



Learning Commons

Communities of Inquiry 

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The Learning Commons

The critical thinker is not...

... a self-sufficient cognitive macho type, protected by an umbrella of invincibly powerful arguments. In reality, the reflective model is thoroughly social and communal. Its aim is to articulate the friction—causing differences in the community, develop arguments in support of the competing claims, and then, through deliberation, achieve an understanding of the larger picture ...

– Matthew Lipman

For most disciplines and professors, inquiry-based learning is neither a new concept nor practice. Teachers often intuitively, even unknowingly, assume an inquiry approach to teaching. As both a philosophy and a methodology, much of the basis for inquiry-based learning draws on the work of John Dewey (1938a; 1938b). Dewey believed that improved learning opportunities could be achieved from the integration of the individual learner's interests with those of society. Within this context, the emphasis on inquiry-based learning and communities of inquiry at the University of Calgary is perhaps best seen as a reclaiming of the ideals of higher education.

Inquiry-based learning is a shared experience. In the higher education setting, it is shaped by the ideal of people bound by shared beliefs and experiences, a community of learners, engaged in active exploration to construct personal meaning and shared understanding. The Boyer Commission explicitly links inquiry to learning communities. The report (Kenny, 1998) states: "... education by inquiry demands collaborative effort; traditional lecturing should not be the dominant mode of instruction in a research university." The ideal for a research university is participation in a community of inquiry. Here the value of the process of learning and thinking for oneself must be in recognizing, rather than assimilating inert knowledge that is divorced from the research that produced these results. Within this context, communities of inquiry can enhance some of a university's traditional strengths. In particular, communities of inquiry join to pursue common or complementary goals aimed at creating, developing, or sharing of knowledge. Together, the essential features of inquiry – questioning and collaboration – define a community of inquiry.

Sustaining Communities of Inquiry at U of C

Fostering a community of inquiry requires both teachers and students to view their role as inquirers. A community of inquiry is broadly construed as including collaborative learning experiences that incorporate the core properties of inquiry-based learning. Lipman (1991) views all inquiry as predicated upon community and the community of inquiry as "the methodology for the teaching of critical thinking" (p. 3). Inquiry is synonymous with thinking itself and is not a linear process devoid of surprises and bound by artificially defined disciplines.



A community of inquiry is based upon discourse and the security to explore and challenge ideas. It bridges the private reflective world of the individual and public shared world of society. A community of inquiry provides the opportunity to iterate between the reflective and shared worlds. The purpose and value is for learners to take responsibility of the construction of knowledge and learn to learn while being open to societal knowledge and the experiences of others.

A central function of the community is to provide a cognitive mirror to our thoughts. As individuals, we most often lack the ability or awareness to critically assess and judge our beliefs and assumptions. A community of inquiry provides an opportunity to challenge ideas, identify misconceptions and achieve mutual understanding. Within a university culture, Northrup Frye (1993) felt that one of the best things the university does for learners is to provide a community where intellect and imagination are continuously at play, so that the learner “gets some idea what life could be like if the intellect and imagination were always functional in human society”.

So, the question is, are we doing all we can to create and sustain such a community of inquiry, and to ensure continuous learning beyond the time students spend at the University of Calgary? In a draft document of the *Institutional Learning Plan* for the University of Calgary, guidelines are offered to help achieve these objectives:

1. The University of Calgary is a campus-based research institution. All students must have the opportunity to participate in communities of inquiry that include faculty, graduate and undergraduate students, and staff.
2. The University will promote the quality of the learning experience through fostering communities of inquiry that facilitate critical reflection, discourse, and the integration of research into the curriculum.
3. Learning technologies (i.e., eLearning) offer opportunities to enhance the campus experience and extend learning through the innovative use of online resources, asynchronous collaborative learning opportunities, and electronic communication among faculty and students.

The rationale for these guidelines is to help attain the goal of being a research university where faculty and students interact in a community of inquiry. The key to achieving this is in facilitating and sustaining meaningful interaction between faculty and students in ways that lead to the construction of knowledge. To this end, adopting inquiry-based learning approaches will ensure that students are introduced to research approaches in their courses and that professors reflect upon how best to interact and share their knowledge with their students in order to facilitate the process of knowledge construction.



References

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