OVERVIEW OF THE TEACHING PRACTICE

Inquiry is the simple act of asking a question and seeking its answer. It is used in classrooms as a motivator and an engagement tool. Teachers can encourage students to ask good questions, and provide them with the tools and skills needed to find answers.

Learning environments where students ask questions and seek answers are dynamic. Students learn to apply content knowledge and skills in meaningful ways. The skill of asking and answering questions is needed in a variety of disciplines and situations. Students who know what it means to engage in inquiry will be motivated and persist when work is difficult or no single “right answer" can be found.

Creating an environment of sustained inquiry makes project-based learning (PBL) experiences meaningful and motivating. It puts students at the center of the learning process and allows their questions to drive the direction of instruction and product creation. Students who can ask good questions are able to frame learning in ways that showcase their understanding. When they answer those questions using tools they’ve learned about in class, they can transfer their learning between experiences and across disciplines.

An environment of sustained inquiry is one where students are less concerned about grades and scores and more concerned about feedback and results. They are interested in solving complex problems over time, even when the answer may not be evident, which helps them persevere in the face of difficult problems. By teaching students to ask their own questions, voice and choice is naturally built into lessons and projects.

EXPLANATION OF THE ACTIVITY

TITLE: Graffiti Wall
GRADES: 4-12
TIME: 15-25 minutes

PURPOSE: This activity can be used for several purposes. It actively engages students and is useful for launching an inquiry process. It helps build a classroom culture that values and encourages student questions, and teaches students how to build on one another’s ideas and honor everyone’s voice.

OVERVIEW

The Graffiti Wall is a powerful activity for launching inquiry and creating a classroom culture where students are encouraged and expected to ask questions and share ideas. The activity promotes equity, because unlike class discussions, where sometimes the students who are most confident are heard, every student participates and has a space in which they can ask questions.

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STEPS

1. Decide on a focus statement. You could pick something connected to the topic of a lesson, unit, or project, or it could be any statement that would provoke students to ask questions if you just want students to practice the skill and get into the habit. For example:
    - (In science) "A recent study revealed that many homes in our community have lead in the water."
    - (In history) "The Iraq War was a mistake for the U.S."
    - (In math) "It is easy to manipulate statistics to persuade people on an important issue."
    - (In ELA) "Some people have a hard time growing up."

2. Create a large space where students will be able to write their thoughts. Most teachers use either long strips of butcher paper or several pieces of chart paper. If using a white board, make sure it is large enough so a number of students can write at the same time. Provide several markers for students to use. (Pro tip: chisel point markers are best, because they allow what's being written to be read from further away.)

3. Introduce the graffiti wall before students move to it: "This is a whole class discussion that is completely silent. Anything you'd like to ask should be added to the discussion in writing. I will let you know when the graffiti wall is open, when we have a minute left, and when it is closed."

4. Open the graffiti wall. Make sure each student has a marker, then ask them to move to the discussion space and write their questions. Allow time to think. In addition to writing their own unique questions, students may build on other's questions by asking "sub-questions" below it, or make connections to others with arrows, or simply put a star next to questions that resonate with them.

5. Watch for participation and encourage students who have already participated to make space for others. Monitor what's being written and redirect or prompt as needed.

6. After 10-15 minutes (or an appropriate amount of time), bring the graffiti wall to a close.

7. Ask students to read the entire graffiti wall, in silence.

8. Debrief the activity. Some possible questions include:
    a. How did seeing other questions inspire yours?

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b. What questions especially resonated with you/made you think/provoked more questions?
c. How did it feel to have a space like this?
d. What can we do differently next time?

NOTES

- Some students might benefit from having the thinking prompt in advance.
- If movement in your class is challenging, set up shifts in which groups of students might visit the graffiti wall.
- Model by being part of the “inquiry” too!
- If you have several class periods, consider how you might both manage the space and ensure the conversation is preserved. Some teachers choose to use a tech tool for the graffiti wall (e.x. Padlet or jamboard). Others might take a photo and upload it to a learning management system after the discussion is complete.

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