The Collaborative Inquiry Journey

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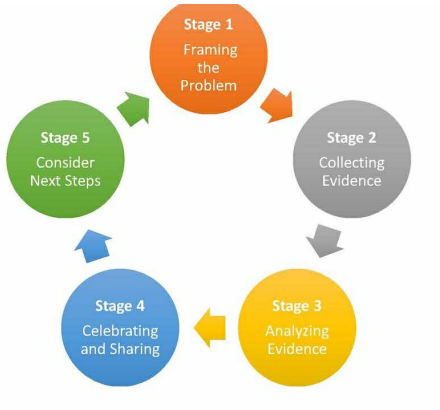
What is Collaborative Inquiry?
Collaborative inquiry (CI) is a structure for professional learning where educators come together to collaboratively investigate a focused aspect of their teaching practice. At the heart of this professional learning model is the focus on improving learning outcomes for students. This model is developed using evidence about the most effective forms of professional collaboration and appropriate research methods. An inquiry question is developed, data collected and analysed, action steps determined, and results are shared with further recommendations for the next learning cycle.

Why Collaborative Inquiry?
CI reinforces how thoughtful action-based on careful examination of evidence can make an impact on learners. Without this impact, working together collaboratively may result in nothing more than an enjoyable and engaging experience. John Hattie (2009) completed a meta-analysis of the more effective teaching approaches and concluded that when teachers work together in collaborative teams to better understand what students must learn, gather evidence of student learning, and identify and implement the most powerful teaching strategies to address gaps in student learning, the impact can be significant. The CI process embodies all of these elements in the learning cycle. Leaders in educational change have embraced collaborative inquiries as a strategy that challenges thinking and practices through collective learning (Katz, Earl, and Jaafar, 2009; Stoll, 2010).

> *"Collaborative inquiry holds potential for deep and significant changes in education. Bringing educators together in inquiry sustains attention to goals over time, fosters teachers' learning and practice development, and results in gains for students."*
> – Canadian Education Association, 2014

The Five Stages of a Collaborative Inquiry
There are five stages in a CI cycle:



The first stage is framing the problem. This stage is where the team identifies student learning needs, determines a shared vision, develops an inquiry question, and formulates a theory of action. Choosing a focus and inquiry question can be achieved by examining current student learning needs and the evidence that verifies the need. The concerns that have been identified need to be authentic and relevant as well as a concern that is within your sphere of influence.

Team members develop a shared vision by describing what success looks and sounds like and what is the most desirable outcome. From this framed problem and shared vision, an inquiry question is formulated.

Here is an example of what this may look like:

> **Student Learning Need:** Students have difficulty with the transfer of knowledge learned in the classroom and applying it in their work term.
>
> **Problem Framed:** Students fail to see the relevance or purpose of the content being presented in the classroom.
>
> **Purpose Statement:** The purpose of their inquiry is to discover how to establish relevance and purpose so that students can make better connections of what they learned in their classroom to their responsibilities in the workplace.

From the inquiry question, theories of action can be formulated. These can be in the form of “if-then” statements and will connect your team’s vision with the more specific strategies used to improve teaching and learning. The theories of action for the above-framed problem and inquiry could be:

- If the instructor used case studies in the course, then students will be familiar with the real-world contexts and to be more successful at transferring knowledge and skills in their work term.
- If the students engage in role-playing activities, then the students will be more

prepared for their work term settings.

> *"Collaborative cultures, which by definition have close relationships, are indeed powerful, but unless they focus on the right things, they may end up being powerfully wrong."*
> – Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012

Once the inquiry question has been defined, the team can move to the second stage of the CI cycle and consider what types of data to collect to answer it. The main purpose of this stage is to test new pedagogical approaches and collect feedback on the effectiveness of these approaches from various perspectives. Data collection methods should actually collect what they are intending to collect and be designed to answer the questions being asked. The team must ensure that the evidence is triangulated when considering the sources of data collected that will inform the team's inquiry. Triangulation is the process of corroborating evidence from different individuals, types of data, or methods of data collection. How many different viewpoints have been considered when measuring impact?

In the third stage, data is analyzed, which includes organizing, reading, describing, classifying, and interpreting. Inevitably, a great deal of data and material will be generated by the group members. The challenge is to make sense of what has been collected. The team must synthesize the organized data into general written conclusions or understandings.

The final two stages are about celebrating their learning and sharing the knowledge and insights with colleagues. Next steps and recommendations are made. How can we apply what we have learned to further actions? What is the next step in the CI cycle? What do we still need to find out?

In summary, participating in a collaborative inquiry enables one to work with colleagues to determine the why and what of their professional learning and to learn in the context of their own teaching environment. Researchers have learned from educators that collaborative inquiry is not a 'project,' an 'initiative,' or an 'innovation,' but a professional way of being (Kaser & Halbert, 2014). Embarking on this CI journey will engage educators as researchers to explore questions about their practices and assumptions with a shared commitment to better understand how to achieve excellence in teaching and enhance student learning.

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