

Reviews / Comptes rendus

Dancing in the Light: Essential Elements for an Inquiry Classroom

By Marcia Behrenbruch

(*The Netherlands: Sense Publishers, 2012, 137 pages*)

After reading the first three chapters of Marcia Behrenbruch's book, *Dancing in the Light: Essential Elements for an Inquiry Classroom*, with its small, tight print and the concentration required to internalize her theoretical interpretations and arguments regarding Dewey and Vygotsky, my intent was to close the book and shelve it. I am glad I persevered and read the rest of the book. Then I realized Behrenbruch has cleverly hidden three distinct books in one. Book one, comprising chapters one, two, and three, is for the aficionados of curriculum theory who get excited by theoretical debates. Book two, chapters four and five, is for instructors yearning to grasp exactly what teachers and students think and say about the inquiry classroom. Book three, chapters six and seven, is the golden egg that makes the book worth reading. These chapters are required reading for every instructor who wants to overhaul their courses through inquiry learning to better generate student engagement. In these two chapters, Behrenbruch clearly outlines the reasons for developing an inquiry classroom.

Throughout the book, Behrenbruch stresses that inquiry learning is enabling students to direct their own learning (p. 59). Inquiry means students have choice. They're not told to do anything. Furthermore, Behrenbruch's research found that students correlate instructor respect with the independence to learn what is relevant to them when they want—to have their voices heard and their wishes implemented. On the other hand, Behrenbruch does an admirable job of quelling the growing swell of naysayers' concerns that inquiry learning lacks rigour. Behrenbruch argues that questions of rigour are not about mastering material or teaching basics. Rigour is about resolving boundary battles regarding who guides the inquiry— who initiates, teaches, and assesses. Behrenbruch contends that inquiry learning is not about having teachers

Dancing in the Light

carefully structure the learning process in sequential chunks moving forward in a step-by-step march and providing remediation along the way for those that fall behind. Instead, a true inquiry classroom is about choice, negotiation, and creating a social learning contract between individual students and teachers—all of which allow for each student to integrate the subject basics into their existing knowledge when it best fits their schedule. “Negotiation is the social interaction that shares the responsibility for learning and keeps the inquiry focused. Choice is a one-way process but negotiating is transactional and transformational” (p. 97). Yet in her September 20th, 2013 editorial, Caroline Alphonse, Toronto’s *Globe & Mail* Educational Reporter, states unequivocally that discovery learning just doesn’t add up. Focusing on math, Alphonse voices the concern that leaving students to use their own learning style has reached its tipping point, run its course, lost its stickiness, and resulted in parents rushing to private tutoring programs to teach their children the basics of addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. In Canada, Manitoba is the only province that has responded to parents’ pushback to inquiry classrooms by mandating that, by the end of grade four, students must know the conventional ways of doing math and performing basic equations without a calculator.

In short, Behrenbruch’s book is not a how-to guide for creating an inquiry classroom. It is a dense book dealing with interpretations of scholarly works and the author’s own assessment of what constitutes inquiry learning. In 137 pages, Behrenbruch introduces the reader to her interpretations of inquiry learning gleaned from 10 years of experience as a teacher and administrator in Victoria, Australia.

Would I purchase the book? No. Would I ask my learning and teaching office librarian to purchase it? Certainly! Would I recommend chapters of the book to my peers? Absolutely. For the instructor looking to gain insight into how instructors and students view inquiry learning, read chapter three. For the philosopher of education, engulf yourself in chapter one. Behrenbruch’s musings and arguments are eloquent and plausible. Can inquiry learning improve teaching and learning? Does inquiry provide greater traction on what knowledge is most essential in the 21st century? Can the close study of one school identify how other schools can formulate approaches to curriculum design during major curriculum reform? According to Behrenbruch, the answer to these questions is an unqualified yes!

Dancing in the Light: Essential Elements for an Inquiry Classroom is an important book not because of its fine-grained analysis of the opinions of teachers and students of inquiry learning, but because it is a must-read for any instructor who wants to flip his or her classroom. In my opinion, the author’s insights presented in chapters six and seven, while originally directed for the inquiry classroom, provide the foundational knowledge required to understand the whys and why nots of flipping classrooms and engaging students in a deeper, authentic learning experience. Once instructors understand that inquiry learning is the basis for introducing differentiated curriculum into

Dancing in the Light

their classrooms, students' learning will be more intense, sustained, and authentic. And, while I am sure that this was not Behrenbruch's intention in writing this book, the passage of time from writing to publication has made these chapters the best I have read for those who want to understand the whys of flipping their classroom.

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