

THE ESSENTIAL ROLE OF INQUIRY IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Teachers have multiple roles¹, sometimes several at the same time. Perhaps the most important of all is curiosity and the capacity to stand in inquiry and make it accessible to students. When students perceive their teachers are engaged in inquiry, they can't help but join in the exploration, discovery and pursuit of understanding through sense making. Learning is a pleasure. Curiosity is contagious. It is the responsibility and skill of the teacher to meet the students where they are rather than to ask the students to come to where the teacher is (the expert). By meeting the student where they are, a more equitable and mutual connection can be established that promotes a relationship conducive of inquiry. Inquiry is the foundation of learning and is essential for life itself. How then are we to understand such a vital process? How can teachers generate conditions for inquiry? An approach offered by the Human Systems Dynamics Institute (www.hsdinstitute.org) utilizes a simple rule that states, "stand in inquiry" that has four active parts that need to be a shared responsibility of both the teacher and the student.

1. Turn judgement into curiosity. Judgement is useful when something needs to be placed in a category, a hierarchy, or a comparative measurement established. We are very good at forming quick opinions and judgements, especially when confronted with a novel situation. For example, a teacher walks into a classroom for the first meeting. She sees the students, feels the energy in the room, remembers similar past experiences, and assumes the role of expert. The judgement is that the students are here to learn. The students assume (judge) that the teacher knows everything and will "learn them and teach them" what they need to know and do. Judgements tend to fix people in social roles and set boundaries or

limits that shape and influence further interactions and exchange. Curiosity, on the other hand, promotes interaction and exchange. It opens boundaries and lowers the threshold for actions leading to exchanges essential for learning. Curiosity is how living organisms sample, engage, and exchange with their environment. Learning is about exchange and sense making. Learning can be understood as a process of exchange through which ideas, experiences, knowledge, and perceptions, etc., interact so that system-wide patterns emerge, and those patterns (concepts, principles, hypotheses, new questions, etc.) influence subsequent thought and action². Learning is the shared responsibility of teachers and students and it benefits from turning judgement into curiosity to promote and support conditions for effective learning.

2. Turn conflict into shared exploration. Learning is a social activity and conflict and disagreement are a normal part of it. Too little conflict can lead to “stability” or stasis. Too much can be disruptive, inhibit connections and exchange and eventually lead to chaos. Conflict can be best as understood as difference between people, places and things. Difference is about potential energy that when released becomes kinetic and can move a system into a new paradigm that is more energetically fit for its functions³⁻⁴. Without exception, the exchange of differences through shared exploration is essential for learning. Today, in health professions education, active learning is the preferred pedagogy. The active part involves shared exploration of differences necessary for effective group learning. How teachers promote conditions for shared exploration, how they generate curiosity, encourage discovery and clarify understanding require both skill and creativity. Skill can be learned and continuously developed. Creativity with discipline is artful. The skillful and creative teacher generates conditions in which shared exploration of difference makes a difference.

3. Turn defensiveness into self-reflection. Life is filled with uncertainty. Human nature is both competitive and cooperative. There are times and situations in which the perception of risk to well-being leads one to adopt a protective or defensive posture. There are also situations in which defensive behavior inhibits learning, productive growth and collaboration. We learn best when we can reflect and make sense out of novel/uncertain situations. Self-reflection is intrinsic to sense making. When faced with uncertainty and novel situations, the ability to turn defensiveness into self-reflection and curiosity promotes learning, growth, and health. How do teachers

set conditions for reflection without creating defensive reactions among students? When a teacher is openly curious and self-reflective so that students can see it in action in real time in shared circumstances, they can learn the value of turning defensiveness into self-reflection.

4. Turn assumptions into questions. We all make assumptions, both consciously and unconsciously. Assumptions inform our subsequent actions. The mark of a mature professional is an ability to be aware of the assumptions she is making and to turn them into questions, into inquiry. Assumptions are based on past experiences and current expectations. Yet, every situation, every context, is unique and presents a challenge for us to adapt. An effective teacher examines their assumptions, makes them accessible for learners and colleagues and turns them into questions that promote dialogue and action that sustain interactions promoting deeper understanding.

Without inquiry there can be no learning. Inquiry-based learning encompasses all contemporary active learning strategies and methods. How we understand inquiry makes a difference to learning. The four rules apply described above apply to everyone at every scale of health professions education and practice. Learning is complex and requires rules for inquiry to guide decision making in every context and in every system.

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