
USING INQUIRY

to Improve Your Teaching Practice

Patricia Reedy

Director of Teaching & Learning, Luna Dance Institute, Berkeley, CA

ABSTRACT

Observation, reflection, defined inquiry, and action research are methods of collecting data in qualitative research, but they are also powerful tools to enhance teaching. This article describes how an inquiry approach can enrich the dance educator's professional practice and improve in-the-moment decision making. Inquiry is useful for managing dilemmas and questioning assumptions. This article offers examples of how one organization, Luna Dance Institute, has used these methods in their work and provides suggestions for developing a habit of inquiry.

“As a learning organization, Luna uses active inquiry to deepen the experience of children and adults, improve teaching practice, and build quality arts programs.” This statement is part of Luna Dance Institute’s mission because it describes how we work. The faculty at Luna work in multiple locations in schools, Head Start centers, residential treatment facilities, and our studio. They have multiple relationships to maintain and curriculum to create that spans ages zero through fifteen. Reflective practice and active inquiry are key to our work in all areas and are also at the core of staff development because these strategies allow our teachers to self-direct their own growth as critical educators.

Problem solving is one of the many skills valued by and demanded of teachers. Yet, in most teaching situations, problems are neither clear-cut nor solvable. Many aspects of human endeavor and social interaction require recognizing and managing dilemmas, rather than finding solu-

tions to clear problems (Cuban 1992). Reflective practice, as first articulated by Donald Schön (1983), offers teachers a flexible and responsive tool to navigate the complex and unpredictable challenges in today’s classroom. Rather than attempting the impossible (i.e., preparing in advance for every possible experience of every unique student), adopting a regular habit of accurate observation and attunement to ourselves allows teachers to have nimble in-the-moment responses to ever-changing circumstances.

For some people, self-reflection is second nature, but for many, especially those who teach, the tendency is to look outward, to ascertain through student behavior when and how to intervene. In any given classroom, so much goes on that taking pause seems an unaffordable luxury. Yet, the feeling of urgency to act often leads to frustration when teachers misread a situation, or are misunderstood by the students, or miss an important opportunity for children’s agency and independence. Taking time to construct a habit of self-

reflection can improve the ability to perceive what is actually going on in the classroom. As teachers increase their observation skills, they are able to take in more, make quicker and more accurate assessments of complex situations, and use their improvisational skills to manage daily dilemmas most effectively.

Becoming a skilled observer and reflector takes practice. Each of Luna's program areas (studio, schools, and community) has a specific reflection tool designed for the population and site. Teachers are expected (and paid) to spend a minimum of fifteen minutes after each class to consider the questions in the particular instrument, or jot down thoughts that emerged. Self-reflection allows teachers to take stock of what is happening in their classrooms and critically examine their own assumptions. It shifts the focus away from what went wrong (or right) to what actually happened and how it felt to the teacher. Taking time to reflect at periodic intervals teaches us where and how to look. It develops accuracy in our observations of student learning.

THREE EXAMPLES OF INQUIRY-BASED PROJECTS AT LUNA

Reflection is the first step toward inquiry or action research. Over the years, Luna engaged in two major inquiry projects

and one formal action-research study. Alisa Rasera, our in-house dance and disability expert, wanted to know how we could get better at teaching inclusion classes to students with and without disabilities. Before making any hard and fast program or policy decisions, we allowed time in her schedule to engage in a six-year inquiry project to better understand how creativity in dance making looks for students with disabilities, and how it can be fostered. Alisa taught weekly dance classes in two special education classes at a public middle school: fourth- and fifth-grade special education classes at a public elementary, and mixed first- through third-grade inclusion classes at another public elementary school, all located in Oakland, California. She approached her inquiry through the curriculum, journal writing,

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Luna participants at 2015 Summer Institute. Photo credit: Luna faculty.





Luna faculty member Jochelle Pereña teaching.
Photo credit: Michael Ertem.

and interviews with teachers and students. Over the years, she was able to build campus dance studios, take students on their first field trips, and integrate special education students with their “general education” community through assemblies and buddy shares. She presented her findings through writing, conference presentations, and webinars. She discovered that dance curricular expectations do not need to change for students in special education, but the delivery systems might need to be more flexible: “Creative dance is very language heavy, but I really like to let students do what they think the direction is and to bring wherever they are in their learning to ... construct their own learning ... and use their own expertise to interpret the meaning” (VSA Webinar 2014).

Another inquiry project investigated this question: Where does dance belong in middle school? Over the course of two years, Luna faculty taught dance to students with low and moderate to high supplemental educational services in

three urban public middle schools, and sixth and seventh graders at a private, progressive K–8 school. Classes were offered through physical education, as electives, in stand-alone special education classes, and after-school programs. At the end of this exhausting examination, Luna was no closer to making definitive statements about where to position dance in middle school, but we unearthed many of the structural problems that make school so challenging for adolescents. For example, some middle schools have not figured out an adequate scheduling system so that students can choose more than one elective; physical education classes are way too large for any learning to take place—up to 100 students can be crammed into one class; and space, always limited, is either over- or underdesignated, including sharing any movement space with after-school programs that also use the space for storage. Through our Professional Learning department, we have deepened our relationships with local middle school teachers, inviting them to lead practitioner exchange sessions so that we can stay engaged in the inquiry.

More formally, we worked with researcher Ted Warburton over two years on an action research project, Moving Parents and Children Together (MPACT), because we wanted to learn more about what aspects of the program (curriculum, structure, teacher prompts) facilitated participants’ ability to bond with their children. Founded in 2001, MPACT brings relationship-based dance curriculum to families in the process of reunification who are working to strengthen their connection as a family unit after separation by court order or less formally through experiences with violence, illness, immigration, active armed service duty, or other reasons for disjunction. Over two years employing a specific observation tool that was embedded in our lesson structure as a way to recognize “engagement,” we developed a framework called I, We, Us to understand participant experience in MPACT (Warburton, Reedy, and Ng 2014). We learned that there was a trajectory of experience for many parents that began with them experiencing dance as individuals, then as bonded units with their children, and finally,

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as part of the class community. This, and other interesting outcomes of this research project can be found in Warburton, Reedy, and Ng (2014). The most astounding result of this research, however, went beyond what we learned about our constituents—it was that each teacher reported emphatically that he or she had become a stronger teacher. The teacher-researchers found that the “engagement lens” was a surprisingly good tool in improving their personal teaching practice. “Now, when I’m scanning, I ... have a narrower focus ... and it is really about how to (snaps fingers) maintain engagement, how to deepen it, how to recognize it and see when it is wavering and changing, and how to support the families” (MPACT Teacher 1 2009). “It has helped me to really just look at how they respond to the curriculum and to each other rather than my ego” (MPACT Teacher 2, 2009).

APPLYING INQUIRY MORE EXPLICITLY

To date, Luna’s inquiry projects have been held by senior staff under my direction as Director of Teaching and Learning. It is my responsibility to loop what we learn from the field (via reflection journals, interviews with participants, evaluation forms, and observations) into our knowledge base for professional development. This year, however, we are trying something new. Everyone is engaging in an inquiry project of his or her own design and has allowed time for reading, reflecting, and making sense of what he or she sees and learns. The research questions staff are asking this year include the following:

- ◆ What happens when students’ ideas and experiences provide the main content for dance lessons?
- ◆ How can I develop a creative practice that unites my teacher and artist selves? Will the application of this creative practice help student choreographers’ flow of learning?
- ◆ How can I make learning more visible in my classes for the students and the adults (classroom teachers, social workers, paraprofessionals, special education teachers, speech and language therapists, etc.) who are present in the room?
- ◆ What role can dance play in establishing a sense of community at the beginning of the year?
- ◆ How can a rhythm-based curriculum serve as a tool for self-connecting and community building?
- ◆ How do weekly creative dance classes affect student learning in a fourth- and fifth-grade special education classroom?

Because Luna teachers have multiple and complex relationships to maintain (e.g., teaching a parent–child class to a foster family and then teaching the same child in a residential center with her mother), observation and awareness can feel overwhelming. By choosing a specific inquiry question, they hone in on one area of their teaching practice. It allows them to seek the information for themselves, rather than rely on outside experts. They begin to see their students, their curriculum, and themselves in new ways—noting the nuances and complexities of the interdependent nature of teaching and learning.



Luna participants at 2015 Summer Institute.
Photo credit: Luna faculty.

SETTING UP YOUR OWN INQUIRY PROJECT

Teachers new to inquiry might consider it just one more thing to add to their plate—particularly if their classes are going well, generally. However, initiating an inquiry project at any time sharpens the skills of seeing and reflecting. At our midyear evaluations, this past December, every single faculty member credited his or her inquiry project with increased job satisfaction. Their individual projects brought new meaning to their daily teaching schedule and produced ongoing surprise discoveries. By sharing their findings, the entire staff was able to see our collective work in new ways—we left for holidays excited to return to our teaching practice to discover more.

Benefits of Taking on an Inquiry Project

- ◆ Honoring your curiosity as a teacher-learner.
- ◆ Collecting data on your students' experiences.
- ◆ Unpacking assumptions and learning more about yourself.
- ◆ Accepting your expertise, neither inflated or deflated, beyond single incidents.
- ◆ Seeing more clearly: nuance, complexity, possibility.
- ◆ Improving your ability to feel, think, and act in the moment.
- ◆ Delighting in discovery.

How to Set Up Your Own Inquiry Project

1. Do a free-write about your teaching practice: What are you curious about? What dilemmas do you face? What challenges you? Where do you feel stuck? What risk do you wish you could take? What don't you know about your students, or about dance, or about yourself?
2. Make a list of questions to guide your research. Sit with them for a week and see what resonates as you go about your daily work.
3. Choose one question. Write it simply. Compound questions are difficult to study.
4. Create a doable plan to investigate your question. When will you look? How will you look? What methods of record keeping do you want to employ? Successful plans provide time and methods for reflection but should fit into your teaching practice easily. Set a midpoint analysis date.

5. Note what tools or support you might need (e.g., buy a journal small enough to carry in my dance bag).
6. Ask a friend or colleague to review your plan to see if it makes sense.
7. Embed your inquiry into your lesson plans so that your inquiry becomes routine.
8. Gather colleagues to make an informal ten-minute presentation of your findings at the end of a semester. (A deadline will hold you accountable to yourself.) The presentation should last approximately seven minutes—what I did, what I learned, what I'm curious about next—followed by three minutes of questions from peers.
9. Evaluate your inquiry for next steps: new ways to examine the current question, revise the question, toss the question because it is no longer relevant, or create a new question.

Have fun! Soon, thinking like a researcher will become second nature to you. You might be surprised how much more there is to see in the daily lives of the children you teach, and how much more there is to the art of teaching dance.

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Address correspondence to Patricia Reedy, Luna Dance Institute, 605 Addison Street, Berkeley, CA 94710.
E-mail: preedy@lunadanceinstitute.org