she’d ever seen: a [well-produced, polished video](#) about Americans’ dependence on pharmaceutical drugs that was dense with facts backed up by students’ research. “And I almost killed this project,” she said. “There are vastly creative minds that are capable of doing intensely wonderful things with their learning but often we don’t let that live and breathe. Thankfully I got out of their way and let them do the work they were capable of.”

2. FOSTER INQUIRY BY SCAFFOLDING CURIOSITY.

Teachers always come up to Laufenberg wanting to learn more about her progressive pedagogy — and they invariably ask, “But when do you just tell them things? Don’t you have to just tell them sometimes?”

Laufenberg’s answer: Get them curious enough in the subject to do research on their own.

“Kids don’t come to class just burning to know about the War of 1812,” she said. “And you just saying they have to know the facts is not good enough. But here’s your chance to bring them along as a person and get them to learn about it.”

For example, in exploring the subject of American identity with her history students, Laufenberg asked them to come up with words that convey to them the abstract idea of America, or what it means to be American. Many of her students came up with the words “greedy” and “ignorant” — a trend she saw echoed throughout many of her classes during her years teaching at SLA. “I got a clear vision of where my students were,” she said.

She asked her students to find images that epitomized America, then asked them to talk about their ideas with their peers, studying data about immigration, taking the American citizenship test themselves (most received an average score of 3, across the board regardless of age), so they could understand the processes and become personally invested in the subject.

“Rather than saying, ‘We’re going to study immigration,’ I took them through a process where they become interested in it themselves,” she said.

3. DESIGN ARCHITECTURE FOR PARTICIPATION.

"There are so many ways that kids can be active in their learning, beyond the standard call-and-respond business," Laufenberg said. It may be hard to do with 140 students, but if you consider all the available tools at your disposal, ideas can start to take shape.

Example: Laufenberg asked her students to watch President Obama's State of the Union address and respond to what they watched and heard. She gave her students the option to either post comments on Twitter (fully public), Facebook (semi-public), Moodle (walled garden) or for low-tech participants, play Bingo with key words the students anticipated they might hear.

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Though some goofed around a bit with comments ("Our school is so cool, we're tweeting the State of the Union"), at the end of the speech, students had posted a total of 438 tweets and 18 pages of Moodle chat. (Interestingly, no one went on Facebook, though she had set up a separate conversation on the school's Facebook page.)

Laufenberg was not surprised with the high quality of responses she saw from her students. "Does Obama have the power to reform and adjust how the other branches work?" one student tweeted. "He's not touching on Iran issue... not a good sign," another posted. "High school dropout laws, rebuilding jobs in our country, and more equipment in schools... me gusta," wrote yet another.

"I could have them face off against any pundit the next day," she said. "They understood it. None of it went over their head — they were making meaning of it. They were offering their own opinions, participating in the conversation."

Laufenberg used every tool she had at her disposal as a framework for her students to build their learning around.

4. TEACHERS TEACH KIDS, NOT SUBJECTS.

As most teachers know, when students recognize that teachers are personally invested in their success, they do better, and that affirmation of students' disposition can help students achieve more. "You can't ask kids to take risks if they don't trust that you care about them," Laufenberg said.

5. PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING.

During the weeks and months that led up to the election, Laufenberg's students got into the neighborhoods and brought back stories from voters at the polls. Though they didn't always feel comfortable asking strangers questions, they went ahead with their assignments anyway. "If none of it is ever real to them, if it's only in books, it lacks interest," she said. "They *want* to do real stuff, but we are perpetually underestimating what kids can do."

6. EMBRACE FAILURE.

Laufenberg made a point of defining the difference between "blameworthy" and "praiseworthy" failure. Blameworthy failure is when the student just decided not to participate in a project. But praiseworthy failure is quite different: kids take risks and experiments knowing that they might not get it right the first time.

"No one talks about cancer research as blameworthy failure," she said. "We don't expect a five-year-old to be able to shoot free-throws immediately. It's a process, and we value it in other things, but not when it comes to school. Kids are not coming in as perfect little products or machines — they're human beings in the process of becoming."

In the engineering industry, for example, there are “failure festivals” and “failure reports” during which engineers discuss the processes they’ve tried that didn’t work. “We need to have kids do that with their own learning,” she said. “Be self-aware enough to do something with that information.”

7. DON’T BE BORING.

“I always told my kids, if I got boring, they should let me know, and if they got boring, I’d let them know,” Laufenberg said. But here’s the twist: kids may actually choose boring because it’s easier, it’s known, it’s quantifiable. “They know what they need to do to get a good score,” she said. When it’s not boring, when the answer is not predictable, that’s when kids are actually challenged more.

8. FOSTER JOY.

For a government history teacher, this last directive has been a tall order. But Laufenberg made a point of trying to create a space where her students were valued, where creativity was paramount, and their voices were allowed to shine through.

“It’s incredibly taxing work, but one of the most exciting and meaningful ways to create transformative spaces,” she said.

Above all, what she wants to instill in her students is a sense of self-sufficiency.

“If by the end of the year, they still need me, I haven’t done my job,” she said. “I’m not coming with them to college. They have to be self-driven, independent thinkers.”

Watch Laufenberg’s fascinating TED Talk [“How to Learn? From Mistakes.”](#)

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