

**DOCUMENTATION — COMMUNICATION — ACTION:
CO-INQUIRY MEETINGS FOR FACILITATED INTERCHANGE**

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Throughout life, meaning develops through *interchange* with people, objects, events and ideas. A dynamic process for conveying ideas, the concept of interchange draws from theories of communication in education, social sciences, the arts and humanities, human services and computer sciences. Interchange employs perception, emotion, action and thinking to construct meaning in a language of signs and symbols. Filled with relationships, development and learning, interchange represents the story of a lifetime. In society, the interchanging of ideas translates into knowledge, commitment to others, cultural and economic development and innovation.

Just as in personal relationships and experience, professional interchange is ever-present in the school, organization, service agency or business. In these settings, meetings provide a forum for group interchange to discuss information, resources and problems. Unfortunately, in some circumstances, after much time devoted to talking, follow-up actions are not always be taken. Consequently, issues can remain unresolved.

While overwhelming at times, a problem has the potential to become an opportunity for learning. *Inquiry* is the pragmatic educational approach proposed by Dewey (1933, 1938) and later adapted for early education as the “project approach” (Katz & Chard, 2000). The inquiry process guides the investigation of a problem based on the scientific method. An inquiry progresses in stages that include:

- 1) Defining a problem or issue
- 2) Raising questions
- 3) Hypothesizing possibilities
- 4) Observing and gathering data
- 5) Analyzing and interpreting data
- 6) Deciding on a possible plan for action
- 7) Continuing the cycle of inquiry by researching new aspects

When undertaken by a small group of learners, *collaborative inquiry* (co-inquiry) stimulates different ideas and perspectives. Co-inquiry establishes a common purpose,

research orientation and commitment to action. Such projects sustain the group's interest, questions and search for solutions. As a result, learners acquire knowledge, skills, dispositions and values. These outcomes suggest the potential of co-inquiry for productive group dialogue concerning problems.

In human service settings, Bray, Lee, Smith & Yorks (2000), initiate co-inquiry to assist in making change. To accomplish this goal, a group agrees to study a problem over a period of time by conducting research in the field in conjunction with recurring professional meetings that examine findings to arrive at solutions.

In education, teachers in a number of schools have found collaborative meetings using inquiry protocols beneficial for analyzing and reflecting on student work (for examples of protocols go to: *Looking at student work*, <http://www.lasw.org/primer.html>) Following a protocol helps teachers gain insight regarding learning styles, abilities and interests and discover ways to improve teaching. (Hatch, Ahmed, Leiberman, Faigenbaum, White & Mace, 2005; Himley & Carini, 2000; King, 2002; Langer, Colton & Goff, 2003; Yorks & Kasl, 2002). A practical and low cost solution in comparison to in-service and conferences, co-inquiry offers a transformative resource for professional development that creates a culture of research to improve education "working within the limits and possibilities" (Noguera, 2003).

Documentation: A Valuable Tool for Co-Inquirers

Many early educators in the US admire the innovative preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy where children, teachers and parents participate in multifaceted co-inquiry projects that develop children's abilities in a "hundred languages" (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998; Krechevsky & Mardell, 2001). A key for successful interchange, the capacity to express meaning in different symbolic languages, might be described as *communicative literacy*. Designing learning experiences that develop *communicative literacy*, children's abilities for multi-symbolic expression that conveys meaning to others, should be a fundamental aim for all early education programs.

Documentation, an invaluable tool for co-inquiry in Reggio preschools, records children's learning and supports reflective teaching (Rinaldi, 1998). Documentation may include children's work, notebooks, classroom journals, photographs, panels, videos and other media. Correlating with the cycle of inquiry, teachers utilize documentation to explore questions; examine children's thinking; and plan, project and respond to new situations and ideas (Gandini and Goldhaber, 2001). Because it continues to be available for future co-inquiry, documentation allows initial interpretations to be revised and new interpretations to be brought forward.

Documentation is itself is a representation of both children's and teachers' communicative abilities (Abramson & Atwal, 2003; Abramson, 2004; Gandini and Goldhaber, 2001). Exhibiting powerful, evocative images of learning in multiple languages, documentation is a basis for interchange among teachers, parents and those in the larger community. In this respect, documentation functions as *metatext*, a discourse on early learning in words, images and other symbols, that fosters communicative literacy.

Co-Inquiry Meetings for Facilitated Interchange

During co-inquiry meetings, documentation enhances communicative literacy and contributes to meaningful interchange among teachers (Abramson & Atwal, 2003; Cadwell, 2003; Carter, 2002; Project Zero, 2003). In regularly held meetings that could be described as "inquiry into inquiry" (Dewey, 1938), teachers become co-inquirers as they engage in dialogue and study documentation to understand the meaning of learning and teaching.

The success of the co-inquiry meeting depends on interchange that:

- Is "open and sensitive to the need to listen and be listened to" (Rinaldi, 2002, p. 2)

- Includes a variety of ways to communicate
- Is not limited by time constraints
- Accepts divergent interpretations
- Raises new questions
- Allows for revision in thinking

Dewey (1933) identifies a number of dispositions that are favorable to co-inquiry: open-mindedness, whole-heartedness, responsibility and curiosity. Open-minded individuals have the active desire to listen and ask questions, welcome new ideas and avoid partisanship, judgment or defensiveness. They know the importance of collaborative work and the value of interchange.

Co-inquiry meetings can be responsive to the diversity of teachers' backgrounds and experiences and the time constraints of full-time teaching. A means for educators to collaborate and learn from one another, co-inquiry has the potential to heighten the focus on development and learning, the primary concern of every educator. To facilitate successful professional interchange, the following elements should be considered: organizing the meeting, role of the facilitator, protocol or format for the meeting and alternative strategies.

Organizing the Meeting

The co-inquiry meeting takes place within a *situational frame* (Hall, 1976), that is, environmental factors affect social interaction, communication and willingness to participate. In organizing co-inquiry conducive to professional development, attention should be given to locating a quiet, pleasant physical space with comfortable seating that supports group interchange in an atmosphere of congeniality and trust.

The co-inquiry meeting convenes weekly and typically lasts two hours. A prepared agenda for the meeting should include who will be presenting documentation and a brief description. Usually no more than one or two presentations should be made at each meeting. In a center, a classroom representative rotating weekly may attend so that the

classroom is not adversely affected. In early education programs, the afternoon nap can be an ideal time. In schools, co-inquiry can be part of the weekly staff meeting.

Prior to initiating meetings, the purpose of documentation and co-inquiry should be explained to parents and be included in the program handbook. Written parental permission for documenting children should be obtained.

The Role of the Facilitator

Someone within the group may act as the facilitator. This individual may be the director, a teacher who is knowledgeable or a “deep thinker” who is also sensitive to group dynamics and potential conflicts. The facilitator guides the process and assist participants unfamiliar with the format but also participates in the co-inquiry.

Co-Inquiry Format

Different protocols or formats are possible for conducting the co-inquiry meeting. Having an explicit format encourages co-participation in the group process and listening to others. The co-inquiry meeting for facilitated professional interchange described in this article represents a synthesis of dialogue approaches experienced by the author in professional development programs attended over the last 12 years, especially, workshops and sessions in the Reggio Emilia Strand at NAEYC conferences and also programs hosted by Reggio “inspired” schools in the US.

For innovative educators who document children’s learning in their daily practice, the format for the co-inquiry meeting includes three stages: documentation, communication and action:

Documentation

1. A participant begins the co-inquiry by presenting documentation of a classroom experience to the group. The presentation should consider a problem, an observation or a situation of interest rather than a specific project or learning activity.

Communication

2. Each participant takes a turn to describe an aspect of the experience that was interesting, important or provocative.
3. Each participant takes a turn to ask a question concerning the implications of the experience for understanding teaching or learning. (the questions are not necessarily answered at this time and may require additional reading or classroom research).

Action

4. Participants move to open dialogue and brainstorming on how the experience could continue to be developed.
5. Based on the comments, questions and ideas from the co-inquiry, the presenter creates a “plan of possibility” that might be explored with the children in the coming week.
6. Documentation of these new experiences becomes the source for future inquiry meetings and the continuation of the process.

To summarize, after the presentation of documentation (Stage I), communication proceeds in a circular fashion (Stage II). Each participant has a chance to comment, ask for clarification or raise a question (or pass) in the order of seating. In the action discussion, participants freely brainstorm their ideas and collaborate on planning with the presenter (Part III).

To share documentation, teachers often bring a binder with their documentation ready to share. If a computer or DVD player is to be used, media are loaded and available to view. Each participant uses a notebook to maintain a dated record of progress and reflections related to a specific co-inquiry project or investigation. The presenter of the documentation makes detailed notes of the comments, questions and ideas contributed by other participants. A follow-up classroom meeting is held based on the notes with the staff that did not attend. The co-inquiry meeting can also be videotaped as a record.

If teachers lack familiarity with creating documentation, a reading, observation from the classroom, conference presentation, workshop or student work can be substituted. Co-inquiry meetings need not be “closed.” As teachers increase in their confidence, parents or teachers from other programs can be invited to attend and participate, a few at a time.

An Example of Co-Inquiry: Improving Peer Relations

The Joyce M. Huggins Early Education Center (Huggins Center) at California State University, Fresno is a demonstration, training and research center in early education that serves families with children ages 3 months to 10 years. Although the format has changed considerably over the years, weekly co-inquiry meetings for teachers have been held since the school opened in 1994.

In the example below, a group of Huggins Center teachers discover new ways to improve peer relations and reduce conflict in the classroom over the course of several co-inquiry meetings by going through the three stages, documentation, communication and action,.

To view a selected documentation related to this example or register for the Co-Inquiry Blog, please visit <http://www.fanslerece.org>

Documentation. At the center's co-inquiry meeting, a preschool teacher, who has moved into a new classroom mid-year, presents observational notes describing problems in peer relations: children disagreeing in playing games, not being able to wait for their turn for the water fountain, having conflicts over toys, not sharing materials, etc.

Communication. The other teachers comment on aspects of the situation they believe may be important, noting that the changes in teaching staff and the learning environment may have caused stress for the children. One teacher observes that the issue seems to involve taking turns rather than personal animosities or differences.

Teachers ponder why children who have been together for some time are having these difficulties. Other questions concern whether the same children are involved, how activities are organized and possible parental influences, a teacher wonders, "How do children acquire skills in taking turns?" One teacher remembers that she has a pertinent article on professional responses to peer conflicts that may be useful (Katz, 1984).

In the final stage of the meeting, teachers consider the following possible actions: discuss the problem of taking turns with the group; read documentation to the children describing recent problems and having them suggest solutions, and offer learning experiences that require taking-turns such as science experiments, using a piece of equipment and cooking.

Action. The group agrees that experiences that require peer collaboration could help children learn to work together and come up with their own ways for resolving peer conflicts such as taking turns. This idea is incorporated into the plan for the week. Returning to the classroom, the teachers discuss the problem with the children and the idea of doing a group project. The children share activities they like to do with others at school and at home and what it means to take turns. Based on the discussion, the

teachers plan and document several of these experiences. Cooking emerges as a strong interest of the children.

Cooking in the classroom is educationally complex and socially challenging. Finding out about favorite family recipes, obtaining ingredients, following directions, stirring and pouring and watching the time encourage children to collaborate and rely on one another as well as adults. Parents also participate by sending in recipes, volunteering to help, supplying ingredients and utensils and attending an experience where favorite family recipes are made with small groups of children.

Children not only practice taking turns and cooperating, they discover the importance of individual and group efforts. For teachers, co-inquiry leads to new approaches for encouraging positive peer relations and parent participation. Through this experience, the classroom becomes a stronger community.

Alternative Strategies

When program-wide co-inquiry is not possible, a group of like-minded individuals either in the program or from different programs may decide to organize meetings. This may involve before or after work, weekend or “virtual” meetings to accomplish comparable results. Listservs such as Projects-L and Reggio-L are designed for networking and collaboration among interested teachers. Electronic formats such as the Co-Inquiry Blog facilitate group interchange on teaching and learning (Abramson, Benavides, Rogers and Ratzlaff, 2005).

Benefits of Co-Inquiry Meetings

Facilitated professional interchange helps teachers see the significance of their work, gain fresh insights and acquire greater communicative literacy. Langer, Colton and Goff (2003) identify these additional benefits: better understanding of children’s abilities and

ways to enhance learning; growth in inquiry skills; stronger emphasis on standards, more sharing; increased mentoring; and improved self assessment. As a result of co-inquiry, teachers become more passionate about their work and revitalize their educational efforts for children and families (Abramson & Atwal, 2003; Tegano, 2002).

Once a routine, co-inquiry becomes integral to the life of the school. Research confirms the value of professional development for teachers. Studies show a positive association between program quality and child outcomes and professional development experiences (Honig and Hirallal, 1998). Another recent study involving 257 elementary schools demonstrates that teacher collaboration and professional development improve achievement of high-risk learners (EdSource, October 2005 at http://www.edsource.org/pub_abs_simstu05.cfm).

As part of a co-inquiry group, teachers feel a sense of belonging and closeness with other teachers. In a culture of professional development, they learn to bridge differences, communicate and plan constructive action to improve early learning and their own teaching. Rinaldi (2001) observes: “Knowing how to work in a group— appreciating its inherent qualities and value, and understanding the dynamics, the complexity, and benefits involved—constitutes a level of awareness that is indispensable for those who want to participate, at both the personal and professional levels, in effecting change and building the future” (p. 29). As an expression of commitment to children, professional growth and one another, co-inquiry meetings forge connections and an educational community that everyone deserves.

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