The role of literature in the inquiry classroom

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In essence, an inquiry classroom in which both learners AND teachers are positioned as investigators or researchers engaged in quests to make meaning of the world around and within them. The inquiry classroom is rich with questions generated by teachers and by students. Students have opportunities to formulate and investigate questions important to them with the goal being the ‘uncovering’ of concepts and skills rather than ‘coverage’ of the curriculum. Inquiry classrooms are places that value curiosity, thinking, research, creativity, collaboration, action and independence. They are places that welcome uncertainty and accept the problematic and complex nature of knowledge. In an inquiry classroom, the student ‘does the learning’...the learning is not ‘done’ to them. Literature should play a central, powerful role in the inquiry classroom. This article explores three important avenues for the use of literature to enhance a culture of inquiry and contribute to the deepening of students' understanding of ‘big ideas’ central to their inquiries. The inquiry teacher recognizes literature as a critical element in his/her repertoire of resources. – it is the perfect bridge from the known...to the unknown.

"The bridge will only take you halfway there, to those mysterious lands you long to see. Through gypsy camps and swirling Arab fair, and moonlit woods where unicorns run free. So come and walk awhile with me and share the twisting trails and wondrous worlds I've known. But this bridge will only take you halfway there. The last few steps you have to take alone."

— Shel Silverstein

1. Literature as an ‘information’ source
2. Literature to teach questions and stimulate curiosity
3. Teaching literature with an inquiry stance

Literature as an ‘information’ source within the context of units of inquiry.

“How might we find out more?” This is a common question posed to students by the inquiry teacher. Part of the process of guiding an inquiry is to invite students to consider the different ways in which they might research in order to find seek answers to their questions or a shared question into which the class is investigating. Typically, texts are used as a source of information but in most inquiry units, students (and teachers) associate non-fiction texts with the business of research.

Fiction, however, can be an equally powerful and engaging source of information, ideas and perspectives on many of the questions into which students inquire. After all, fiction – like any art work, is the author’s expression of their exploration into life experience. And it is the exploration of life experience that inquiry is all about. Fiction – by its very nature – can be the most potent way to amplify reality, bringing the truths of the world to us through story.

When planning inquiry journeys for our students, we should consider the extraordinarily rich world of literature as a potential resource to deepen and widen students’ thinking about and understanding of...
the concept into which they are inquiring. For example, an inquiry into the question “Why do people leave their homeland to live somewhere else?” is beautifully served by a study of Shaun Tan’s “Arrival” or David Miller’s “Refugee”. An inquiry into the question “How does food connect people?” is enhanced by Jennie Adam’s “Pigs and Honey” or Sally Rippon’s “Chinese New Year”. Inquiries into family life need look no further than Bob Graham’s beautiful, whimsical tales – perfect for students to make connections to their own lives. An inquiry into the concepts of conflict and resolution can be explored through the use of a range of fiction texts: the dynamics of Donkey and Shrek’s relationship in the ‘Shrek’ films, for example, are perfect fodder for thinking about this concept. The use of literature within a journey of inquiry has come a long way since the days of thematic instruction. This is not simply a matter of locating “books about the topic” – rather it is selecting titles that we know will contribute to the exploration of the big question we are exploring as a class. The inquiry teacher asks: “As we read this book, let’s think about how the author is answering our inquiry question.” What connections can you make between this story and what we have been learning so far?” Connecting the world of fantasy and fiction to data already gathered (perhaps through interviews or surveys) is an effective way to challenge students to take their thinking further. For example “As we read “Oscar’s Half Birthday by Bob Graham, I wonder what connections you can make to some of the celebrations around the world we have been finding out about?”

Suggested strategies:

- Once the conceptual understandings for the inquiry have been planned, seek out a selection of fiction texts that support the ‘big idea’ and weave them into the investigation as it unfolds.
- Ask students to locate texts that connect with your big question
- Select passages/sections/images from fiction texts to include as prompts for discussion/thinking strategies in connection with your big idea
- Investigate, if available, the author’s journey in devising and creating the text. What did he or she intend for the audience to gain from the text? What research/life experience is the story based upon? What did the author need to find out in order to craft the text?
- As each text is introduced through the unit, systematically compare and contrast the way the concept/s are explored. A data chart is the perfect way to analyse, summarise, compare and contrast the perspectives emerging from the texts.
- Use literature to compare the way the same idea explored in a non fiction text can be similarly expressed through fiction. For many, it is in fact the engagement with fiction that helps deepen real understanding of something. Consider what we learn about the challenges of living in a remote Australian outback from ‘The Drover’s Wife’ or the beauty and fragility of the Daintree rainforest we learn from Jeannie Baker’s ‘Where the Forest Meets the Sea’
- Use quality comprehension tools in conjunction with the texts – these tools fulfill the purposes of the ‘sorting out’ phase of the inquiry model, for example:

  - Text to self, text to text, text to world
  - Blind sequencing
  - Concentric circles synthesis
  - Directed Reading and thinking
- Talk to the author
- Question in role

Not all inquiries will lend themselves to the rich and meaningful integration of literature, however planning teams need to take the time to consider the question: how might literature help our students explore this concept more deeply? Consider the way literature can might act as a source of information and perspective when investigating the following questions:

Sample inquiry questions

- Are we more the same or more different?
- What’s worth saving?
- What is a hero and do we need them?
- What does it mean to be a good friend?
- How can I care for my environment?
- How are we connected to animals?
- How and why do people seek homes in new places?
- What is work and why do people do it?
- Where is the past in the present?
- Poverty: whose responsibility?
- How does where we live affect HOW we live?
- How do children live in other places?
- What makes a great leader?
- Who has the power?
- Does the past make us who we are?
- Can we belong to more than one culture?
- What makes a good home?
- How can we improve our school/community?
- Why do people belong to groups?
- What legacy will we leave behind?
- Whose history is it?
- How and why do we move from place to place?
- How do places change over time?
- Do we need rules?
- What ‘stands the test of time?’
- How and why do we remember/commemorate events of the past?
- How can I have my say?
- What does it really cost?
- Does technology change our lives for the better?
- What happens when cultures collide?
Literature to teach questions and stimulate curiosity

Literature holds another critical role in the inquiry classroom. We can use literature to **model and stimulate the dispositions of curiosity and wonderment and to teach students about how to ask different kinds of questions**. Many texts appeal to students’ natural appetite for finding out about the world, others use questions themselves in the structure of the text while others tell stories in a way that leaves us with much to ponder, wonder and discuss.

**Literature to enhance a culture of inquiry**
Brown, P. *The Curious Garden (2009)* Hachette Book Group. This picture book raises the question: So what would happen if we just left nature to itself? What would the world really be like?

A beautifully written, mysterious story about relationships and learning. Wide open to interpretation and prompts wonderful discussion

A series of powerful illustrations accompanied by a small thread of text. It begs to the reader to ask for more. What happened? What happened next? What could this mean?

A gorgeous, wordless text that invites imagination, creative thinking and wonderment.

This is a book about self expression and discovery told through the story of a child who thinks they can’t draw.

Thompson, C. and Lissiat, A. (2005) *The Short and Incredibly Happy Life of Riley*, Lothian
Perfect for philosophical Inquiry, this books explores the nature of happiness, of needs and wants. Big themes for young and old alike.

A challenging and evocative book about poverty and global inequity. This book never fails to get kids questioning and thinking…Thomson’s new book “The Bicycle” (September 2011) looks set to be equally engaging and ripe for inquiry and conversation!

This book explores various belief systems but does so through a journey of inquiry taken by two students. Their discoveries are recorded in diary form – so this is both informative about the issue of beliefs AND a model of the inquiry process

Most books by by Shaun Tan ([www.shauntan.net](http://www.shauntan.net)) stimulate the questions, creative and divergent thinking. Both the text and illustrations in Tan’s books leave the way wide open for interpretation and wonderment. Hachette Australia publishes most of Tan’s titles, including *Arrival, The Red Tree and The Lost Thing. Tales from Outersuburbia* is published by Allen and Unwin.

Silverstien, S. (1964) *The Giving Tree,* Harper and Row
This classic, beautiful story opens leads the way to questions about childhood, generosity, change, loss, growth and responsibility!
Brown, K. and Stewart, L. (2010) *Can I cuddle the moon?* Scholastic
For young readers. A poetic and simple text that asks questions – allowing the reader to respond and think creatively. “Can I cuddle a shining star?” …

The questions a dog would ask….if it could.

The beautiful 'Stella' books are all about inquiry. Sam – Stella’s little brother’ asks many wonderful questions to which his big sister replies with her theories on the way the world works. Creative, magical and quirky. Checkout [www.marielouisegay.com](http://www.marielouisegay.com)

A great book for mathematical inquiry. Questions are posed throughout the text (How high is high? How stretchy is stretchy?, etc) and some fascinating facts to accompany each one. This book can trigger some wonderful scientific and mathematical investigations

Trudy’s whimsical questions and drawings not only inspire discussion and creative thinking, they often prompt students to ask their OWN questions. The random and non linear nature of the text makes it delightfully fun to read and play with.

Taylor, G. *Why is the sky Blue? & Do Dogs Dream?* Ladybird Books UK
Each of these pop up books explores a range of questions about animals and the natural world. By hiding the answers under flaps and pop ups, the books give scope for students to explore and share their own theories

Jenkins, S. *Hottest, Coldest, Highest, Deepest* Haughton Mifflin. [www.stevejenkinsbooks.com](http://www.stevejenkinsbooks.com)
Steve Jenkins Books are wonderful for stimulating inquiry into the natural world. They appeal to students thirst to find lout fascinating facts about the world as well as using the power of comparison to stimulate curiosity and awe.

Joyce, W.E *The fantastic Flying Books of Morris Lessmore*, Simon and Schuster An extraordinary book – and one that opens up a multitude of questions, inferences, ideas, possibilities. A book to respond to with wonderment and awe!

Frost, H. and Lieder, R. *Step Gently Out* Candlewick Press An ‘up close’ look at nature - the amazing art work invites children to ponder the natural world in more detail – and offers the perfect springboard for questions

Papp, Lila. (2005)*‘Why?”* Kane Miller books
Using the world of animals as her context, "Why? is a series of questions about animals. For example, "Why do kangaroos have pouches?" "Why do rhinos have horns on their noses?"


www.harrietrussell.co.uk
A collection of 60 questions or curiosities to which there are no clear answers…the author has a delightful “play” with each….

**Smith, K. (2008) How to be an explorer of the world: portable life museum Perigree**
A fun collection of ideas for exploring the world from the perspective of an artist. It encourages the user to document moments, patterns, every day occurrences and is definitely written in the spirit of inquiry!

**Teaching literature with an inquiry stance**

Regardless of whether literature is used to enhance students' understanding of the ‘big idea’ being inquired into, or whether books are used to model questions and stimulate curiosity - ALL literature can be approached with an inquiry stance. One of the most powerful things a teacher can do is to cultivate the habit of approaching texts with ‘wonderment and awe’. We do this when we:

- model the questions that literature stimulates in our own minds (‘this has got me wondering about….’)
- Model and invite students to share the way our thinking changes as we move through a text (oh! Now I am thinking so differently about this character! I used to think….but now I think….)
- Model and invite students to research questions or issues of interest that emerge from the book (even if unrelated to the central story)
- Treat the sharing of literature as part of a broader, whole year inquiry – eg “What makes a great story?”
- Take our time with a text – predict, pause, reflect, ponder, review, question….sharing a beautiful piece of literature together is all about noticing and questioning.