Meeting the Challenge:

Creating Engaging and Powerful Contexts for

Literacy Learning

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This article explores the conditions of ‘flow’ experience from two studies into the literate lives of young men (Smith and Wilhelm 2002; 2006) that were explanatory, when present, of motivation and engagement in various activities including literacy, and when absent, of a lack of motivation and engagement in various activities including literacy. Typical school activities and the lack of flow, as experienced by informants in the studies, is contrasted with the experience of playing video games and the presence of flow. The second half of the article explores the practical implications of how to meet the conditions of flow experience in school using inquiry framings of traditional curricular topics.

This article consists of two parts. The first section reviews a provocative set of research findings regarding the issue of engaging students in learning and literacy. The second explores how to apply these findings in a particular way, viz. reframing curricular topics into problem-oriented inquiries using essential questions, culminating projects and instruction designed to assist students to develop the expertise to create the projects.

In this first section, I will review some of the central findings of (1) a study into the literate lives of young men (Smith & Wilhelm 2002; 2006) (2) a series of teacher research studies into the effect of playing out the implications of the original study through the use of various instructional interventions (Smith & Wilhelm 2006). I will review the first study here by comparing learning experiences in school to those experienced in the context of video games.

What teachers can learn from video games
Why do many students refuse to do homework and resist classroom activities, but spend hours reading, writing and talking related to playing video games? In our studies of American boys’ literacy (Smith and Wilhelm 2002; 2006), the data revealed provocative insights
about student learning. Among the most challenging findings was that nearly every boy – including highly accomplished readers and good students – rejected and resisted almost all school literacy practices. But all of our informants – including those boys who were illiterate or who struggled mightily with classroom learning – were eager to embrace highly sophisticated literate practices outside of school.

One of our informants (Jon) was grounded for nearly six months for refusing to do his school work, yet he read widely from fantasy literature and video game journals, was a passionate gamer, and organised a video game blog for himself and his friends. When asked why he wouldn’t do his homework, he said, ‘it’s boring, stupid, way too easy … no fun and you can’t use what you learn.’ Yet he loved video games, which are complicated, lengthy, challenging and designed to become more difficult as the player progresses. This informant was typical of boys in our study, of all ages, ethnicities and social classes, most of whom were passionate video game players.

**Play and flow**

Why would Jon endure being grounded to avoid English homework, but spend hours studying video game manuals, keeping track of scores and strategies in his journal, discussing cheat codes with friends, participating in on-line forums to make suggestions for game improvements, and reading reviews of new games? Put simply: because video games use principles that are well-established by cognitive psychology to make learning engaging and powerful. These principles are present in games, play, and most naturally occurring learning situations, but we found them to be typically absent in schools.

Our data indicate that, if teachers want students to engage with literacy, to move through their ‘zones of proximal development’ (a cognitive zone where students can learn to do something with help that cannot yet be done alone), to be better readers, writers, thinkers and learners, we need to make our learning contexts more playful, specifically – more like video games – by incorporating the features of what is called ‘flow’ into our teaching. The psychologist Csikszentmihalyi (1990) found that all people seek these same experiential features of ‘flow’ that lead to total immersion in an immediate experience.

The conditions of ‘flow’ include:

- clear purpose and continuous feedback
- appropriate challenge and assistance to meet the challenge
- development of competence and control that enhances one’s identity
• immersion in the immediate experience
• the social
• rewards for risk-taking
• learning by doing: including opportunities to use and share what is being learned.

(The first four principles are combinations of Csikszentmihalyi’s principles. We added the other three since our data demonstrates that they are also necessary to engagement, learning, and flow.)

Let’s consider how these features work in video games, and why they are typically lacking in schools.

CLEAR PURPOSE AND FEEDBACK. When students play video games, they know what they must do: they must get James Bond, win the race, build the skateboard park, help their nation reach the Gunpowder Age. Every action they take provides them with immediate feedback about their progress. Compare this to school. After interviewing every student in our study about every assignment for a semester, not a single student could identify the purpose of a single assignment. They said things, to be sure, like ‘the teacher told me to do it’, ‘I don’t want to fail’, ‘my mom will ground me if I don’t do my work’ but they clearly did not understand the deeper purpose or importance outside of school of what they were assigned and required to learn. Feedback, far from being immediate and continuous, was rare and often came a long time after a test or a writing assignment – usually when it was too late to make use of the provided information.

APPROPRIATE CHALLENGE. Video games are written to operate on multiple levels of difficulty, so that, as a gamer becomes more competent, the game remains challenging, mildly frustrating, but doable. They operate on the edge of evolving competence. Our informants took great joy in the learning they had to do to meet the new challenges presented in games. In contrast, they complained that school was made up of ‘busywork’ and was typically ‘too easy’ or ‘too hard’, geared as it is to the average student or determined by the curriculum, instead of being responsive and tailored to individual interests and needs, and how these develop and change.

WELL-ORDERED ASSISTANCE TO MEET THE CHALLENGE. Related to the idea of appropriate challenge is that of providing sequential assistance to meet the challenge. Video games, for example, work as genres. In other words, games introduce strategic demands and then continue to require these but in ever more complex forms. The game teaches you how it needs to be played by discouraging ineffective strategies and encouraging effective ones, then helping the player to
further develop good strategies. In this way video games teach children not only how to play the game, but how to layer on increasing levels of understanding and expertise so they become even more competent. Games are wonderful at teaching both general and specific problem-solving strategies that can often be applied outside the game. In contrast, school often moves quickly from one topic to another, instead of developing deep competence over time, and rarely explores how to transfer learning to real life situations. Schoolwork often lacks sequence as you ‘do one darn thing after another’, as one boy complained, nor does it offer assistance in how to do things. As another informant remarked, ‘Teachers give you hard stuff to do and then never help you.’

DEVELOP COMPETENCE. Not only do games help you to be more competent at that particular game, many popular games teach strategies and content that help students be more competent in other specific knowledge domains. For example, games like *Rise of Nations*, *SimCity*, *80 Days*, *Guitar Hero*, *Tony Hawk’s Underground*, and *Age of Mythology* actually teach students, in well ordered, step-by-step ways, how to think like historians, urban planners, geographers, travel guides, musicians, role players, literary scholars, scientific and mathematical problem-solvers, and much more by getting the player to deal with real content and problems that require players to see connections, apply what has been learned, and to improvise, innovate, and create new knowledge. Good games stay within the player’s competence, but always push at the edge of it to further develop and extend that competence. Video games celebrate competence and continually demonstrate the player’s progress. The students who play such games learn significant content and strategies while they are engaged and having fun. But in school, as one boy complained, ‘You are told how you are dumb, not how you are smart. They concentrate on what you can’t do, not on showing you what you could do.’

CONTROL AND IDENTITY. Most important is that good video games cast the learner as an agent who is actively involved in decision-making and who therefore becomes an active co-producer of each unique iteration of the game. To play this role, gamers are offered strong identities that require them to exercise expertise. In some games, players are provided with an identity. In others, players build their own characters. We know that learning and identity are always related (Gee, 2002), as we always learn and enact knowledge from a particular role and perspective. Gamers exercise control as they co-design the game, because what they do affects what will happen next (Gee, 2002). In contrast, school typically exerts complete control over students, and tells them what to do instead of helping them develop
and exercise their own choices and apply their individual expertise in independent ways.

IMMERSION IN THE IMMEDIATE EXPERIENCE. If you watch students playing video games, they are totally immersed in the experience of playing. They may not even hear you talking to them (calling them to dinner, etc.). But in school, our informants were often distracted and rarely identified engaging experiences. Short class periods, disjointed curricular experiences, separate classes, and frequent interruptions are just a few of the school features that work against immersion.

THE SOCIAL. No one in our study played video games that their friends did not play. They enjoyed trading advice and comparing scores. They visited websites and forums to trade tips and ideas. Knowledge was socially constructed and readily available in a variety of social forms. But when we asked our boys if they had the chance to collaborate in school, one boy offered this typical answer: ‘You can do it, but it’s called cheating.’ Working alone is not how people best learn, nor is it the most enjoyable way to learn.

RISK-TAKING ENCOURAGED. In a video game, risk-taking is encouraged and failure is seen as a natural part of learning. Levels of difficulty can be modified, previous actions saved, the game restarted, and there are multiple ways to solve the presented problems. In some games, like *Laura Croft*, making mistakes or not following directions is rewarded. These features encourage players to take risks, explore, and try new things. But in school, taking a risk can easily result in a bad grade. As one informant said, ‘[in school] you learn just to play it safe – do what is required – no more and no less.’ Another informant had this to say: ‘Take a risk in school and you are likely to get creamed. You’ll never get your grade back up. Save your risk-taking for stuff outside of school.’

LEARN BY DOING. Players learn as they play in the meaningful, purposeful context of the game, rather than having to master a knowledge set before being allowed to put it to use – which is often how things work in school. Video games provide their own coherent world, and often offer simulations of real life experience. Research shows that students learn best when they learn in context, that is, when they can draw on vocabulary, concepts, and strategies from prior experience and further develop and apply these through activity in the immediate learning situation. The boys in our study were alienated from what they learned in school because they received information instead of actively developing and using strategic and conceptual knowledge as tools, and because learning was not
connected to their own life experience nor to the world and how real people do work in the real world.

**Intervention research: What’s a teacher to do?**
In our follow up studies, exploring the use of instructional interventions to stimulate motivation and learning (much of this was done in the context of a national demonstration site project for promoting literacy in the content areas), our data show that by organising class activities and units to meet the conditions of flow, we achieve huge pay-offs in terms of student motivation and learning (Smith & Wilhelm, 2006). Instead of focusing on basic skills and standardised test scores, we should organise student learning around ‘inquiry’ which mirrors the complex problem-solving of real readers, ethicists, social scientists and the like, and the use of literacy in service of addressing real issues. After all, anything we already teach was discovered or invented to help address a real-world and disciplinary question or problem. Articulating that question highlights the problem-orientation, and framing instruction around it will provide a clear purpose and then the other conditions of flow.

**An introduction to inquiry: An example**
An intermediate teacher in our national demonstration site reframed the teaching of *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry into a unit around the question ‘What are civil rights and how can we best protect them?’ Students still read *Number the Stars* as part of this inquiry. But different challenges were offered as different students chose related readings about various civil rights issues from the newspaper, Internet sites, or the library. Choices and risks were encouraged, because the whole class benefited from what individuals or small groups learned on their own. Students learned by doing as they interviewed community members, studied their own school, pursued individual interests related to the general inquiry topic (e.g. Is gun ownership a civil right? Are girls harassed in our school hallways? What can we do to address bullying in our community?) and did much more to augment their study. Students applied their life experiences and learning with civil rights to social activities like dramatisations about social problems and how to address them (performed for their elementary school reading buddies, thereby achieving two social elements: performing with and performing for), participated in school-wide forum discussions, created public service announcements for the community in the form of posters, exhibits and videos, and undertook social action projects such as running a community meeting about local hate crimes and what to do about them.
Three steps to inquiry
In our intervention research, teachers used three steps to reframe an information-driven curricular topic into an inquiry unit.

Step One: Re-frame the topic with an essential question, and identify the goals and standards that exploring this question will allow the class to address.

Step Two: Identify culminating projects for students to complete at the end of the unit that will demonstrate and apply the use of the major conceptual and strategic goals. For example, in each unit, we asked students to write an assigned formal writing assignments, create a multimedia compositions of their choice, and undertake a social action project of their choice.

Step Three: Create an instructional sequence that will assist students activity by activity and text by text to move from where they are now (being more novice), to where they need to be (being more expert), to successfully complete the projects. This sequence involved teacher modelling of strategy use with the concepts of the unit, mentoring through teacher-student and small group work, and monitoring of individual work. Multiple modalities (drama, visualisation, think-alouds, etc.) and measures were used to support the learning.

Moving to the practical
Let’s turn our attention now to practical issues of creating essential questions, and matching them to culminating projects that will develop and demonstrate understanding.

Framing curriculum with the guiding question
My own students, like the students in our studies, often used to ask: ‘Why do we have to do this stuff?’ But I’ve found that nobody asks that question any more. Now they know why we do what we do, because essential questions purposefully reframe the curricular topic. The use of these questions creates a clearly focused problem-orientation to curriculum that connects kids personally to socially significant learning. This in turn leads to exciting conversations that bring together the students’ lives, the course content, and the world as we consolidate major concepts, vocabulary, strategies and ideas.

So, what is a guiding question?
A guiding question (see Jacobs 1989, Travers 1998, Smith & Wilhelm 2006, Wilhelm 2007, Wiggins & McTighe 2003) is quite simply a question that reframes a curricular topic into a problem or issue to be pursued. The question highlights the central reasons that the
studied material was developed or discovered in the first place. It foregrounds the functionality and use of what is to be learned. Guiding questions connect students to real expertise as practised in the world. Everything that is taught, including all strategies, concepts, and the big enduring understandings are learned in the service of understanding and doing things related to the question. One of the most powerful aspects of a guiding question is that it suggests meaningful activities, writing, and culminating projects that help students to address the question and take a position on the issues that it raises (more on this follows). As a result, an experiential coherence of the curriculum is achieved – something that we found rarely happened in school, but always did in the learning of a video game (Smith and Wilhelm 2002, 2006).

A guiding question ...

• honours the ‘reality principle’ of students – addresses students’ point of view and need for interest. The question will also lead to enduring understandings students can immediately use to think, talk and solve problems.

• addresses the ‘heart of the discipline’ being studied (Wiggins & McTighe, 2003) – that is, essential disciplinary knowledge will be required to answer it. Including this means teachers and students will necessarily uncover required curriculum through the inquiry.

• possesses emotive force, intellectual bite or edginess – will be engaging to students and invite them into ongoing conversations and debates.

• must be open-ended; contended; arguable; with multiple perspectives and possible answers.

• is short; the question should be succinct and pointed.

• demands research, that is the gathering of data for answering the question– information can be ascertained and developed by students to address the question.

• should lead to new questions asked by the students. This provides directions for students’ future critical inquiries.

Tips for writing guiding questions

Composing a guiding question might seem difficult at first, but after a few passes – either on your own, with a colleague or with the help of your students – teachers find them quick and easy to compose. Here are a few tips to get you started (Smith & Wilhelm 2006, Wilhelm 2007).
**Tip: Consider the heart of the matter**
When dealing with a required text or topic, ask yourself: why was this considered important enough to be in the curriculum? If you love the book or unit you should ask: Why do I care so deeply about teaching this? What human problems/issues/questions does it address? If you have trouble answering, consider what other things you could teach instead. What advantages do we get from teaching one instead of the other? For example, if I am required to teach evolution or environmental issues I could ask: ‘Who will survive?’ This question speaks to student concerns and to issues that play out every day in politics and the media.

**Tip: Looking around the community**
Think about links to the curriculum in the community or region where you work. What is in the news and on people’s minds? For example, I have taught in school districts that experienced huge influxes of immigrants from Somalia and Bosnia due to drought, warfare and other social problems in those countries. Framing a unit around the question: ‘What is our responsibility to those in trouble/less fortunate?’ can help students in units on immigration, civil rights, work conditions and many other topics. It can also help students to consider the nature of ‘right action’ in their own lives.

**Tip: Ask questions about quality that require students to make judgements**
Such questions personally involve students in making evaluations. Such questions may involve concepts like good, great, best, influential, important, successful or superior. For example, in my survival unit, I could ask: What would be the most important adaptations that would allow a human to survive on Mars? What adaptations will be most important to surviving on planet earth when biodiversity has been halved? Or during a civil rights unit: What have been the most important contributions to civil rights and why? Who are the most important contributors to civil rights and why? What makes a great person/civil rights leader?

**Tip: Ask questions of application**
Remember that most human knowledge is contested because of its socially constructed nature. But some knowledge bases are not as contested as others, enjoying wide agreement or failing to possess an emotional edge. For this kind of material, essential questions can ask about the uses, most effective uses, or misuses of the knowledge. Students can be asked, ‘We know this, but so what? What problems can we apply this to? What issues can we address with this knowledge?’ – e.g. How can we use what we know about Maths to
build a doghouse and play area? (I did this one with fourth graders.) How can we create a useful friendship contract (or pre-nuptial agreement) based on what we believe about good relationships? If we were on a deserted island, how could we use what we know about good government to organise ourselves?

**The power of guiding questions**

As mentioned in the first half of the article, I currently serve as in-service director for a national demonstration site project in content area literacy. After working with several hundred teachers, K-12 and all subject areas, we have yet to find a unit that cannot be reframed with an essential question. And doing so has had powerful results for both teachers and students.

For example, Dallas Smith from the BYU/CITES demonstration site accosted me one morning to say; ‘Inquiry changes EVERYTHING! Everything is better. I’d never imagined what a change just asking an inquiry question could make for me and the kids’ learning.’ Katie McKiernan confided that ‘if I hadn’t discovered inquiry I don’t think I would have stayed in teaching. I had a vision and I couldn’t put it in action. Now I can. I’m totally energised.’ Other teachers wrote that: ‘I’ve come to believe that what I have been doing for years doesn’t lead to real learning. Now I feel like the students are learning for the first time in years because they have a purposeful direction. Even more exciting is that I feel like I am learning and growing for the first time in years too!’ ‘I was bored doing the same ol’ same ol’. I didn’t see how what I was doing mattered and the kids didn’t either. Now we all see we are working together towards something truly important. Now I know that what I am doing matters. And I’m glad to be getting more hip.’

In our national demonstration site research, we found that teachers using the inquiry model reported higher satisfaction, and students reported higher engagement. Attendance has tended to rise, and behaviour referrals have gone down.

**How guiding questions lead to culminating projects, deep learning, and flow**

If what and how we teach does not immediately matter to kids, their learning will suffer. Research in cognition shows us that purpose motivates learning, directs what we attend to, and determines what we remember. Without a clear purpose, learning is difficult to achieve. Using guiding questions provides the clarity of purpose necessary to promote our students’ learning.

One of the most powerful features of guiding questions is that they directly lead to culminating projects that address the question in various ways. This, in turn, means that instruction and assistance to
develop conceptual and strategic tools is in clear and direct service of considering the central question and preparing to undertake the culminating project that answers it in some way. In this way, what is known as ‘curricular coherence’ can be achieved; that is, everything is about the central project of thinking through the guiding question in more expert ways and with deeper understanding. Students no longer feel that they are doing ‘one darn thing after another’ disconnected thing.

Let’s take a look at how guiding questions can lead naturally to culminating projects and coherent instruction while addressing all the conditions of flow.

**Romeo and Juliet**

I have personally taught *Romeo and Juliet* twenty-three different times during my career. When announcing this unit, my students rarely danced in the aisles in anticipation. But here’s a news flash: Shakespeare did not write *Romeo and Juliet* to torture Year 9 students. He wrote the play to explore issues that remain of utmost importance to our experience and happiness. By using the tip to ‘get at the heart of the matter’ through an essential question, we can come up with a question such as: ‘What makes a good relationship and what can stuff it up?’

By thinking about the play’s answers to this question, we can identify enduring understandings we would like our students to own, insights that, if missed, would surely impoverish their understanding and life experience. For example, I want my students to understand that good relationships require continual attention, care and reciprocity. I want them to consciously consider that there are many things that threaten relationships: inattention, familial interference, conflict of religion/deeply held beliefs, deceit, membership in conflicting gangs or groups, etc. The guiding question and the way that the text in question addresses it focuses my attention, and the students, on these kinds of enduring understandings – which we could also choose to resist or adapt in some measure based on our life experiences, philosophies, other reading, etc.

Asking an essential question also allows the teacher to combine readings that might typically be read during different times. For example, I combined reading of love poems from Shakespeare, the Brownings, and modern authors and musicians with a reading of John Collier’s ‘The Chaser’ (a short story about a love potion with unintended consequences), articles about relationships from *Psychology Today*, and ultimately a reading of *Romeo and Juliet*. Texts which might have been taught in isolation now were taught together, could speak to each other, and could help prepare students
conceptually for a rich reading of the play. Again, the essential question helped to achieve curricular coherence.

Achieving the enduring understandings and using them as conceptual tools requires students to develop new strategic tools. In this case, such tools might include strategies for script reading (the drama theorist and semiotician Esslin (1987) identifies 22 unique demands that scripts place on readers that are required by no other text type; see box), seeing complex implied relationships (a prerequisite to identifying and justifying theme), identifying themes and the textual evidence that expresses it, recognising and explicating structural generalisations, i.e. how a text is structured to communicate implied meanings, and considering how to apply what has been learned to our own lives. Of course, the strategies to be developed will vary for individual students and from class to class, but this list provides a set of very sophisticated and transferable goals, the achievement of which would help students to address the essential question, create the culminating projects suggested next, and that can be transferred to the reading of any other piece of literature (and lots of life experience) requiring inference-making.

### Five basic systems of scripts

I've collapsed Esslin’s conventions of scripts into five basic systems (thanks to David Anderson for these insights). These systems can provide a useful blueprint for developing instructional activities that will point out each system to students and help them use the conventions in each system to make meaning.

#### Five systems

**Pre-reading (Framing) systems:**

- Titles and Subtitles
- Identification of the kind of media (TV, stage, cinema, etc.)?
- Cast: order, names, titles, class designations, physical descriptions
- Generic tips: will this be comedy, tragedy, irony, etc.
- Initial details that help the reader infer tones, moods, intentions, expectations

**Setting descriptions**

- Settings and descriptions of settings
- Mood and tone in setting
- Type of people living in this environment
Social and historical perspective on the setting, authorial attitude towards setting and people in it
Description embedded in dialogue

**Technical Stage Directions**
Sounds, lighting, properties
Description and movement of properties
Mood, tone, expectations, symbolic meanings

**Character dialogue**
Characters portrayed through dialogue – own and that of others
Tone, style, word choice, individual language and voice
Subtext, purpose and effect of language

**Stage Directions/Descriptions of Characters**
Character appearance
Movements, gestures, body language, reactions of other characters
Symbolic implications

The question (What makes a good relationship and what can stuff it up?) itself suggests a variety of culminating projects that students could design both to express their answers to the question and to demonstrate their ability to use the major concepts and strategies. For example, the question suggests writing arguments about what Shakespeare thinks promotes and threatens relationships. This argument could easily be combined with an authorial reading argument about how much the student agrees or disagrees with Shakespeare based on her own beliefs and experiences. Or students could stake their claim about what makes a good relationships using evidence from across various readings and their own experiences.

Likewise, my students have enjoyed composing a pre-nuptial agreement that Romeo and Juliet should have signed, or more general ones for promoting a good relationship today. Other students have created interactive relationship quizzes (One was entitled: ‘Is he right for you?’) to express what had been learned about good relationships and the pressures that threaten them.

I began the instructional sequence, prior to doing any reading, with frontloading activities designed to help solidify our purposes, solicit current understandings, activate existing background knowledge, build background (by sharing responses with other students), foreground the contended nature of the debate, and provide a template to stimulate and organise our response to future readings. I used a ranking exercise, an opinionaire, and autobiographical writing. (See Exhibits 1 and 2, from Wilhelm, 2007).
Each time my students read an article, short story, poem regarding love, and as they read the play, we returned to our opinionaire and asked: what would the author, e.g. Shakespeare, or a major character, e.g. Romeo, or Juliet, or Friar Laurence, say about this statement, and how do we know?

In this way, students were helped to gather evidence and learned how to warrant (explain) it in such a way to connect it to the theme statement. By the time we had finished the unit, they had been supported and had plenty of practice with the strategies and processes of argument (claim stating, evidence citation, and warranting/evidence explanation), and had a deep familiarity with various kinds of evidence about relationships from our various readings. Therefore when it came time to undertake the final written argument, they were ready to go and the products were of a very high quality.

**Exhibit 1: Introductory activities**

**Sample Scenarios:**

Each of the following scenes describes a relationship. Read each scene and rank them from the scene that describes the best love relationship (1) to the scene that describes the worst love relationship (3). Make sure you can support your opinions. You’ll be sharing them in groups and then with the whole class.

1. Joseph always felt uneasy at parties, especially parties that included people from Forest View. Forest View was Elk Grove’s chief rival in every sport, and Joseph and his friends have been competing against kids from Forest View for as long as he could remember. And sometimes those competitions got pretty heated. So who could blame Joseph for saying his good-byes early. As he was headed out the door, however, Joseph caught a glimpse of Sara. Even all decked out in Forest View’s colours, she was, Joseph thought, the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. Screwing up his courage, Joseph went over to say hello. And it wasn’t long before he was involved in a friendly conversation with Sara and several of her friends. An hour flew by and Joseph really did have to go home. But he felt changed. Monday at school he confided to his best friend that he was in love, and with someone from Forest View on top of it. The kidding he got was intense, he and his best friend almost got into a fight over it. But Joseph was sure. He couldn’t wait to see her again. He spent all week searching to find a party that she might attend.
2. Mary and Martin have been next-door neighbours since the fifth grade and for seven years they’ve walked to school together. Since high school started, though, once they got to school, they went their separate ways – Mary was an athlete and Martin a musician. But on that mile walk they shared a lot of talk about everyday events, hopes, and heartbreaks. The senior prom was approaching and neither Mary nor Martin had a date. They decided to go together. It was funny, they broached the subject on the same day, and in fact, they couldn’t figure out who asked whom. The prom was great; they laughed and danced and kidded with their friends. They didn’t go on an after-prom trip, though. They had decided that it would make them seem too much like a couple, and they didn’t want any uncomfortableness to interfere with their friendship. That night both of them thought that the prom was one of the best dates they had ever had. It was too bad that their ‘real’ dates never went so well.

3. What a whirlwind of a romance, thought Amy. Ever since she had met Tom, things had been, well, fantastic. Nightly phone calls. Dinners at expensive restaurants. Gifts. She didn’t mind that Tom insisted she spend all of her time with him. After all, her friends should understand, and if her grades slipped a bit, who cares? She’d always be able to get into some college. She had a bit of a twinge when he asked her not to go out for the musical, but the dozen long-stem roses made that twinge fade. What a romance!
(from Michael Smith)

Autobiographical Writing before Reading
Most young people want to have dating relationships that are fun, exciting, and long lasting. First, describe a healthy, lasting dating relationship that you’ve been part of or that you’ve observed. What does a relationship need to be like in order to grow and last? Why do some relationships seem to work well? Be specific, and remember to write about real relationships that you yourself have experienced or watched.
(from Brian White)

Exhibit 2: Opinionaire
(adapted from an idea from Kahn, et al.
Writing About Literature)

Identify whether you agree (A) or disagree (D) with each statement. Then choose one statement that you feel particularly strongly about and write a brief comment about what in your experience leads you to feel this way.
1. Love at first sight is possible.
2. Love means never having to say you are sorry.
3. It is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.
4. You are never too young to fall in love.
5. You can’t expect a person to change his or her habits after you enter into a relationship with them.
6. Love takes a lot of hard work.
7. Opposites attract.
8. If you are really in love, physical appearance doesn’t matter.
9. Teenagers are capable of true love.
10. The hottest fires burn out fastest.
11. If you are really in love with someone, then you won’t be attracted to someone else.
12. Love is blind.
13. If someone does not return your affection, the best thing to do is to keep trying to change his or her mind.
14. You have to work very hard at love.
15. Love is a decision that you make, not something that happens to you.

When my students most recently pursued this unit (for a complete description of the unit, see Wilhelm, 2007), this process helped them achieve the experience of flow. The essential question provided a clear sense of purpose and drove our attention throughout the unit. Using the opinionaire after each reading gave us continuous feedback about how authors and characters would answer various facets of our essential question.

Because the purpose was to address the question, and reading *Romeo and Juliet* was in service of this purpose, actually reading the play or reading it in its entirety was not necessary. Therefore two boys just off the boat from Bosnia could read the graphic novel version and know enough to participate legitimately in our project. Some struggling readers read *Shakespeare Made Easy*; others read the original text. By combining a reading of the play (in these various forms), with other texts from the curriculum, and with self-selected popular culture texts, pictures books and young adult novels, an appropriate reading challenge was posed for all students. Also, since individuals or small groups of students read and did various kinds of
work throughout the unit, complementarity was achieved. In other words, we all did slightly different things for a common purpose. My Bosnian boys and other struggling readers did and knew things no one else did or knew, so their contributions were unique contributions to the classroom project.

Assistance was provided each day to develop conceptual and strategic tools necessary in the context of our inquiry. The frontloading activities, the work with script reading, and the sequencing of different readings were just three ways students were actively assisted to meet the challenges facing them.

Students chose not only their own free reading around the topic, but also their own multimedia or social action projects to complete that addressed the topic. In this way, they had meaningful choices that staked their identity. Also, since they could resist or adapt Shakespeare’s (or any other author’s) message, and add their own experiences to the argument, even that fairly formal school assignment exhibited choice and control that enhanced identity.

By doing one thing through many things (addressing one essential question through various curricular readings, various kinds of writing and multimedia design) students were immersed over time in an inquiry that was important to their current lives and futures. They did not move from one ‘darn’ thing to another, but from one ‘related’ thing to another related thing, developing their competence and control all the while.

Because we dramatised scenes, used drama in education to develop various ideas, created video glossaries of terms using examples from our reading, talked and wrote together, and shared our final arguments and multimedia projects, and because we were all working in slightly different ways on the same common project, the social element of flow was met.

Students were not expected to get an ‘argument’ right, or to exhibit deep understanding of processes or ideas until they had received support and multiple opportunities to practice over time. Risk-taking and trying things out was seen as necessary to the process of learning. And finally, students, through the various activities and modalities, were engaged in learning by doing.

**Conclusion**

In inquiry, learners must stake a claim in the essential question (and stake their identity as they do so), so students will need to learn (depending on the inquiry) how to write arguments, extended definitions, process descriptions, classifications or whatever else is implied or required to address the question, as well as show to undertake social actions that will address problems, e.g. civil rights issues in the school. They will learn strategies and content, and they will do so in a situated context of use that will naturally lead to real
world application. They will end up making and doing things together that are meaningful in their immediate lives, and that help them develop competence that can be used in their future lives outside of school. Inquiry makes learning in school more like the real world and disciplinary learning pursued and achieved outside of school. Inquiry incorporates the powerful principles of flow that video games use to engage and teach students (see Smith & Wilhelm, 2006 or Wilhelm, 2007, for complete treatments of how to reframe instruction as inquiry).

Let’s not be trumped by popular culture or the powerful learning people achieve in real situations; let’s use the same powerful principles of learning to engage students with the meaningful work we need to pursue in school.

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