Designing for inquiry requires a shift in practice—hard work that motivates students to dig deeper into the learning experience.

An Exploration of the Inquiry Process

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With the publication of Standards for the 21st-Century Learner, AASL declared its commitment to the instructional role of school librarians, a role grounded in a constructivist instructional philosophy. This model focuses on students as they use an “inquiry-based process” to “inquire, think critically, and gain knowledge”; “draw conclusions, make informed decisions, apply knowledge to new situations, and create new knowledge”; and “share knowledge and participate ethically and productively as members of our democratic society” (AASL 2007, 4, 5, 6).

Although school librarians have taught information process skills for years, how does aligning our instruction with an “inquiry-based process” change our work? How does an inquiry-based process differ from information literacy? To what extent are school librarians changing their professional practice to incorporate this model in their own school library programs?

We asked this issue’s authors to address these questions:

• How is using an inquiry process different from helping students with traditional research assignments?
• How does an inquiry process fit into implementation of the Common Core State Standards and other state standards?

How Is Using an Inquiry Process Different?

Carol Kuhlthau and Leslie Maniotes discuss how Kuhlthau’s research has led to a deeper understanding of student behavior, thinking, and feelings at different stages of a research assignment. The authors define the characteristics of inquiry and show how the Guided Inquiry Design model can be used to design learning experiences.

Daniel Callison and Katie Baker define elements of information inquiry and describe and compare the three major inquiry models the learning tasks embedded in these elements. They note that the increased emphasis on inquiry results from the application of constructivist theory and changes in the teaching role of the school librarian.

Trudi Jacobson and Emer O’Keefe introduce two learning models used in academic libraries and consider their application in high school instruction. Metaliteracy emphasizes students’ information creation, collaboration, and metacognition. Threshold concepts are a discipline’s core concepts. Both models are integral to the Association of College and Research Libraries’ draft Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education.

In an online exclusive, Judi Moreillon discusses the alignment of reading strategies and tasks in the inquiry process. She demonstrates how the school librarian can “build a bridge” to the classroom by using a shared vocabulary and intentionally aligning library instructional goals and practices with those of principals and teachers.
To What Extent Do School Librarians Embrace and Teach with an Inquiry-Based Process?

Using a Driver’s Ed analogy, Suzy Rabbat shares practical opportunities and relevant strategies to provide students with multiple opportunities for practice so learners can gain the skills to move from “the parking lot to the highway.”

Nālani Naluai shares how librarians in Hawaii’s Kamehameha Schools developed an inquiry process model infused with Hawaiian values and traditions to empower their students to learn about the world while continuing the traditions and learning styles of their ancestors.

Sandy Graham, Patrice Lambusta, and Barbara Letteri-Walker tell how school librarians came to the painful realization that their district’s inquiry process model was possibly flawed and why they revised it. These authors also describe how changes to the model resulted in improvements in student learning at elementary, middle, and high school levels.

School librarians may not recognize browsing as a search strategy, but browsing shares characteristics with the “Explore” component of inquiry. In an online exclusive Barbara Montgomery defines browsing, summarizes research on the practice, and explores its benefits and shortcomings.

Debbie Abilock and Connie Williams use the frame of an infographic assignment to provide rich examples of negotiating assignments with teachers, supporting students as they develop questions, and providing structures like matrices to scaffold students’ synthesis and product design.

Cherry Fuller, Gayla Byerly, Donna Kearley, and Lilly Ramin describe a grant-funded project undertaken by public, school, and university librarians. The librarians’ development of a K–20 information literacy curriculum has been an authentic inquiry with all the confusion and uncertainty our students experience.

How Does an Inquiry Process Fit into the Common Core?

Many see the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) as a catalyst for implementing inquiry, and most authors in this issue reference CCSS. Paige Jaeger and Olga Nesi discuss the difference between teacher-driven information tasks and true inquiry, provide steps to transform assignments, and illustrate the redesign of a fact–based information assignment into an inquiry project that requires students to do something with what they have learned.

Mary Boyd Ratzer declares that “school librarians who invest in inquiry have...expertise to bring to national standards reform.” She explores the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards and the Next Generation Science Standards and shows how both sets of standards align with AASL learning standards and the CCSS and require a school librarian to be actively involved in inquiry tasks.

Summing Up the Change in Practice

In an online exclusive, Nālani Naluai describes how school librarians at Hawaii’s Kamehameha Schools customized Charlotte Danielson’s framework for school librarians.

Traditional research assignments typically focus on teaching students the mysteries of location and access and strategies for note-making and citation to avoid plagiarism. Questions may be predefined by the teacher or school librarian, with expectations of a limited range of correct student responses. Inquiry, on the other hand, engages students in framing their own questions and provides structures to help them make sense of information, synthesize ideas, and communicate their findings to a real audience. Designing for inquiry requires a shift in practice—hard work that motivates students to dig deeper into the learning experience. I hope that this issue inspires readers to dig deep into their own practice, ask questions about the learning they inspire, and embrace an inquiry–based process to help students think, create, share, and grow.

Mary Keeling is the supervisor of library services at Newport News Public Schools in Virginia. In 2003, she became a National Board Certified Teacher in Library Media. Her article “Mission Statements—Rhetoric, Reality, or Roadmap to Success?” was published in the Sept/Oct 2013 issue of Knowledge Quest. She also wrote “The AASL Planning Guide: A District Approach to Powerful Professional Development” for the Mar/Apr 2013 issue of Library Media Connection. She is an AASL member and is serving on the AASL/ACRL Interdivisional Committee on Information Literacy and is chair of the AASL Supervisors Section. She has presented numerous eAcademy courses.

Work Cited: