

Future focused learning – step forward and lead by example



Marlene Filippi, teacher librarian at Newbridge Heights Public School, shares the journey and the success of future focused learning at her school.

Introduction

Future focused learning – are they buzz words, an innovative idea, or a new pedagogy which will enable our students to become information literate adults in an ever changing world?

In 2004 at the Techonomy conference in Lake Tahoe, California, the first panel convened featured the then Google CEO, Eric Schmidt. On being introduced Eric stated,

Every two days now we create as much information as we did from the dawn of civilization up until 2003. That is something like five exabytes of data.

User-generated data and social media are a huge part of this created information. How do we empower our students to effectively use and interpret this data?

As teacher librarians, we need to facilitate a learning environment which enables our students to

understand and utilise this information and not be overwhelmed by the sheer volume of data which is available.

To succeed in the future, our students will require research, problem-solving and critical thinking skills. They will need to be able to work independently and together with groups of other students.

NSW Department of Education, 2015.

We know that students need to be engaged with relevant, meaningful and exciting learning. It is at school that we must provide our students with the skills and knowledge required for the suggested different careers it is predicted they will have over their working lives. Each year the number of careers a current school age child will have in a working lifetime is escalating. Gone are the days of school and a one job career until retirement.

The work place environment, for which we are preparing our students, is changing and we must assist our students to become successful learners, creative individuals and active informed citizens (MCEETYA, 2008).

The Big6 process model, developed by Mike Eisenberg and Bob Berkowitz in 1990, has been at the forefront of teaching information literacy skills to our students and good teacher librarian practice. Unfortunately, these skills are often taught in isolation, and without a direct correlation with the learning undertaken in the classroom, resulting in a non transference of skills into real life situations. How then do we utilise this accessible knowledge to assist both students and teachers to develop the skills to become future focused learners?



M. Eisenberg - The Big6 approach to information & technology literacy by Mike Eisenberg

Personalised learning

Future focused learning is personalised and allows students to take control of their own learning. Personalising learning means students:

- understand how they learn,
- own their learning
- co-design their curriculum and their learning environment.

The advent of the new History and Geography syllabuses, focusing on inquiry based learning, is an opportunity to change the way in which the students interact with technology, their environment, the curriculum and each other. It immediately empowers the teacher librarian to lead the change.

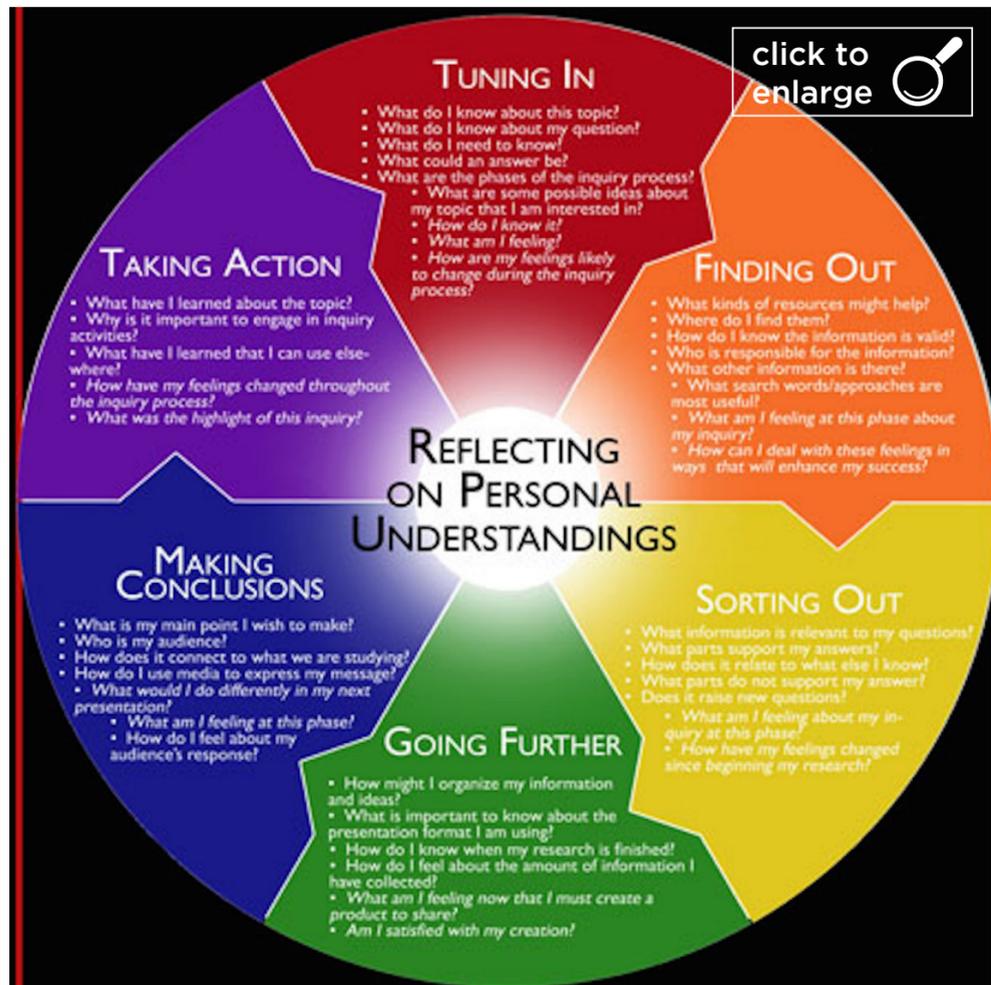
Inquiry based learning is synonymous with future focused learning. An old adage states: *Tell me and I forget, show me and I remember, involve me and I understand.* Inquiry implies involvement that leads to understanding. Furthermore, involvement in learning implies possessing skills and attitudes that permit you to seek resolutions to questions and issues while constructing new knowledge. Effective inquiry is more than just asking questions. Inquiry based learning is a complex process where students formulate questions, investigate to find answers, build new understandings, meanings and knowledge, and then communicate their learnings to others. This is future focused learning.

In 2015, Stage 2 and Stage 3 teachers at Newbridge Heights Public School stepped away from the traditional teaching model, whereby teachers deliver content whilst developing skills, as we introduced Kath Murdoch's model of inquiry based learning (Murdoch, 2010).

This style of learning supports the new curriculum focus of developing creative, critical thinkers who can independently search for and use information and it provides a scaffolding for both students and staff. Murdoch's model also emulates the processes of the Big6 with the following components: *Tuning in, Finding out, Sorting out, Going further, Making conclusions and Taking action.*

As Hay and Foley (2009) state,

... the basis of student learning through the school library is an inquiry-based instructional program. School library programs build students' deep knowledge and understanding through effective inquiry when they connect with students' existing knowledge and interests to establish relevance, and engage students in learning about and solving real world problems.



Kate Murdoch's inquiry based learning model

This was a steep learning curve for everyone as students tuned in to a big question and then developed, while researching, the necessary skills to reach a solution. The environment was conducive to learning for both students and teachers as all library lessons were cooperative.

With 24 classes, how best do you utilise your time and timetable? The physical environment of the library allows for two classes to come at any one time with an hour for each group. Technology is easily accessible with a computer lab attached to the library and a bank of iPads and laptops available for use. To implement change in the way in which the students would learn and work it was imperative that they become part of the journey and understand the changes whilst taking ownership of their learning.

The students were introduced to inquiry learning by initially asking them: *Do teachers know everything and how do you find the solution to a problem or the answer to a question?* It took time and gentle coaxing for the students to finally admit that teachers do not know everything, and they admitted that Google probably had the answers to anything and everything they wanted to find out. After prompting, they also recognised that there were other common sources of information available, such as teachers, parents, peers, books and television.

In order for the students to understand why the process of learning was changing, it was explained that the workforce is changing and the way in which they will need to interact with information and each other is also changing. They need to adapt, so teachers and students would embark on this journey together. As teachers we do not know all the answers.

We need to follow exactly the same processes as the students and access, evaluate and share our information.

Stage 3 inquiry

The Stage 3 inquiry question was posed:

What are the key events that have shaped Australia's history and why are they key events?

Tuning in phase

This was a new beginning. There was brainstorming to determine what was already known and where this journey would go - *Tuning in*. Students were also asked to formulate questions which would help them answer the initial question. What did they want to know? What was their interest?

There was a lengthy discussion as to what constituted a key event. One group decided to investigate KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken) as it was the first fast food chain outlet to open in Australia. Maybe their initial intention was to be extremely creative but the end result of this investigation was amazing with both students and teachers learning about the effects of fast food.

Initially, students experienced some difficulty and hesitancy when asking questions, many of which were closed. With encouragement, questioning techniques developed.

Students were instructed that there would be a sharing of information at the end of the term, using a presentation of their own choosing, such as, *Google slides, Prezi, PowerPoint*, and models. Students were then asked to form groups of four and they were given the freedom to choose their own combinations. In this first instance there were no guidelines as to

whom they could choose. However, after the first term of inquiry learning, the students were brutally honest in their self-evaluation and stated that working with friends was not always a good idea as they were easily distracted and had difficulty remaining on task. There was also some consternation in working in a group. Many students were very comfortable working on their own and found it difficult to share their opinions with others. This was very evident with the more academic students who are often result driven.

Finding out phase

During the *Finding out* stage students researched information. Each group was given a laptop and an iPad. As there were three teachers available to assist the groups formed from the two classes, individual instruction was possible. Students were continually questioned as to which was the best way to research and what should they be using as their search terms.

- Is just typing in the question going to give you the answer you want?
- Should you rephrase what you want?
- Is the first site mentioned after a Google search always the best?
- Do you need to read more than the first line or can you skim?
- What can you do if you don't understand the text?

This was an excellent time to introduce [Rewordify](#), a website which enables students to change text into kid speak. This is authentic learning; the students were learning for a purpose and it was much more meaningful than an isolated lesson on how to research, and the engagement levels of the students

were evident. They were being given the opportunity to engage in learning which interested them.



Students engaged in their learning

Teacher challenges

An obstacle to be overcome by teachers was their desire to answer questions about the topic. They realised that it was important to question students to formulate their own questions which would guide them in finding answers. This is a skill in itself.

Also, with 60 students in one location, the noise level was higher than usual. Some teachers found this behaviour challenging but agreed that the students were on task, and that their engagement levels were evident. Groups were spread out and utilising the space while discussing their findings. The library has flexible seating which enables the students to work where they are most at ease.

Sorting out phase

When *Sorting out* the information retrieved, students needed to continually ask: *Have I answered the question?*

While *Going further* and *Making conclusions*, students gathered and sorted their information to present to their peers.

Changed learning behaviour

Moving on from this first experience the students have become very astute at listening to what is being presented and questioning both the validity of the findings and the way in which information has been retrieved. They are aware of copyright and the need to paraphrase. Since implementing this inquiry learning model, the students have developed a real purpose for learning research skills and the ability to share their information with each other. They are becoming critical learners who question and discuss rather than accept blindly. Their questioning skills have improved exponentially. Students who previously may have been passive listeners have become critical thinkers who draw on their own experiences, make connections with the world in which they live, and expand their knowledge bank. As Murdoch (2011) states ... *in an inquiry classroom we encourage students to notice their learning*. This is the way of the future.

Inviting learning spaces

The change in learning which began in the library has now filtered into many classrooms, from Kindergarten to Year 6. They have some flexible seating, enabling students to choose where and with whom they will work, depending on the activity. Rows of tables are

no longer the norm. Sitting on cushions or in a bean bag is much more inviting. Group work has always occurred in many classrooms in the past but not with the level of engagement which is demonstrated now. Students question, discuss what they want to know and share their subsequent findings with each other.

Students have access to iPads and laptops in their classroom and these have become an integral tool in their learning. Whiteboard tables, where students can take notes and brainstorm, can be photographed and information is shared with fellow classmates via [AirServer](#). Students automatically reach out for these devices as they have become integral in their learning. In future focused learning, students are more proactive and not merely recipients of information which is delivered to them without input from themselves. Students, individually, work on different aspects of the continuum and negotiate with the classroom teacher the clusters which they wish to achieve. Some classes have lanyards which the students wear, displaying sets of these clusters, making them easily accessible for updating.

Future focused learning is empowering students to take ownership of their learning by providing an environment which is flexible, innovative and challenging and which will foster students who are capable of making formative decisions based on accessing the facts.

Teacher librarians leading change

Teacher librarians play a major role in providing this environment. They do not have all the answers to all the questions but they can guide, demonstrate and lead the ways in which to find solutions. They can be the driving force behind change in a school.

It is less threatening to work with a colleague who is implementing change than to undertake the journey as a solo traveller.

Schools with innovative and collaborative staff who have developed future focused school communities acknowledge the worth of their library and the teacher librarian. The teacher librarian, in turn, must articulate their beliefs and act on those beliefs together with their school community.

A future focused learning community is not achieved solely through the inclusion of a teacher librarian, within the community, but rather through the combined effort of the learning organisation. Newbridge Heights Public School is a learning organisation which continues to strive for excellence and one which is not afraid to change and challenge the future.

As Llopis (2014) states, *change is difficult; not changing is fatal*.

Future focused learning is empowering students to take ownership of their learning ...

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