

Shared Inquiry™ and Educator Best Practices

Today’s college- and career-readiness standards and teacher frameworks call for more rigorous, student-centered instruction. Making and sustaining changes to curriculum and practice is challenging and requires ongoing teacher learning. To increase student growth and maximize effective teaching, a shared vision of learning must unite curriculum, instructional approaches, and professional development efforts.

At the Great Books Foundation, we describe Shared Inquiry as a practice to highlight the reality that students and teachers learn by doing. Our training and follow-up consultations focus on Shared Inquiry as a method—one that equips

teachers to lead students in becoming active and collaborative learners. This emphasis harmonizes with Danielson’s Framework for Teaching and Marzano’s Teacher Evaluation Model, as well as other prominent models that draw on them.

The parallels between our approach and the Marzano and Danielson frameworks are especially striking in these areas:

- Questioning and discussion strategies
- Teacher’s role in helping students process content
- Content and preparation in a student-driven learning environment

Questioning and Discussion Strategies

Complex Tasks: Focus on Open-Ended Problems of Meaning

The Great Books Foundation	Danielson ¹
<p>Our inquiry-based methodology centers on group exploration of substantive questions that support divergent responses. As a result, students learn to construct their own understandings of complex content.</p>	<p>Domain 3: Instruction. “Domain 3 is the heart of the framework for teaching . . . the critical interactive work that teachers undertake when they bring complex content to life for their students. And the heart of Domain 3 is engaging students in learning; all the other aspects of the framework serve the purpose of engagement, because it is engagement that ensures learning.”</p>
<p>Effective focus questions require students to make claims (or generate hypotheses), substantiate their ideas with sound evidence and reasoning, and respond to the diverse ideas of others. Teachers can create such questions once they build the necessary skills, and they can also help students learn to differentiate types of questions and recognize how each type can best be used.</p>	<p>Marzano and Toth²</p> <p>Helping Students Engage in Cognitively Complex Tasks. “Engaging in cognitively complex tasks is not merely an end-of-unit or culminating activity. Students must begin to ‘live’ in a land of cognitive complexity. . . . Effective teachers incorporate ‘short visits’ throughout the unit to help build student capacity for complex tasks.”</p>
<p>Great Books materials include suggested focus questions for each text, which serve as models and help teachers plan instruction.</p>	<p>Organizing Students for Cognitively Complex Tasks. Marzano points out that this is one of the least frequently used strategies but among the most critical for developing cognitively complex skills.</p>

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Ongoing Questioning by Teachers and Students

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<p>During Shared Inquiry activities, teachers deepen students' ideas and use of evidence by asking follow-up questions. The goal of follow-up questions is to scaffold each student's critical thinking while also allowing the student to maintain cognitive control of the idea under consideration.</p> <p>Follow-up questions, because they are closely based on the student's own responses, are inherently differentiated. Asking effective follow-up questions requires the teacher to listen carefully to a student's answer and respond with a question that will deepen the student's thinking.</p> <p>Expertise in questioning distinguishes the highly effective teacher from the novice, and can be continually refined. Shared Inquiry practice increases the amount and quality of teacher questioning and correspondingly decreases "teacher talk." Students do more talking about their own questions and ideas, and academic collaboration increases as students learn to ask each other follow-up questions.</p>	<p>Component 3B: Using Questioning and Discussion Techniques. "A teacher's skill in questioning and in leading discussions makes a powerful contribution to student learning and is valuable for many instructional purposes: exploring new concepts, eliciting evidence of student understanding, and promoting deeper student engagement. . . .</p> <p>Good questions . . . tend to be divergent rather than convergent, framed in such a way that they invite students to formulate hypotheses, make connections, or challenge previously held views. . . .</p> <p>Moreover, teachers make good use of questioning and discussion as an instructional skill by teaching their students how to frame good questions. . . . Teachers show students how to frame questions of high cognitive challenge and how to use the questions to extend learning. . . . In a well-run discussion, a teacher does not hold center stage but rather encourages students to comment on one another's answers and request further elaboration."</p>
	<p>Marzano and Toth²</p> <p>Helping Students Process Content. "This strategy systematically engages student groups in processing and generating conclusions about content. Note: For the student-centered classroom, the focus shifts from teacher to student. The teacher is 'helping students process content.' Inherent in this phrase is that students are expected to work with, summarize, and elaborate on content, not just listen as the teacher discusses or lectures."</p> <p>Helping Students Elaborate on Content. "Helping students elaborate requires students to make inferences about the information addressed in class. Equally important, students are asked to provide evidence and support for their inferences. This strategy has great purpose in any lesson."</p> <p>Helping Students Examine Their Reasoning. "With this strategy, students produce and defend claims by examining their own reasoning or the logic of presented information, processes, and procedures. The shift to rigorous standards requires the analysis of information for errors or fallacies in content or in students' own reasoning, as well as the examination and critique of the overall logic of arguments."</p>

Effective Collaboration and Group Discussions

As students become skilled at engaging with content and each other in Shared Inquiry activities, the productivity of partner, small-group, and whole-class collaborations improves. Students' motivation increases as they learn that the ideas of others can deepen their own thinking and see that the questioning and listening practices they are learning are vital beyond the classroom as well. Middle and high school students are ready to understand that Shared Inquiry activities are exercises in civil discourse and that the skills they

have developed are those they will use every day in their personal, academic, civic, and professional lives.

Because students' curiosity drives each stage of the Shared Inquiry process, all learners have ample opportunities to share and refine questions to explore. Consistent practice with questioning enables both teachers and students to strengthen their capacity to engage with challenging content while focusing on inquiry.

Teacher's Role in Helping Students Process Content

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<p>Teachers of Shared Inquiry are themselves active learners who are acquiring new knowledge about the content being explored. Effective leaders pose questions that stem from genuine curiosity about the content or about students' responses to it.</p> <p>This emphasis on exploration enables the teacher to model authentic curiosity about the ideas of all students, thereby creating a more equitable thinking community in the classroom.</p> <p>The questioning strategies central to Shared Inquiry activities emphasize the importance of tailoring responses to each student in ways that extend critical thinking, no matter at what level the student is currently working.</p> <p>This personalized learning experience increases student engagement and also expands the teacher's repertoire of differentiation techniques.</p>	<p>Component 3B: Using Questioning and Discussion Techniques. "When teachers use questions skillfully, they engage their students in an exploration of content. . . . Teachers often probe a student's answer, seeking clarification or elaboration. . . . Such interactions, in addition to encouraging deeper understanding, convey respect for students and their thinking. . . .</p> <p>Experienced teachers also cultivate their skills in leading discussions. As a result, class discussions are animated, engaging all students in important questions and using the discussion format as a technique to extend knowledge. . . . In classes accustomed to discussion, students assume considerable responsibility for the depth and breadth of the conversation."</p>
	<p>Marzano and Toth²</p> <p>Helping Students Process Content. "Note: For the student-centered classroom, the focus shifts from teacher to student. The teacher is 'helping students process content.' Inherent in this phrase is that students are expected to work with, summarize, and elaborate on content, not just listen as the teacher discusses or lectures."</p> <p>Managing Response Rates with Tiered Questioning Techniques. "The teacher purposefully asks questions with ascending cognitive complexity in order to support students in deepening their thinking about content. In addition to ensuring that all students respond, the teacher ensures that student responses are backed up by evidence."</p>

Content and Preparation in a Student-Driven Learning Environment

The Great Books Foundation	Danielson ¹
<p>Rich, complex content is essential for inquiry-based learning, but it can be time-consuming for teachers to find it. The Great Books Foundation supports inquiry practice with collections of outstanding texts for grades K–12 that prompt curiosity, sustain in-depth questioning, and provide evidence for multiple viewpoints. Our teacher’s editions offer frameworks that strengthen and simplify classroom practice.</p> <p>The Shared Inquiry method can also be used with other texts or objects of inquiry that sustain substantive exploration, making it possible for teachers to further customize learning experiences.</p> <p>This emphasis on complex objects of inquiry supports the Shared Inquiry focus of seeing questions, and even confusion, as starting points for exploration rather than as deficits. Open-ended questions and appropriately challenging content also increase student engagement and make differentiated learning a natural response to the issues raised by the content.</p> <p>Great Books materials and professional development equip teachers to explore complex texts, model intellectual curiosity, and ask questions rather than ask students to look for a single “right answer.” Interactive workshops and in-class visits with Great Books consultants (live or via video) help teachers extend the model provided by exemplary materials and use the Shared Inquiry method with other content. Teachers thus gain the proficiency needed to place questioning and discussion at the center of classroom practice, as envisioned by today’s standards and teacher-effectiveness frameworks.</p>	<p>Domain 1: Planning and Preparation. “It is difficult to overstate the importance of planning. In fact, one could go further and argue that a teacher’s role is not so much to <i>teach</i> as it is to <i>arrange for learning</i>.”</p> <p>Component 1E: Designing Coherent Instruction. “Encourage depth rather than breadth. Activities and assignments designed to enhance student engagement are not superficial. They challenge students to search for underlying causes, explain their thinking, and justify a position.”</p> <p>Marzano and Toth²</p> <p>Getting to How. “Teachers need models and training to help them step back to the role of skilled facilitators, to guide students to take ownership of their own learning.”</p> <p>Marzano and Toth³</p> <p>Domain 2: Planning and Preparing. “The more effectively a teacher plans and prepares, the higher the probability that the teacher will utilize effective classroom strategies and behaviors.”</p> <p>Domain 2, Category 1, Element 2. “Planning and preparing for lessons within a unit that progress toward a deep understanding and transfer of content.”</p>

Conclusion

Genuine learning comes to life when teachers and students are empowered to approach complex content with curiosity, robust questioning strategies, and confidence that collaboration

supports in-depth critical thinking. Great Books and Shared Inquiry professional development help to put this simultaneously rigorous and joyful experience of learning within reach for all.

Sources

1. Danielson, Charlotte. *Enhancing Professional Practice: A Framework for Teaching*, 2nd ed. ASCD, 2007.
2. Marzano, Robert J. and Toth, Michael D. *Teaching for Rigor: A Call for a Critical Instructional Shift*. Learning Sciences Marzano Center, 2014.
3. Marzano, Robert J. and Toth, Michael D. *Teacher Evaluation That Makes a Difference*. ASCD, 2013.