Spirals of Inquiry

A Guide to the Phases of the Spiral of Inquiry

SCANNING: *WHAT IS GOING ON FOR YOUR LEARNERS?*

What scanning is:

A wide perspective on learning informed by learning principles

Involves finding out what is happening for all learners from their perspectives and those of their families and their community

What scanning is NOT:

Seeking evidence to reinforce the status quo

Only looking at aspects of academic learning that are easily measured

Exclusively about what the professionals think

Note: It is impossible to conduct a thorough scanning without involving learners – and listening closely to what they have to say.

Three powerful ways to engage in the scanning process:

1**. Use the four key questions from *Spirals of Inquiry*** to determine the extent to which learners are connected to their school community (social-emotional learning) and are developing meta-cognitiion and self-regulation (cognitive sciences).

1. Can you name two adults in this setting who believe you will be a success in life?
2. Where are you going with your learning? (What are you learning and why is this important?)
3. How's it going?
4. Where to next?

2. Use the seven learning principles from the conclusion to *The Nature of Learning* from the Center for Educational Research and Innovation: OECD as a framework for understanding what the learning experiences of your learners are like. Here are some examples:

Learners at the centre

- Can learners describe in their own words what they are learning - and why what they are learning is important?
- Can they use a range of ways to demonstrate their learning?
- Can they self-manage independent learning times?

- Are they able to set specific learning goals and construct their learning through active exploration?

The social nature of learning

- Do learners demonstrate the kinds of social and collaborative skills needed for teamwork, citizenship and the workplace?
- How much opportunity do they get to collaborate across ages and stages

Emotions are central to learning

- To what extent are learners able to monitor and manage their own emotions?
- To what extent do learners exhibit a growth mindset? Are they developing resilience and persistence?
- Do learners have the chance to use physical activity appropriately to develop calmness or alertness?

Recognizing individual differences

- Can learners articulate their individual strengths, interests and passions?
- Do they understand, and can they express, what they find difficult or challenging?
- Do learners believe that their prior knowledge and cultural backgrounds are respected, valued and utilized?
- Are they developing a sense of personal identity?

Stretching all students

- Are learners, regardless of their age, able to teach someone else and are they able to make a contribution to the community as a whole?
- Are all learners experiencing demanding, engaging and challenging work without excessive overload? Are they experiencing challenges that are within their zone of proximal development – not too hard or too easy?

Assessment for learning

- Are learners clear on what they are learning and why it matters?
- Can learners describe what quality work looks like – and how they are doing with their own learning?
- Are learners confident and comfortable in both giving and receiving feedback with their peers based on co-constructed criteria?

Building horizontal connections

- Can learners see and understand the connections across content areas/disciplines?
- To what extent does learning extend beyond the walls of the school?
- To what extent do they learn on a regular basis from members of their community?

3. Use the First Peoples' Principles of Learning to understand what's going on for your learners. Here are some starting questions:

- Do learners see what they are learning in school as contributing to their own well-being and to that of their families and communities?
- Are learners developing a deeper sense of place?
- Do they have a chance to explore and understand the consequences of their actions?
- Do they have the opportunity to learn from and with different generations?
- Are they developing a greater understanding of and appreciation for Indigenous knowledge?
- To what extent are stories part of their experience at school?
- Are they developing patience?
- Are they exploring their own identity?

FOCUSING: *WHAT'S GOING TO GIVE YOU THE BIGGEST IMPACT?*

What focusing is:

Uses information from the scan to identify an area for concentrated team learning and action

Usually requires collection of further information to ensure accurate understanding of the situation

Builds on strengths or positives as well as gaining clarity on challenges

Identifies a common area many people can buy into

What focusing is NOT:

The time to introduce completely new areas disconnected from the scanning process

About assuming you have it all figured out and don't need to investigate any further

Just about problems or challenges

About everyone choosing his/her own area of interest

Considerations:

- What popped out at you during the scanning phase? What pleased you? What surprised you? What concerned you?
- What additional evidence do you need? How will you gather it?
- What are some strengths that your learners show in this area?
- How could you build on these strengths?

- What is going to make the biggest difference for your learners?
- What can you most effectively tackle over the next few weeks or months

DEVELOPING A HUNCH: *WHAT'S LEADING TO THIS SITUATION?*

What developing a hunch is:

About getting deeply held beliefs and assumptions out on the table about our own practices

Considering the practices that we can do something about

Checking our assumptions for accuracy before moving ahead

What developing hunches is NOT:

A general brainstorm of all possibilities

Being obsessed with the actions of others or issues over which we have limited influence

Venting about the past, fuming about the present or finding someone to blame

Considerations:

- How can you express your views in a way that opens up thinking about practices?
- How can you create the conditions that build curiosity (not defensiveness)?
- How do you ensure that when developing hunches, you focus on the areas over which you have control (rather than blame the parents, the system, the learners or anyone else)?
- How will you develop fairly quick ways to test out your hunches?
- How might you involve learners and their families as you check out your hunches?

LEARNING: *WHAT DO YOU NEED TO LEARN? HOW WILL YOU DESIGN NEW LEARNING?*

What new learning is:

Motivated by and connected to changing the learning experiences of learners

Directly linked to the focus identified in the earlier phase of the spiral

Involves understanding why new ways of doing things are better than previous practices

Sustained and supported over time

What new learning is NOT:

About what someone else thinks would be useful – or is readily available

Disconnected from the context

Just about a set of strategies, without deeper understanding of the purpose

Only short term or a quick fix

Considerations:

- Now, that you have explored some hunches and have landed on a focus for more in-depth learning and action, what is it you need to learn more about?
- Are there schools with a similar focus from which you can learn? What resources can you access?
- How can you make sure that the strategies you are considering are evidence-informed, current and fit with your context?
- Over time how will you build in multiple opportunities for learning during the school day?
- How will you sustain the momentum and keep the learning engaging?
- How will you address the varied needs of educators in your setting?
- How will you ensure that everyone – formal leaders, teachers and support staff – are engaged in their learning?

TAKING ACTION*: WHAT CAN WE DO DIFFERENTLY TO MAKE ENOUGH OF A DIFFERENCE?*

What taking action is:

Learning more deeply about new ways of doing things – and then trying it out

Informed by a deep understanding of why new practices are more effective than others

About evaluating the impact on learners – and seeking their feedback

About acknowledging feelings of vulnerability and building conditions of trust

What taking action is NOT:

Just about trying out some new strategies

Borrowing ideas just because they look exciting

Doing something different and failing to monitor the effects on learners

Assuming everyone feels OK about the change

Considerations:

- How will you ensure that everyone involved knows they are expected to DO something different?
- How will you make sure they have the time and support to try out new actions?
- How will you provide opportunities to learn from what is working – as well as from the challenges faced - when trying out new approaches?
- How can you make risk-taking less risky? How can you celebrate the inevitable failures as part of new learning?
- How will you ensure there are lots of opportunities for reflection?
- How will you open up classroom doors as you try out new approaches?
- What will you do to model new actions yourself?

CHECKING: *HAVE WE MADE ENOUGH OF A DIFFERENCE?*

The purpose of shared inquiry is to make a difference in valued outcomes for learners. The checking question asks *are we making **enough** of a difference? How do we know?*

Change does not always equal improvement or transformation. There may be instances where teachers change what they are doing only to find not much has changed for their learners.

New actions arising from an inquiry spiral can only be considered 'good' if learner outcomes and experiences have changed for the better.

What checking is:

Knowing what we want to accomplish for our learners and having specific ways to determine how we are doing – early in the inquiry process

About high expectations that our actions will make a substantial difference for ALL learners

About providing information on the impact of our actions

About beginning to set the stage for what comes next

What checking is NOT:

Just a routine to follow at the end

About making **some** difference for **some** learners

About making judgments about the capacity of learners

Designed to justify our actions

Considerations:

- What evidence will you seek to know you are making a difference? How much difference will be enough?
- When will you check and how often? How can you check in a way that allows for adjustment – right away?
- How will you make it safe for participants to share what they are learning in the checking phase?
- How and when will you celebrate the learning gains you are making as a team?