

# Engaging Students in Shared Inquiry

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It is often assumed that framing an activity as inquiry will inherently result in enhanced student engagement, which may not always be the case. As with any instructional activity, fostering student engagement is critical. For this issue of *Voices from the Middle* on inquiry, I want to describe ways to foster student engagement through activities based on shared inquiry. To do so, I am drawing on examples of shared inquiry instruction from Amber Damm's seventh/eighth grade classroom at Barton School in Minneapolis, as well as the perceptions of three of her students, JoJo, Katlun, and Pablo.

For Amber, engaging students in shared inquiry involves employing activities supporting students' collaborative exploration of issues and problems based on themes of "hope and perseverance, and justice and mercy, and race, identity and culture." A primary goal of such inquiry is not only to construct knowledge to generate new insights into issues and problems, but also, in the process of collaborating and grappling with these issues and problems, to build relational ways of being *with* their peers, a skill that itself is central to what students learn in Amber's classes. As she notes: "How we learn together is as important as what we learn together. Matter of fact, it's more important . . . Inquiry is like, I care about you and what you have to say, and I want to learn from you when we're not in middle school language arts together anymore."

Amber's commitment to shared inquiry as serving to engage her students is consistent with research on middle school students' perceptions of those features of inquiry that serve to engage them, including

- appreciation for autonomy
- joy in study immersion
- satisfaction with self-selected topics
- enthusiasm for learning
- considerations in time management
- stress with project completion (Buchanan, 2016, p. 491).

## Engagement through Focusing on Key Questions

Use of shared inquiry involves focusing on certain key questions that lead to "joy in study immersion" (Buchanan, 2016) through students working together as partners with teachers as opposed to simply responding to a barrage of teacher questions. Beth Holland (2018) reflects:

A few years ago, in an EdTechTeacher workshop, a teacher made a comment that stuck with me: "I want my students to be able to sit with a problem." This middle school science teacher found herself frustrated with her students' frantic rush to just get the answer—assuming that only one existed. Instead, she wanted her students to develop the skills that would allow them to deeply examine a problem, to form new questions, and then to seek out novel solutions. In other words, she wanted her students to engage in *critical thinking*. (np)

Amber notes that "the question is always important in inquiry or questions that we ask because when we were doing the shared inquiry we come up with our positions [based on] who or what did you . . . feel was

responsible?” In posing open-ended questions, she is not soliciting specific thinking; she is instead encouraging students to wonder, “How can we all respond to it and have different evidence that gets us to that response? . . . I never think there’s a perfect answer, but more like, this is worthy of your time.” This focus on the questions helps her students “sit with a problem.”

In having her students read about an issue or problem, she also has students “write their own questions on the first reading. They share those with each other. I purposely don’t get involved in these conversations, because they answer [questions] for each other,” questions similar to those based on the Critical Response Protocol (CRP) heuristic: “What are you noticing?” “What did you see that makes you say that?” “What does it remind you of?” “How do you feel?” “What questions does the ‘text’ raise for you? What did you learn?” (Beach, Campano, Edmiston, & Borgmann, 2010, p. 27).

For responding to *The Pearl* (Steinbeck, 2000), Amber had her students address the question, “Which does our world need more of, justice or mercy?” Addressing this question required students to unpack and share the meanings of the concepts of “justice” and “mercy” in ways that raised further questions, inviting further inquiry. As Pablo noted, attempting to define *justice*, “You end up realizing that it also depends on who’s serving the justice. How good does justice actually work, especially in politics now? . . . Like justice is always wrongly delivered when they don’t listen to other people’s perspectives and they don’t try to get more than one view on something.” While Kaltun initially believed that “not everybody deserves mercy,” she adopted a different perspective from “the discussions we’ve had, that really made me change my opinion.”

## Engagement through “Exploratory Talk”

These students’ exposure to alternative perspectives in collaborative inquiry illustrates the importance of engagement through their use of open-ended “exploratory talk” in which students are collaboratively co-constructing ideas and perspectives, often based on sharing firsthand experiences (Cervetti, DiPardo, & Staley, 2014).

“Exploratory talk” involves students’ use of tentative, hypothetical framing utterances such as “I’m not sure about this,” “I was wondering whether,” or “it might be the case that.” Using these tentative hunches as framing utterances as opposed to definitive statements invites others to collaboratively share their own hunches. If I hear someone state that they “aren’t sure,” “are wondering,” or that something “might be,” those words

signal me to help that person with a question or issue.

Students develop their use of exploratory talk by listening to others’ “external dialogue” consisting of alternative voices and perspectives. They then internalize those voices and perspectives as inner dialogue for covert rehearsal of verbal participation to then export out in subsequent “external dialogue” interactions with others (Grossen & Salazar-Orvig, 2011), a looping process between external and inner dialogue leading to growth in shared dialogic inquiry over time.

Amber’s student Pablo noted that, in giving him feedback, she employs external dialogue that fosters growth in his inner dialogue based on his adoption of her external dialogue with him.

It’s never just like, “Oh, you didn’t put this here.” It’s like, “Here’s what you could have put here,” or, “Here’s how something could have worked here,” or maybe, “I think you should look at this,” and that could actually help you . . . It’s helpful ‘cause then *every time you do it you go back smarter than you were last time, so you’ll come back with new ideas and new ways to look at things than you did the last time.* I don’t know. It’s like a building block, and you’re always adding something to make the tower bigger. (italics added)

In having her students engage in peer feedback to each other’s writing through external dialogue, Amber asks her students to go beyond their own inner dialogue, to be open to their peers’ alternative thinking, leading to their growth in adopting alternative voices and perspectives:

And if you really care about it, then what I want you to do is just shut down your own thinking, it doesn’t matter right now, and put all of your energy into that other person’s writing [so that] you get to be smarter because you just heard something that you never could have done on your own. And then you can take that back to your own writing . . . So that conversation, the way you get smarter is [through] socialized intelligence.

Effective use of exploratory talk also entails students use of “interlistening” as “*a form of speaking that resonates with echoes of everything heard, thought, said, and read*” (Lipari, 2014, p. 512). Amber stresses the importance of listening, “I used to think inquiry was about talking until I learned that it’s really about listening . . . they’ll say, ‘Kaltun, I agree with what you said. I’d like to add to that.’” JoJo notes that in their discussions

people are really listening and writing things down. No one’s shooting down your ideas or saying sort of

thing like, “That’s not right.” It’s like, “Yes, and this is another way to back this up,” or whatever . . . I think that’s proof in itself that kids are engaged and they’re taking what they’re hearing from it. And they’re thinking about it in relation to their answer and everyone else. It’s not just like, “Okay, ‘nother thing.” They put their thinking about it in the whole big picture.

To foster self-reflection about their use of exploratory talk, Amber has her students complete a self-assessment rubric after each of their group discussions. The rubric is related to their own level of preparation for a discussion, participation, and communication of ideas, evidence, and questions, for example, noting the degree to which they participate “fully,” “generally,” “sometimes,” and “rarely/never.”

## Engagement through Entertaining Alternative Perspectives

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Students are also more likely to be engaged in inquiry when, in addressing an issue or problem, they entertain alternative perspectives as to how to address that issue or problem as opposed to just choosing between an either/or set of propositions based on limited information (Litman & Greenleaf, 2017). For example, addressing the issue of adolescents’ use of social media requires going beyond framing the issue as a good/bad debate in order to apply complex perspectives.

Amber encourages students to adopt alternative perspectives by considering their peers’ perspectives. JoJo notes that “in inquiries in this class no one’s ever like, ‘No, that’s wrong.’ It’s like, ‘Okay, that’s another perspective that you can weigh with the other ones and see where you’re coming from in terms of everything else.’” For example, in a discussion of *The Pearl* (Steinbeck, 2000), students discussed who was responsible for the death of Coyotito, son of the main character, Kino, who finds a large pearl that he believes can pay to save Coyotito after he is bitten by scorpions, only to engage in a fight with some trackers who shoot and kill Coyotito.

Students were asked to identify different possible causes of Coyotito’s death related to his father’s actions, the quest for the pearl, the scorpions, or the larger social system of race and poverty; provide evidence for their choice; and then share how and why they chose their particular explanations. Pablo adopted the stance that “racism was responsible for the death of Coyotito . . . that Kino was not responsible, and that was fun.” JoJo posited that “Kino was the actual one responsible, but going back, we talked more about society and racism and

stuff.” Katlun thought that the primary cause was “the system. The society that they lived in because none of it would actually matter if it wasn’t for the society, Kino’s greed or even the pearl. The pearl is basically valueless if the people around Kino didn’t give it value, so that’s why I thought it was the system.”

In my interview with the students, Pablo noted that their discussion of *The Pearl* was enjoyable: “I mean, it was fun because there’s so many ways to interpret it ‘cause he was . . . it was basically just a clash of who is responsible for the death of Coyotito . . . We’re all in debate, so I think that’s another reason why we all like inquiries and stuff because it’s sort of like mini-debate.” In reflecting on their interaction, JoJo noted, “I think it really helps to hear other people’s perspectives, especially when you wouldn’t think of that at all, or if they used a different piece of evidence and you find it. It can totally change your views.”

In our interview, Amber noted how she is continually acquiring new perspectives from listening to her students:

I can leave a conversation in one group kinda thinking this the best evidence I heard and then in another group think about it really differently . . . Ultimately, one goal of a literature classroom is to shift some of the responsibility of the asking of questions from the teacher to the students.

For example, Amber noted that, based on Pablo’s claim that “in our class everybody who said Kino was responsible was female and everybody who said Juana [the mother] was responsible was male,”

I would say, Pablo, your comment about gender with Juana and Kino will probably impact the way I read and if I were to teach again *The Pearl* for the rest of my life and really would help me notice that in a way that I might not because of bias or because I’m a mother. When someone said that she was to blame, I had a reaction to that, right, in a different way than you do as younger people than me, but that’s kind of the beauty of inquiry, I think, is that every day I get smarter just like I have in the last ten minutes because of the things you say because we all have a unique perspective.

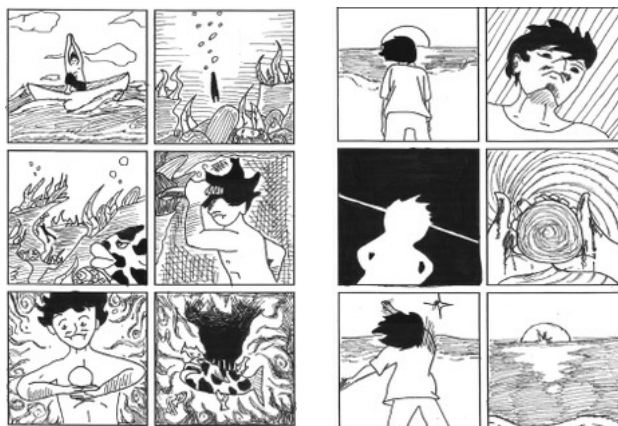
Amber’s openness to learning from her students serves to enhance students’ engagement in what they perceive to be shared, collaborative inquiry.

## Engagement through Multimodal Responses

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Students are also more engaged in inquiry when they use multimodal responses to texts, tapping into the appeal

of using visual and or digital literacies as inquiry tools. In responding to *The Pearl*, Amber's students employed comics depicting key events from the novel. In creating his comics, Pablo portrayed Kino finding the pearl in the ocean and then later throwing it back into the ocean.



Pablo drew on his experience with cinema to employ close-ups versus long shots of Kino's actions in his comics and made those decisions based on his perceptions of

the way Steinbeck writes his books. They go hand in hand, the descriptions and all the emotions. I remember reading it like, "Wow, this would make a really good movie," or like an animated movie or a short . . . it wasn't super hard to visualize what some of these scenes look like.

JoJo described her use of color in her comics to portray "sunlight filtering through the water" in the novel to visually engage her audiences. She also noted the value of students sharing their comics

because some kids that don't always, even in inquiries, talk as much as sometimes be more confident in their artistic abilities or can have more to say. That was awesome to walk by and see everyone and people I never talk to see that's so . . . That was really powerful, so that was really cool.

Kaltun chose

the scene where Kino goes to the doctor's house and they get turned away . . . It was so terrible and there's a lot of emotion and pain. . . . I chose not to add a lot of details in their faces, in Kino and Juana's faces, because I wanted it to kind of be seen from the doctor's perspective or some[one] who doesn't understand. "Oh, you don't have money? You can't pay for it. You obviously don't deserve to get the treatment," but then it's like really you have to look at

people. You have to look at their circumstances, why they can't afford it. That's why I chose to draw it that way.

Given the importance of students' sharing each other's work, Amber had students respond to their peers' images by adding sticky-note responses to their visual representations. As she noted:

I also thought when you look at art and then looking at my classmate's art, you can see a lot through it that you can't when you're reading it. You can also see through a lot of a person's interpretation, what they highlight, what they don't, what they think needs color, what they didn't, and seeing their thought processes was really cool.

## Challenges in Engaging Students in Shared Inquiry

Teachers engaging students in shared inquiry often experience the tension between letting students drive the direction of the inquiry through their interactions and providing some guidance for students to acquire certain knowledge or understanding of key concepts associated with an issue or topic (Cervetti et al., 2014). This requires creating a balance between fostering open-ended, inquiry-based interactions and some degree of teacher guidance related to acquiring certain knowledge relevant to an inquiry. While this tension is inherent in any instruction, the larger value of shared inquiry is that it can enhance student engagement with learning how to learn through inquiry as evident in the various reports in this issue.

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## Call for Nominations: James Moffett Award

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NCTE's English Language Arts Teacher Educators (ELATE), formerly the Conference on English Education (CEE), offers this award to support teacher research projects that further the spirit and scholarship of James Moffett. A champion of the voices of K–12 teachers, Moffett focused on such ideas as the necessity of student-centered curricula, writing across the curriculum, alternatives to standardized testing, and spiritual growth in education and life. This award is offered in conjunction with the National Writing Project.

Applications for the Moffett Award should be in the form of a proposal for a project that one or more K–12 classroom teachers wish to pursue. The proposal must include

- A cover page with the applicant's name, work and home telephone numbers and addresses, email address, a brief profile of the applicant's current school and students, and a brief teaching history (when and where the applicant has taught).
- A proposal (not more than 5 pages, double-spaced, 12-point font) that includes an introduction and rationale for the work (What is the problem or question to be studied? How might such a project influence the project teacher's practice and potentially the practice of other teachers? Why is such a project important?); a description of the connection to the spirit and scholarship of James Moffett; initial objectives for the study (realizing these might shift during the project); a clear, focused project description that includes a timeline (What will be done? When? How? By whom?); a method of evaluating the project (What indicators might reviewers note that suggest the work was valuable to the researcher and to other teachers?); and a narrative budget (How will the money be spent?).
- A letter of support from someone familiar with the applicant's teaching and perceived ability to implement and assess the proposed project.

Moffett Award winners receive a certificate designating the individual as the 2019 recipient of the ELATE Moffett Award and a monetary award (up to \$1,000) to be used toward implementation of the proposed project.

Submit proposals to ELATE Moffett Award, at [elate@ncte.org](mailto:elate@ncte.org), Attn: ELATE Liaison. Proposals must be received by **September 19, 2019**. Proposals will be judged on such criteria as the strength of the connection to James Moffett's scholarship and the perceived value and feasibility of the project.