

An inquiry-based approach to library instruction

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Abstract

The work described in this article was founded on a philosophy which foregrounds the importance of students developing their own inquiry questions as an essential precursor to their learning of the complex skills of accessing, reading and writing information texts. In the article I will outline how such an inquiry question was used to focus the work of six year old students, involving them in the use and development of a variety of library and study skills. I refer to these students as “young inquirers” and show how they, with the support of their teacher, were able to approach their inquiry with an actively questioning mindset which led them to some, often surprising, insights into the process of finding and using information.

Introduction

Amy and Kelly are two six-year-olds who work in a pleasant open plan classroom which borders on a central school courtyard. Their grade 1 class is responsible for the upkeep of the flower beds in the courtyard and some of the students attend a weekly after-school gardening club run by parent helpers. It is June and the school has decided to spend some money on hanging baskets for the courtyard. The students are keen to discuss the contents of these baskets and, because of this keenness, their teacher, Mrs. Cox, decides to get them involved in deciding which plants should be purchased. Later they will visit the local garden center to purchase their chosen plants but before that the students, in discussion with their teacher, realize that only certain plants will be suitable and in order to plan successful baskets they will have to find some information.

I followed the work of these students as they:

- set clear purposes for their work,
- drew up a framework for recording information,
- located information in a range of reference materials,
- collaboratively constructed their understanding of the information they located,
- made their recommendations for the purchase of plants,
- were empowered by the knowledge they had constructed.

This paper is an account of the work of this class of students and an illustration of the power of an inquiry approach to students' learning, especially their learning of the skills involved in effective book use. I will also explore the role of the teacher in an activity such as this one. How can a teacher act as support to the learning and intervene at the appropriate points to take it just that bit further?

A framework for the research

The work described here was carried out under the auspices of a curriculum development project (the EXEL – Extending Literacy project) which focused on students’ interactions with text, especially non-fiction texts, as a key medium for their learning in a range of content areas (an account of some of the early work of the EXEL project can be found in Wray and Lewis, 1997, and some more recent work is described in Wray, 2004). The original concern was that non-fiction text had been relatively neglected as a resource for learning, and the focus of most elementary school teachers was on children learning to read, rather than reading to learn. Such a concern was not new. Almost twenty years previously Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of schools (HMI) had found “little evidence that more advanced reading skills were being taught” (DES, 1978, para. 5.30). Their 1989 report on reading policy and practice had commented that, “Schools saw it as an important obligation to help pupils master the complexities of advanced reading, but while they saw it as their duty, few gave coherent accounts of what these skills were and how they were to be developed.” (DES, 1989, para. 36). By 1995, HMI were describing good practice in teaching reading as producing elementary school students of whom they could say: “The variety of their reading increases, they talk about it in structured ways and use reading regularly for an increasing range of purposes such as information seeking...” (OFSTED, 1995, p.8). In their survey of elementary schools, however, such good practice was found in only one third of schools, suggesting that it was not majority practice. Official reports such as these also made it clear that students’ reading of fiction texts was relatively well developed. The perceived problems seemed to focus on what were often called ‘advanced reading skills’ and in particular the reading of a wide range of non-fiction material.

As a check on such official pronouncements, we carried out a survey of elementary school teachers in order to elicit their current practice and views relating to literacy. This survey is described in more detail in Wray and Lewis (1997) but, in brief, the findings echoed those arising from a review of the relevant literature. It did seem that fiction texts were given an overwhelmingly predominant position in many elementary school classrooms, both in terms of what was read and what was written. Teachers were much more secure in their understandings about how to develop children's fiction reading and writing than they were about non-fiction. These two factors appeared to be mutually reinforcing. Teachers were unsure of exactly how to teach non-fiction reading and writing; therefore they tended to focus their attention on what they understood a lot about, fiction. Students were given much more access to fiction texts to read and were encouraged to write largely in fictional forms.

More recently, an awareness has developed that we need to think about reading to learn in a more extended way, taking into account the increased range of information sources students need to be able to read effectively. The concept of information fluency is a helpful one in this regard, defined by Callison (2004) as “the ability to analyze information needs and to move confidently among media, information and computer literacy skills resulting in the effective application of a strategy or strategies that will best meet those needs”. This suggests the need for a large element of student control

over the process of identifying, accessing, reading, evaluating and using texts in a wide range of forms.

One major aim of the EXEL project was to develop a process model to describe students' interactions with non-fiction texts and to link this to a range of strategies and materials for use in classrooms. The processes we were interested in had tended to be described in the literature as 'information skills' and, in that they refer to the processes of locating and dealing with the information given in texts in a range of media, this was a useful descriptor. We were concerned, however, that the use of this term, and linked terms such as 'information reading' and 'study reading', tended to indicate a separation of these ways of interacting with texts from ways more generally referred to as 'reading'. As Cairney (1991) argued, theories about the understanding of written text which characterize it as a process of information transfer, that is as 'getting the information from the text', were strongly contradicted by conceptualizations of the reading process as one of transaction, that is, the active construction of meaning in negotiation with the text as written (cf. Rumelhart, 1985; Goodman, 1985). Thus any model aiming to describe the process of interacting with expository texts must account for its transactional nature and build in a strong element of the reader contributing to the constructed meaning. As Meek put it, "Until now we have sometimes assumed that information books might do children's thinking for them. Instead even the simplest text to be read for information 'retrieval' (whatever that is) implies a complex network of interactions and intertextuality....." (Meek, 1995, p. 21)

The above remarks notwithstanding, almost all attempts to elaborate more fully what happens when we read and learn from expository texts have tended to term themselves as descriptions of the 'information process'. This is not to say that all these attempts have nothing to offer a more extended and interaction-based description of this process. Many of the elements described in information skills models have relevance to interactive models of the reading to learn process.

There have certainly been no shortage of models (or, more usually, lists of skills) put forward with the intention of helping teachers plan more thoroughly for their teaching of students' use of textual information. Of these models, two were particularly influential in our thinking around this issue. The first was an attempt to describe the 'information process' in terms of six stages of activity (Winkworth, 1977). These six stages were used by Wray (1985, 1988) to form a basis for advice to teachers on the teaching of information skills through class project work. The stages were:

- 1: Defining the subject and the purpose of the enquiry
- 2: Locating information
- 3: Selecting information
- 4: Organizing information
- 5: Evaluating information
- 6: Communicating the results

Although this model was useful as a guide for teachers of the processes through which their students might go as they pursued inquiries, it was, however, incomplete. It lacked what we now feel to be the crucial element of the actual interaction with a text. In the terms of models like these, what happens when a reader faces the words on the page of

an appropriate text is limited to selecting, extracting and recording information. As argued earlier, this now seems inadequate as a description of the multi-faceted transaction between a reader, coming to a text with a whole range of attitudes, feelings and arrays of knowledge, and the words on a page, created by an author with a range of intentions many of which go beyond the simple passing on of information.

A second formulation of the information process which had been widely quoted and used, particularly in secondary school contexts, was that of the Schools Council working group under the chairmanship of Michael Marland (Marland, 1981). Marland's group tried to break down the process of a secondary school student carrying out an assignment involving the use of information. They suggested nine steps, which were phrased as nine questions, as follows:

1. What do I need to do?
2. Where could I go?
3. How do I get to the information?
4. Which resources should I use?
5. How shall I use the resources?
6. What should I make a record of?
7. Have I got the information I need?
8. How should I present it?
9. What have I achieved?

A particular strength of the way these steps were formulated was that, as students were asked questions as they proceeded with their assignments, they were given the opportunity to consider directly the processes of their own learning and thinking. They were therefore encouraged to take a metacognitive stance on their own activities, a feature which, as will be argued later, is a necessary part of serious attempts to extend learners' control over their own thinking with texts. The nine questions were still, however, inadequate in their reduction of the text-reader transaction to "How shall I use the resources?"

Because of such problems with existing models of the learning with text process, we felt we needed to reconceptualize this process. The model we developed, referred to as the EXIT (**E**xtending **I**nteractions with **T**exts) later became a central element of the National Literacy Strategy in the United Kingdom (see DfES, 2001). This model consists of ten key activities:

1. Activating previous knowledge. (What do I already know about this subject?)
2. Establishing purposes. (What do I need to find out and what will I do with the information?)
3. Locating information. (Where and how will I get this information?)
4. Adopting an appropriate strategy. (How should I use this source of information?)
5. Interacting with text. (What can I do to help me understand this better?)
6. Monitoring understanding. (What can I do if there are parts I do not understand?)
7. Making a record. (What should I make a note of from this information?)
8. Evaluating information. (Should I believe this information?)
9. Assisting memory. (How can I help myself remember the important parts?)
10. Communicating information. (How should I let other people know about this?)

The model describes a process which is akin to that referred to, in academic contexts, as “research”. This process consists fundamentally of setting oneself a question or series of questions and engaging in inquiries in order to attempt answers. Inquiry driven experiences of finding and using information can enable learners to engage in such processes with a clear goal in mind.

The young inquirer

We began the EXEL project with the misguided assumption that it would largely concern students who had reached a sufficient stage of fluency in their reading that they were able to use reading as a means of inquiry. However, it rapidly became clear that the processes involved when students were researching and interacting with text were not age-specific. Students encounter non-fiction texts (books, lists, notices, signs etc.) from their earliest years, both in school and at home, yet most of the work on students’ use of this kind of text has concentrated upon older students. For example, the most widely known British research project into the use of reading as a medium for learning (Lunzer & Gardner, 1979, 1984) was undertaken with students aged 10 upwards. Even the requirements of the National Curriculum in England (see <http://www.nc.uk.net>) suggest that these are matters to be left to older students. The introduction of students to the use of structural organizers such as chapter headings, for example, is not required until age 10.

The very terms used to describe such skills also often imply a chronological hierarchy. References to ‘higher order reading skills’ or ‘advanced reading skills’ have certainly led many teachers to feel that the teaching of study skills is best undertaken in the later stages of the primary / elementary school, when students are competent readers. These ideas are beginning to change and more attention has been given to inquiry as a feature of the curriculum experiences offered to younger students (Mallett, 2003; Neate, 1991). We would now argue that students should be introduced to non-fiction texts and taught how to learn from them from their earliest days in school.

The literature is generally supportive of the benefits of instruction in the use of information books to learn (e.g. Branch, 2003) although the critique presented by Eadie (1990) needs to be taken seriously. Eadie suggested that instructing students in how to locate and use information was likely to fail because the students would probably not yet have asked the question that they were being taught to answer, and would still need assistance later when they did think of the question to ask. Throughout the EXEL project care was taken that work on students’ interactions with non-fiction texts stressed the need for these to be firmly located in a meaningful context, rather than to take the form of decontextualized study/library skills lessons. All of the work of the project took place within the context of the ongoing work of the classroom, which usually meant an approach to the curriculum centered on cross-curricular inquiry. Most UK teachers of elementary school students adopt the approach of working through cross-curricular themes or topics (see Wray, 1999 for a general description of the UK inquiry approach) most of which will involve an element of students ‘finding out’ from books and other information sources. It should be noted that, in common with most UK elementary schools, this classroom had no access to a library specialist to offer support to the class

teacher. The benefits of collaboration between teachers and library specialists have been well documented (e.g. Brady & Estes, 2005) but such collaboration was impossible in the context in which the work of these students was carried out.

The work described in this paper is drawn from a detailed study of the cross curricular inquiry of 6 classes of 6-7 year old students. The work of each of these classes was observed over the course of a full week with the aim of testing whether these teachers and students were able to implement and extend the inquiry processes inherent in the EXIT model earlier described. The study thus was a follow on from the main EXEL project in that it sought to test out the ideas of that project in a range of new teaching contexts, in this case the classrooms of younger students.

The hanging baskets question

The students in Amy and Kelly's class had a clear purpose to guide their inquiry, as described earlier. Their teacher, Mrs. Cox, had guided them to make their focus as explicit and structured as possible. Simply to ask them to 'find out' about plants would have been much too vague and vast a task. As these students were relatively inexperienced information finders, Mrs. Cox had suggested that a grid would help focus their work and provide a scaffold for the kind of questions they might want to ask. Through discussion she was able to draw upon their prior knowledge of gardening, flowers and hanging baskets. As they brainstormed what they already know she scribed their comments. Certain 'themes' emerged which they drew together into several headings - height, spread, color, flowers and leaves, smell. Together they constructed a grid listing the information they would need to collect about each plant they researched. The teacher was able to extend their technical vocabulary during this process, substituting 'fragrance' for 'smell' and 'foliage' for 'leaves', etc.. By introducing these words at this stage she was also preparing them for the vocabulary they would encounter when they started to look in books. Because the information the students would need to find would necessarily be quite technical, it quickly became apparent that the reference books already available to the class were largely inadequate in terms of the level of detail they contained. The teacher was able to make available, with the help of the students themselves, several adult gardening books and pamphlets. Many students were so keen that they persuaded their parents to take them to local garden centers and stores to find reference materials, much of which they could pick up for no cost. Of course, these materials were designed for adult readers and their vocabulary, layout and print size made few concessions to young readers.

Each heading of the grid the students had helped design acted both as a question to be answered and a 'key word' to focus the students' inquiry and perhaps even to help with scanning the text for that particular word. The grid, therefore, scaffolded the students' work.

Teacher modeling

Before they began their inquiries the teacher discussed with the students where they might find the information they need. The students suggested several sources: books, asking 'experts' (i.e. members of the gardening club), looking at other hanging baskets,

asking their parents, watching gardening programs on television. At this point the teacher modeled for them how they might select and use information books. As she did this she talked about what she was doing and why. She was making what is usually an internal monologue accessible to the students. One extract from her demonstration was as follows:

“Now which of these books shall I use? This book’s got flowers on the cover so it might be useful and the title ... yes Garden Flowers that tells me it might be useful. Now what do I do. Yes, I can look in the index. Let’s look up hanging baskets in the index. So I’m going to turn to the back of the book. Here it is. Index. Now. Its arranged alphabetically a... d... g ... h... h... here it is. H. Lets look for h, a
.....”

Through this kind of cognitive modeling, that is by making explicit to the students the thought processes she was going through as she was experiencing them, the teacher was able to give the students some very important lessons on what it is an experienced reader does. The importance of teachers not simply telling students about the processes of problem-solving, planning and strategic decision-making which characterize the reading process, but actually demonstrating them, cannot be over-emphasized. Modeling enables teachers to make explicit the thought processes which accompany involvement in literate activities; processes which, by their very nature, are invisible. Unless these processes are made explicit students can have no way of understanding what it is like to think like an accomplished reader until they actually become one: in other words, much of their learning is directed towards trying to perform an activity of which they have no clear concept. It is little wonder that, in such circumstances, many students focus on what seem to be the visible aspects of reading - such as sounding out the words and letters.

Collaborative inquiry

Several groups of students were video-recorded as they undertook their inquiries. In pairs (6 students at a time) they worked around a table loaded with gardening and flower books - most of them adult books. Their teacher checked on the group at intervals but for most of the time the students worked independently. The video recorder was left running throughout the morning and, after about 15 minutes during which they tended to whisper to each other and glance at the camera from time to time, the students seemed to become largely oblivious to its presence. Field notes and observations were also made. It was then possible to view and review the video and analyze what took place. There were several striking features of the students’ work that morning.

The social, interactive nature of the task was important. On numerous occasions the students prompted each other to continue working, to try another technique if they could not find what they were looking for, discussed information, worked together to try to understand difficult text, asked each other for help and advice and, of course, also engaged in conversation with each other. Interestingly much of this conversation originated from the task. For example, at one point the attention of one of the students was caught as he was searching for a picture of marigolds.

Barry: Oh! look at that ... that's ... that's ... It's made out of flowers.
Points to picture of a flower bed laid out as a ship.

Lisa: There's a Mickey Mouse one ... other ones in other places.

Barry: Woah! That's brilliant!

Lisa: I've seen them millions of times.

Barry: *(to Simon)* Have you seen them at Torquay? They've got them. Made out of flowers. Them.

Simon: Where?

Barry: Torquay. Where they make them models out of flowers. You been to Torquay?
Simon shakes his head

Barry: Been to Paignton?

Lisa: I've been to Paignton.
(Torquay and Paignton are local towns the students have visited.)

A teacher arriving at this moment might be tempted to conclude that the students were not on task but in some ways they certainly were, being involved in making their own connections with the material they were working with. This linking of previous knowledge and experience to new material is a crucial part of the reading and learning process and reaffirms the importance of conversation rather than silence in young students' learning through inquiry.

Scaffolding the task

The video evidence also demonstrated how important the grid was in scaffolding and prompting the students through a very complex task of information gathering. It reminded them of what they needed to know but also allowed them space for their own interests. Several times the grid prompted students to return to the book(s) for further information. For example, Amy and Kelly had, after some searching, found a reference to Nasturtiums in the index. The following exchange took place:

Amy: Nasturtiums.... Nasturtiums.... GOT IT.... 157.... 157.... 157.
Turning pages and checking number.
 Here. Nasturtiums. Should be here somewhere.
Scanning page.
 There it is. Height 1 foot.... 30cms. Well done. I found it.
Kelly begins to write. Amy closes book.

Amy: I don't know the color yet do I?
(Color is the next column on grid.) Reopens book.
 157.... Right.... What's the color?.... What's the color?
Reads aloud.
 Red, orange, yellow. Red, orange, yellow. We'd better get red.
Closes book again.

Kelly: How do you spell....?
Both write in color column

Amy: Right. Fragrance.
Looking at grid.
 What's its fragrance? Has it got a fragrance or has it not? I don't think....

Opens book and searching for page 157 again.
Now where's it gone?

Here we see quite clearly the grid reminding Amy of what she needed to know and prompting her to continue her inquiry. The grid was acting as a scaffold for the students, helping them move from the stage of joint activity alongside a teacher towards independent action.

Using study skills: practice in context.

The students used a variety of study skills during their inquiry. They used them because they needed to use them. They were observed to use index pages, contents pages, alphabetical order, skimming, scanning and extracting key information. Of course, they did not always use these successfully and they showed varying levels of expertise but they were receiving practice in using very important skills in the best possible way.

Sometimes they had to deal with extremely sophisticated features. Amy and Kelly, for example, in looking up *Busy Lizzy* in an index found the entry: *Busy Lizzy- see IMPATIENS*. Puzzled by this, they sensibly approached their teacher for an explanation. Very few teachers of six year olds would plan to introduce their pupils to the use of Latin plant names and yet occurring as it did within the context of a real situation these students were fascinated by their discovery. They also learnt about cross-referencing in an index. How many library skills programs would introduce cross-referencing to six year olds? Yet Amy and Kelly (by no means outstanding pupils) took it in their stride.

Most of the students were also willing to try several different techniques if their first attempt to find an answer failed. Here is Amy again, starting her hunt for Nasturtiums and trying a variety of strategies.

Amy: This one got anything?

Picks up a book.

Kelly: I need to copy.

Looks at the spelling of nasturtiums in Amy's jotter and writes.

Amy: Index. It should be here somewhere. Yes....right.... what does it say?....

Nasturtiums.... It hasn't got it there. I'll have to go to the contents. Turn to the front. Ah, here it is.

Searches contents page. Cannot find desired entry.

It'll have to be another book.

Scans pile of books on offer.

Kelly: Look in that one.

Points to book.

Amy: Yeah. I'll look in this one.

Picks up book indicated by Kelly.

Kelly: What's it say?

Holds front cover with Amy. Reads "Ornamental Kitchen Garden".

Amy: This is the one I had.

Browsing through some pages of pictures, but actively searching.

This tells us about.... hardy Petunias.... French Marigolds.... Nasturtiums?.... Sweet Williams.... Lizzie Busies.... Lizzie Busies. Midsummer Plants.

Reading page heading.

Marigolds. I've got some of those in my back yard.

Muttered conversation between the two. Keep on 'browse searching'.

Amy: Where's it gone? Nasturtium.

Kelly: Have a look in another book.

Amy and Kelly each pick up another book.

Kelly: Have a look in the index.

Amy: Index. Right.

Both looking in index of their book.

Amy: Nasturtiums.... Nasturtiums.... GOT IT....

As well as the structured techniques of using the index and contents pages, the students also used less structured techniques such as random searching, skimming through books looking for pictures, and flicking over pages. Since these techniques can also achieve results it is very important not to over-emphasize a rigid index/contents-only approach to using information books. A flexible approach is more helpful especially as many information books are not organized terribly well. These students' relative inexperience in information location meant they had no fixed ideas about what they needed to do. They were therefore willing to try a range of strategies rather than fixate upon one which, if it had not worked, might have left them unable to continue.

That these students had a flexible approach was also apparent in their willingness not only use a variety of strategies, but also a variety of information sources. As well as consulting the books, students were observed sharing their existing knowledge with each other, asking 'experts' and looking at concrete examples, i.e. real flowers. Again it was clear that the collaborative, social nature of the task was important in allowing the students to make use of these sources.

Empowerment through information

Two of the students observed learnt a very important lesson that week. Lorraine and Charlotte learnt that information can be empowering.

The pair had begun by browsing through the gardening books, looking at pictures. From these pictures they decided that they wanted their hanging baskets to contain tomatoes, strawberries and a bonsai tree. They wrote the names of these three plants into the first column of their grid and were about to start looking for further information when their teacher joined them. She pointed out that their suggestions were unusual and that they would need to find some good evidence to support these choices. Charlotte and Lorraine were not deflected from their ideas and started to search for evidence. In one gardening book they discovered a variety of dwarf trailing tomatoes. In another they found a picture of strawberries in a planter which clearly suggested that these were trailing plants. Then they turned to bonsai trees. They discovered a section in one book on the growing and training of bonsai trees. This gave them the information that bonsai trees could be trained into any shape. They reasoned from this that they could train their

bonsai tree to trail over their basket. They worked out that they would need wire for this task but they did fail to realize that it might take them 10 years to grow their tree! When their teacher returned they were ready to argue their case and defend their choice of plants.

What these students had learnt was that, armed with the appropriate information, you can argue with powerful and important people such as your teacher. Knowledge can give you the power to argue your case - a lesson central to democracy. Their teacher was humane and responsive enough to concede the argument, not wishing at this point to dampen the students' enthusiasm. It should be noted, however, that when it came to trying to convince their classmates, Lorraine and Charlotte had a much more difficult task!

Implications

I have space here to provide only some brief glimpses of young students with a real purpose and a structure which guided them in the successful use of information skills. This success is still, of course, patchy and there remain some problem areas. Students as young as this lack maturity and often find the business of making sense of complex information very difficult. Yet this work does suggest that with a strongly perceived purpose to motivate them and an explicit structure to scaffold their work young students can and do become effective inquirers. The implication can be made quite forcefully that we must not underestimate what these students are capable of. The sooner they begin to work with books in this way then the more likely they are to develop their skills, hopefully making redundant the familiar complaint of teachers about students copying whole sections from reference books. Experience of inquiry should very definitely, I suggest, be part of the rich interaction with books provided in the best elementary school classrooms. This is true, I would argue, whatever the abilities, ages and backgrounds of the students.

This research also persuades me that until we have observed students in action following through the demands of a clearly focused inquiry question, we can say little about these students' capabilities or limitations. Students only act to their potential when they are excited and driven by an inquiry need.

The role of the teacher seems to me to be two-fold in such an inquiry-based curriculum. He/she firstly has to create a classroom environment in which inquiry is central. This can imply some very skilful negotiations with the demands of a subject-focused curriculum. Secondly the teacher needs to consider carefully how and when interventions in students' learning processes can best be made. I suggest that teacher modeling of learning strategies has a central role in such interventions.

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