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## The question is the answer : making the language arts classroom meaningful with essential questions and student-driven inquiry

Ashley A. Jorgensen  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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## The question is the answer : making the language arts classroom meaningful with essential questions and student-driven inquiry

### Abstract

Coalition research scholar, Grant Wiggins, firmly believes the idea of a question-driven, inquiry approach to teaching and learning should be at the heart of a school's mission. In examining one of the chief questions of a school's mission, that is, 'What are the aims of a high school curriculum,' Wiggins says it must involve getting students to "use their minds well" (Cushman, 1989). Wiggins says that, "students should emerge from their high school career with an integrated vision of *how to think* within the culture, which implies a broad understanding, not just narrow or rote expertise" (Cushman, 1989). In order for this type of curriculum to essentially 'work' in schools, classroom teachers, professional development leaders, and English educators must develop a similar, question-driven professional development plan. "Because the process of classroom inquiry is difficult to sustain when individual teachers are working alone, the field of English education needs to foster communities of inquiry. Professional growth and educational change become most possible when groups of teachers come together to reflect, to question, and to devise a collective course of action" (Buehler, 2005, p. 286). In a professional development environment built around growth and change, an inquiry based curriculum has the power to transform curriculum.

**The Question is the Answer: Making the Language Arts Classroom Meaningful with Essential  
Questions and Student-Driven Inquiry**

**Masters of Arts in Education**

**Educational Psychology: Professional Development for Teachers**

**Ashley A. Jorgensen**

**University of Northern Iowa**

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This Research Paper by: Ashley A. Jorgensen

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\_\_\_\_\_  
Director of Research Paper – Radhi Al-Mabuk

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2010

\_\_\_\_\_  
Co-Reader of Research Paper – Jody Stone

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date July 13, 2010

\_\_\_\_\_  
Graduate Faculty Advisor – Radhi Al-Mabuk

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2010

\_\_\_\_\_  
Department Head – Radhi Al-Mabuk  
Educational Psychology & Foundations

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2010

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## Chapter One

### Introduction:

I will never forget the summer before I began my first teaching job. Fresh out of college and excited to finally have a classroom of my own, I sat down on my living room floor with a course textbook for a tenth grade American Literature course, a desk calendar, and my old notebooks from postsecondary English methods courses. It did not take long before I had a list of topics, texts, and units I desired to teach; however, I quickly grew overwhelmed at the idea of plotting a year-long course that would challenge, engage, and motivate students to learn, understand, and appreciate literature. I thought back to my own American Literature courses in high school and college, typically taught in a chronological way that began with the Puritans and ended around the Romantics. I recalled reading material and writing papers; for example, a compare and contrast essay that examined the similarities and differences of the film version of *Lord of the Flies* to the book version, or a literary analysis paper on Steinbeck's, *Of Mice and Men*. I enjoyed reading and writing about literature, obviously choosing it as a career, yet struggled to recall a moment when I saw the literature as something *relevant* and *purposeful* in my life at that particular moment.

As teachers get caught up in mapping curriculum, deciding on content to teach and papers to assign, we often lose sight of the actual *purpose* of teaching literature. In the past, teachers of literature have been under the misconception that we must teach and expose our students to as much literature as we can get through. We want students to love and appreciate literature as we do, yet hurriedly move through a textbook and frown upon pep assemblies, student absences, and other conflicts because they cut into our instructional time. Many

traditional school curriculum units are weak and fragmented because teachers struggle with *what* to teach, *how* to teach, and *when* to move on. When a unit becomes a series of unconnected, isolated activities, students fail to walk away with a deep understanding of a topic (Traver, 1998). “Regardless of how carefully the individual activities and lessons are crafted, on close inspection, the curriculums reveal a lack of intellectual focus and coherence because the goals of study are not explicit” (Traver, 1998, p. 70).

In *Authentic Instruction and Assessment: Common Standards for Rigor and Relevance in Teaching Academic Subjects*, F. Newman, B. King, and D. Carmichael (2007) echo this argument, referring to the “myriad of purposes” for teaching thrown at educators from all directions: “The comprehensive high school has been aptly described as a ‘shopping mall’ of fragmented learning opportunities of wide-ranging quality that fails to serve many students” (p. 11). When lessons, units, or learning activities fail to connect to students’ lives, their thinking, or their behavior, true learning will not occur (Wilhelm, J., 2007, p. 39). Rather, “when students have opportunities to construct knowledge, to understand topics in depth instead of only superficially, to express themselves by explaining their ideas, and to study topics that have some significance beyond the classroom, they are more likely to care about and be interested in learning and willing to devote the serious effort that learning requires” (Newman, F., King, B., Carmichael, D., 2007, p. 11).

Since reformers like Rosenblatt, L., Dewey, J., and Murray, D. started calling for closer attention on the act of the reader when encountering literature, schools have sought to develop a more student-centered approach to teaching literature. Literature teachers moved away from a New Criticism approach to teaching and chose to step down from the podium and

listen to what the students had to say about a text. In more recent years, reformers have pushed for *authentic literacy*, the ability to read, write, and think effectively (Schmoker, 2007). Instead of teaching students a book, with one interpretation and a test to mark the end of a unit, it is important to teach students *how* to think about literature and society alike. Instead of promoting a classroom that encourages students to memorize and care about the *answers*, we must shift curriculum to focus on the *questions* that literature provokes. **A question-driven, student-centered curriculum is key to making literature meaningful, purposeful, and relevant to today's high school students.**

During my preliminary research, I found that many researchers see student-driven inquiry as an important component of the 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom; however, they lack explanations and approaches of ways to implement a curriculum that encourages such inquiry. **The focus of this research paper is on the development, explanation, and research behind the implementation of a student inquiry unit centered on essential questions in a secondary literacy classroom.** Essential questions are short, concise, often controversial questions that provide a framework for teachers and lead to deep and meaningful learning from the students. Essential questions have the potential of leading students into a process of *inquiry* because students learn to weigh evidence, build connections, and justify their perspectives. Reframing units, lessons, or entire courses around essential questions makes learning exciting for students, encourages the *process* of thinking over the *product*, and propels students toward deep understandings of the content (Wilhelm, 2007). Through a process of researching, planning, and teaching a unit developed around a set of essential questions, I hope to see

students' engagement, motivation, and depth of understanding sharpen as they travel through my year long American Literature course.

### **Organization of Paper**

My paper will consist of four major sections. In the first section, I will examine the research behind essential questions, inquiry based teaching, and authentic literacy. I will refer to researchers who are particularly interested in how inquiry fits into the language arts classroom. I will narrow the term *inquiry* into a definition that aligns with the goals of my classroom and the goals of the state standards and benchmarks that guide my planning and teaching.

The second section of my paper will focus on the development of a curriculum around essential questions and how it affects a teacher's process of planning, implementation, and assessment. I will provide detailed illustrations of my process of developing a unit around these essential questions, as well as details and explanations of activities, strategies, and assessments. My main focus will be my attempt to foster a classroom built on questions instead of answers, and will outline many before, during, and after activities that align with this goal.

The third section of my paper will include the major findings of my implementation plan outlined in section two. Throughout the unit, I will highlight ongoing, qualitative responses that happen in my classroom, as well as formative assessment of my students' engagement, motivation, and overall learning. I look forward to seeing how students respond to classic literature when they look at it through a lens that is relevant to them, as well as how their

higher order thinking skills expand in activities such as Socratic Seminars, discussions, and other writing assignments.

In the final section of my paper, I will connect the findings of my research to some suggestions for other educators in the field. I am interested in studying current educational initiatives, specifically, The Iowa Core Curriculum, and how essential questions align with the Essential Skills and Concepts for Literacy, as well as the Characteristics for Effective Instruction. As part of a new professional development model at Price Laboratory School, PreK-12 teachers are working together to form 21<sup>st</sup> Century Initiative Groups around a common interest area. The goal of these groups is to choose and research a common, innovative focus area, and develop a plan to create, implement, and assess the innovation during the 2009-2010 school year. I am excited to be working with a group of teachers across grade levels interested in inquiry based teaching in the classroom. We look forward to seeing how inquiry fits into our particular discipline and hope to explore possible ways our entire school may adapt a curricular model that encourages teachers to more closely coordinate activities and assessments around a common model. This professional development group will offer unique avenues for my research and I anticipate interesting findings from a wide variety of teachers, grade levels, and disciplines.

## **Chapter Two**

### **A Time for Change in the Language Arts Classroom – A Look at the Literature**

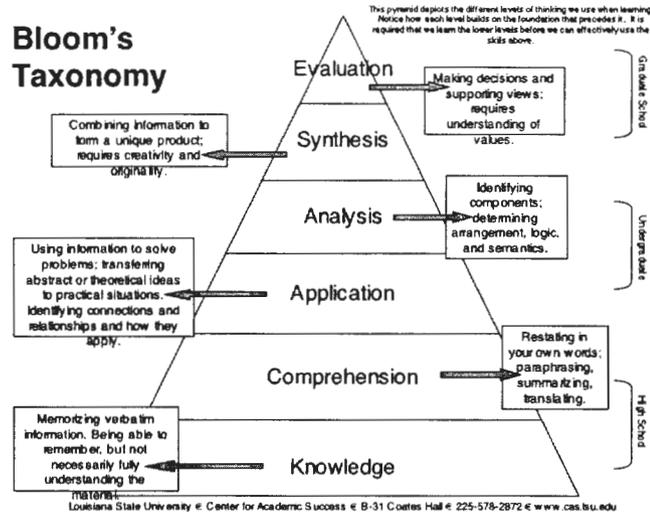
*A place of embarrassment, not challenge* (Schmoker, 2006). This phrase was used to describe the school experience of Mike Rose, author of the classic book, *Lives on the Boundary*. Growing up poor in east Los Angeles, Rose's stifled sense of hope and passion was not only a

reality in his one bedroom home, but reinforced at the school he attended. He described his school as “sleepy,” and “bored.” The lack of curiosity and passion in the classroom not only threatened Rose’s academic success, but his intellectual capabilities and more importantly, his desire to further his education. Newman, King, and Carmichael (2007) write:

For most students, the usual work demanded in school is rarely considered meaningful, significant, or worthwhile. Learning tasks call for specific memorized information, retrieval of given information, or application of routine computational procedures...Schoolwork is regarded largely as a series of contrived exercises necessary to earn credentials for future success, but for many, especially poor students of color, this work leads to disengagement and dropping out. (p. 3)

In recent years, education has been moving in a direction that emphasizes curriculum and instruction that is both rigorous and relevant to the students’ lives outside of the classroom.

Rigorous and relevant curriculum refers to “challenging content that is significant to a topic and includes authentic work” (Iowa Department of Education). Rather than fact-based or memorization-focused curriculum, rigor and relevance works to infuse levels of higher order thinking, as defined and characterized by Bloom’s Taxonomy (diagram retrieved from <http://www.c21te.usf.edu/materials/institute/ct/index4.html>):



Many studies have shown that high expectations and engaging, authentic work correlate with student success. Newmann, who also authored, *Student Engagement and Achievement in American Secondary Schools*, found that students were more likely to try, to concentrate, and be interested in academic study when they were intrinsically challenged (1992, p. 3). Newman, King, and Carmichael were part of a research team at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison that sought to define the main goals for student learning across academic subjects. This research, conducted from 1990-2003, “demonstrated that students who experienced higher levels of authentic instruction and assessment showed higher achievement than students who experienced lower levels of authentic instruction and assessment” (2007, p. vii). To define this concept of *authentic work*, the research team analyzed the kinds of skills demonstrated by successful adults who continually work with knowledge. Professions such as musicians, childcare workers, construction contractors, engineers, citizen activists, salespeople, and scientists were studied closely. Although each of these professions requires very different skills and concepts, some important similarities could be found. Consider, for example, the occupation of a childcare

worker. Each year, a childcare worker gets a new group of children. To successfully care for each child, the childcare worker must use their knowledge of growth and development to identify and assess the needs of the children. Since every student, as well as the dynamics of every class are different, the childcare worker must organize, analyze, and interpret behaviors, backgrounds, and attitudes in order to create a successful learning and growing environment. “Compared to the work of students in school, which often seems contrived and superficial, the intellectual accomplishments of adults in diverse fields seem more meaningful” (Newman, F., King, B., Carmichael, D., 2007, p. 3). The term, “authentic,” refers to intellectual work that is more complex and socially or personally meaningful (p. 3).

For years, the teaching of literature has run into many roadblocks in terms of rigor and relevance. The study of American Literature, a course often required in a secondary language arts curriculum, is typically taught chronologically by exposing students to a number of different texts and passages, written during monumental historical events. This method of teaching American Literature creates natural avenues to higher order thinking. For example, questions found at the end of a textbook reading often ask students to *analyze* a passage, *research* its historical context, or *evaluate* the author’s message. Many writing assignments, such as compare and contrast essays, research papers, and multi-genre papers may require students to utilize necessary skills of synthesizing, analyzing, and creating. Students are often challenged with *rigor*, yet unengaged because of a lack of *relevance*.

Making literature relevant to students in today’s classrooms is an entirely different ballgame. After all, how is a typical teenager, immersed in social networking sites, hand-held electronic devices, and reality television going to find anything relevant about Shakespeare’s,

*Romeo & Juliet*? As English teachers, these constant distractions of the Web 2.0 world can be exciting as they provide endless food for thought; however, they are changing what students are interested in reading and writing. Instead of a library card, students long for an iTunes card; instead of reading literature, they are reading each others' Facebook wall posts. In order for students to *engage* in a piece of literature, they must see meaning in it. As students prepare to enter the adult world after high school, they must be prepared to tackle a diversity of literacy in order to perform their jobs, run their households, and act as citizens.

In his book, *Results Now*, Mike Schmoker says it is time to get busy in regards to beefing up our literacy programs in school. He says (2006), "the lifelong consequences of good – or poor – literacy skills are monumental" (p. 52). They not only impact school success, but intelligence itself; our ability to think. Schmoker claims that teaching literacy must be a transaction of three skills: *reading, writing, and talking*. By reading, writing, and talking about common, complex issues raised in literature, students learn to *think*, "to accurately and effectively weigh words and articulate ideas with skill and clarity" (p. 53). When guiding students through literature, we must stop emphasizing the content tested on standardized tests, and engage students with the problems, questions, and issues people encounter in real life. Schmoker continues saying, "Every day of their school lives, students should be reading texts critically, then weighing evidence for or against people, ideas, and policies, and forming opinions" (p. 55). These activities emphasize a number of skills necessary for reading and interpreting difficult texts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century:

- Critically examine evidence in a text
- See the world from multiple viewpoints

- Make connections and detect patterns among ideas and perspectives
- Imagine alternatives (What if? What else?)
- Understand relevance (What difference does it make?)

Researchers such as Schmoker insist that a curriculum built around these principles will prevent the need for endless hours of mundane practices – identifying elements of literature such as “plot,” “rising action,” or “climax,” or overanalyzing symbols, metaphors, and linguistic style such as the dreaded iambic pentameter of Shakespearean writing. Schmoker claims, “we do not yet realize that twelve years of generous daily amounts of *in-school* reading, writing, and discussion, built around good questions (shared and refined by teams and networks of teaches), would create unimagined intellectual, academic, and professional possibilities for our children” (p. 56).

So how does a teacher begin to piece together this curriculum “built around good questions?” Jeffrey Wilhelm, author of *Engaging Readers and Writers with Inquiry*, suggests language arts teachers utilize **essential questions** to reframe what we already do and make it matter to the students in the classroom. By using a question such as, “*What makes a good relationship and what screws up relationships?*” when reading Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, students encounter the text through a relevant lens; thus, creating a “clearly focused problem orientation for our studies that connects kids to socially significant material and learning. This in turn leads to exciting conversations that bring together the students’ lives, the course content, and the world in which we live as we consolidate major concepts, vocabulary, strategies, and ideas” (2007, p. 8). Wilhelm states, “by recasting a curricular topic in terms of an essential question, we set the stage for a model of teaching known as **inquiry**. The inquiry

process explores and addresses the real-world problem articulated by the question. It gets at the central reasons that the material being studied was developed or discovered in the first place. It foregrounds the functionality of what is being learned” (2007, p. 9).

### **What is “Inquiry?”**

The concept of inquiry based instruction has been around for quite some time. The idea can even be traced back to Socrates. Socrates was known for leading his students through a process of self-discovery, not by making them memorize a series of facts, names, and texts, but by asking them complex questions about the world, its people, and their relationships. This prescribed process of both questioning and dialogue is referred to today as a Socratic Seminar, an organized method of discussion often utilized in schools.

Philosopher and educator John Dewey also believed in an inquiry-based approach toward teaching and learning. In his renowned classic, *Democracy and Education*, Dewey attacked the rigid, formal model of education, proclaiming that it, “easily becomes remote and dead -- abstract and bookish, to use the ordinary words of depreciation” (1916). Dewey thought that education was lacking an authentic connection to the *human experience*. When education does not connect with the human experience of a social group, “ordinary vital experiences fail to gain in meaning” (1916). Dewey suggested in rather stark terms that formal education was guilty of “conditioning” the young to think, act, and believe a certain way: “Now in many cases -- too many cases -- the activity of the immature human being is simply played upon to secure habits which are useful. He is trained like an animal rather than educated like a human being” (1916).

Today, if one were to scour the internet searching for information on inquiry-based instruction, they would find numerous resources for science classrooms. According to the National Research Council's, *Inquiry and the National Science Education Standards* (2000), "teaching science through inquiry allows students to conceptualize a question and then seek possible explanations that respond to that question" (p. xii). Inquiry based instruction acts on the inquisitiveness of a student's mind while using important problem solving, communication, and thinking skills needed to be successful in the 21<sup>st</sup> century:

Scientific inquiry refers to the diverse ways in which scientists study the natural world and propose explanations based on the evidence derived from their work. Inquiry also refers to the activities of students in which they develop knowledge and understanding of scientific ideas, as well as an understanding of how scientists study the natural world. (2000, p. 23)

An inquiry based approach to learning in science encourages students to engage in many of the same processes that scientists engage in. The features of this process include five major parts:

1. Learners are *engaged* by scientifically oriented questions
2. Through *exploration*, learners give priority to evidence, which allows them to develop and evaluate explanations that address scientifically oriented questions
3. Learners formulate *explanations* from evidence to address scientifically oriented questions
4. Learners *evaluate* their explanations in light of alternative explanations, particularly those reflecting scientific understanding
5. Learners communicate and justify their proposed explanations

The elementary constructivist approach to teaching and learning follows a similar path as the National Science Standards of Inquiry. The Five E's refer to the following skills: Engage, Explore, Explain, Elaborate, and Evaluate.

### **Inquiry and the Secondary Science Classroom**

So how then, does this inquiry based approach to learning work in a science classroom?

In the book, *Inquiry and the National Science Education Standards*, inquiry is described as:

“Inquiry-based teaching requires careful attention to creating learning environments and experiences where students can confront new ideas, deepen their understandings, and learn to think logically and critically about the world around them” (2000). The book describes an inquiry based unit in Ms. Idoni's 10<sup>th</sup> grade biology class. Visiting a local lake, the students first raise questions in individual journals. Some questions raised in the journals included: Is the water safe to drink? Can people swim in the lake? What kinds of plants and animals live in the lake? How have humans changed the lake? After a class discussion on their initial observations, Ms. Idoni concludes that students are most interested in the change of the lake and the influence humans have had on this environment.

For several weeks, the students research and explore issues of human influences, particularly pollution. Ms. Idoni frames the unit's essential questions: *Is the city park lake polluted? If so, how have humans influenced the pollution?* With Ms. Idoni's help, the students use the essential questions to form three study groups, focusing on three different factors: physical, chemical, and biological influence. They gather data about their focus and frequently report to the other groups. The students explore and explain using a variety of different resources: they conduct library and computer searches, as well as various technologies such as,

temperature probes, oxygen test kits, a pH meter, and common items that allow students to gather samples for examination in the science classroom (Inquiry and the National Science Education Standards, 2000).

While the students take control of the inquiry process with their group investigations, Ms. Idoni keeps track of the students' inquiry abilities and schedules periodic group discussions and meetings in which the students share data and present what they understand about the influence of various factors. During these meetings, "students begin to realize that the factors interact" (2000, p. 69). As the students take ownership of their findings and explain their initial observations, Ms. Idoni recognizes that students are using physical and life sciences, concepts they have learned, earlier in their education. Secondly, "Ms. Idoni sees that this entire inquiry is providing ample opportunities for all students to understand several parts of the standard on science in personal and social perspectives" (p. 71). Not only have they utilized processes of prior knowledge to help in their exploration, but they have demonstrated evidence of learning in the standards and skills required of the science curriculum.

After two months of data collection, the groups present their data, explanations, and conclusions about the specific effects their target topic had on the lake and whether the effect would constitute pollution:

As students listen to the different groups, they recognize and analyze alternative explanations and models for understanding stability, change, and the potential of pollution in the city lake. They review what they know, weigh the evidence for different explanations, and examine the logic of the different group presentations. They challenge each others' findings, elaborating on their own

knowledge as they help each other learn more about their particular factors.

Slowly, they form the view that all the factors have to be considered in any explanation for pollution of the lake. (2000, p. 71)

Towards the end of the unit, the students in Ms. Idoni's class decide they want to synthesize the data and formulate an answer to their guiding question. More importantly than the 'answer' they come up with, is the fact that their "observations and explanations continually expand; they find they have to consider factors they did not originally think were important" (p. 71). By the end of this unit, Ms. Idoni is pleased with the students' respective reports. They successfully describe procedures, express scientific concepts, review information, summarize data, develop charts, explain statistical procedures, and construct a reasonable and logical argument for their answer to the question, "Is the city park lake polluted? They were engaged in the content because they were studying something relevant and authentic to them. This authentic work on a local city lake provided multiple opportunities for students to develop the abilities of scientific inquiry as described in the National Science Education Standards. Finally, Ms. Idoni "uses the initial field experience as a way to make the investigation meaningful to students. She understands there are several ways that students may find meaningful topics to pursue, for example, current topics in the media, local problems, and personal experiences. She also knows that initially some experiences may not be highly engaging, but active involvement by its very nature has some meaning" (p. 73).

### **Reflections on Research**

After studying this model of inquiry in a 10<sup>th</sup> grade biology class, I was able to draw several of my own conclusions. First, the creation of the engaging, overriding, essential

question of the unit was developed by a partnership between the experienced teacher and the novice students. Although the students were engaged at the city lake and developed many interesting, insightful, and complex questions on their own, they needed Ms. Idoni's support to help frame their investigation and the learning goals of the unit. Secondly, although the five steps of the inquiry process were all present during the unit, the time spent on each was not clearly defined, nor isolated. For example, as the students *explained* their findings to the other groups, alternatives were often discussed and elaborated on within groups. Lastly, although the city lake was the 'hook' for the students in Ms. Idoni's class, the lake, or topic, was not the purpose of the unit. Students successfully implementing parts of the scientific inquiry process was the chief goal of the unit. The lake was the piece of the puzzle students cared about; it gave them an authentic purpose for utilizing the scientific process.

### **Chapter Three**

#### **Applying Science Inquiry to American Literature – Introduction**

The study of American Literature is typically a standard requirement of high school English curriculum. The famous words of our Founding Fathers revealed in the Declaration of Independence, the fire-and-brimstone sermons of Jonathon Edwards, and the pessimistic, ideological attitude of Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, are common texts celebrated by English teachers, yet scorned by their students. When it came time to plan a curriculum unit on such pieces of American Literature, I knew without a doubt I needed a 'reality check.' This began the process of designing my first inquiry unit.

## **The American Dream...A Reality or an Illusion?**

Before beginning my unit planning, I looked to the students for help. At the beginning of the school year, I gave my students a survey. In this survey, the students answered questions about their language arts skills: where they excel, where they struggle, and what they like to read, write, and think about. Finally, the survey asked them important, personal questions about their lives in high school, as well as their future: What are you afraid of? What bothers you about high school? What are you interested in? Out of the 99 students surveyed (grades 9-12), 17 percent wrote about their fear in the failing economy and the lack of jobs for college graduates, and ten percent wrote about the general apathy and entitlement of today's youth. Phrases of fears such as, "the loss of person to person/face to face communication due to technology," "losing people to the downfalls of society," "the lack of interest that students show for their future," and "not being successful," stuck out to me as valuable content in which to couch the literary concepts of the course. I also began piecing together texts that examine many of the same issues. Relationships, communication, ideas of success versus failure, and a changing of ideals across generations are common themes sprinkled throughout much of American Literature.

**Through this process, I found myself in the beginning stages of inquiry.** I did not chart my curricular year based on the stack of textbooks in my classroom, or by the literary periods of our history, but by the questions that mattered to the students. Jeffrey Wilhelm says (2007), "To discover problems worth pursuing, think about what matters to you, and what matters to your students, and jot it down on a piece of paper. Then make connections – literally and figuratively – between these passions and the concerns and the content of your curriculum" (p.

25). As I began to sift through the responses, I was able to come to an exciting conclusion.

Many of the issues my students wrote about: trusting the government, making enough money to live, fitting into various social groups, finding a job, and discovering personal success, were the same issues wrestled with in literature throughout history.

After gathering my students' survey data, I decided to create my first unit on American society, specifically, the concept of the American Dream. In order to plan an inquiry unit, I, too, began my own process of inquiry. I scoured the Internet in search of articles about American society. Titles such as, *Vanity Fair's*, "Rethinking the American Dream," the *New York Times'*, "American Middle Class: Slipping Away," and *CNN's*, "Is the American Dream Dead?" became my choice reading material. I paid closer attention to billboards, advertisements, and commercials. I listened intently as friends, family, and colleagues conversed about the daily stresses or thrills of everyday life, everything from gas prices to celebrity gossip. I even analyzed seemingly superficial shows such as *American Idol*, *The Biggest Loser*, or *Modern Family*. It was not until January 20, 2009, in the school's library that I heard the words that would eventually shape the **essential questions** of my unit:

Less measurable, but no less profound, is a sapping of confidence across our land; a nagging fear that America's decline is inevitable, that the next generation must lower its sights. (President Obama, 2009)

As I observed the quiet room of mixed emotions the day of President Obama's Inauguration Address, I began to see my unit unfold. How does a teenager define success in American society? How have the ideals and goals of Americans changed in the last decade? How are they impacted by defining moments in history? What is the future of the American Dream?

Are teenagers, the ‘future’ our new president refers to, hopeful? Confident? Willing and ready to work?

Although my students did not come to me with these exact questions personally, publicly, or deliberately in class, I was confident they were on the minds of many, if not most, of the teenagers that day. Questions of the future, questions of fear, questions of equality, questions of reality. These questions framed the **essential questions** for my unit entitled, “The American Promise: Past & Present:”

- 1. What is the American Dream? How does one attain it? How has it changed over time?**
- 2. How do we limit our dreams? Are our dreams societal or internal?**
- 3. Is the American Dream a reality for all?**
- 4. Do we as Americans have a moral obligation to help those who face difficulties obtaining their American Dream?**
- 5. What is the future of the American Dream? Are you hopeful?**

The next phases of my unit planning involved the integration of the *what* and the *how* of my discipline. The *what* involved the literacy skills and concepts I wanted my students to develop throughout the unit. The class, Integrated Language Arts II, was a required class for tenth grade students and involved an integrated curriculum of the five strands of language arts: reading, writing, speaking, viewing, and listening. After reviewing the Iowa Core Curriculum’s Essential Skills & Concepts, I mapped out the objectives I wanted to focus on in my unit. Listed below are examples of learning objectives for the unit, as taken directly from the Iowa Core Curriculum’s Essential Skills and Concepts for Literacy.

1. **Reading:** Respond to literature and support judgments with evidence and justification from a text; in both written and spoken forms
2. **Reading:** Use a variety of skills to comprehend and interpret complex literature
  - A. Make predictions
  - B. Summarize literary materials
  - C. Determine importance
  - D. Analyze literature based on literary elements and devices
3. **Speaking:** Participate in a variety of speaking opportunities; in both small and large group formats
  - A. Engage in purposeful and meaningful dialogue
  - B. Demonstrate respect for the viewpoints of others
  - C. Ask relevant questions and respond to questions
  - D. Initiate new ideas on relevant topics
4. **Writing:** Communicate information and ideas in a literary analysis, argumentative essay
5. **Viewing:** Explain how literary forms and elements are represented in visual narratives
6. **Viewing:** Construct an original visual media message, considering bias, tone, viewpoints, symbols, stereotypes, and themes

Much of what I wanted students to gain throughout this unit mirrored the process it took to put it together. I wanted them to notice the unseen; to question the obvious; to form an opinion and communicate it to an audience. These are not only skills outlined in the

standards for literacy, but necessary in finding success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In recent years, schools across the nation have advocated for curriculum change that allows students to be prepared for life in a “global economy that demands innovation” (“Partnership for 21st,” 2004). In connecting to the teaching of literature, The Framework for 21st Century Learning stated, “We believe schools must move beyond a focus on basic competency in core subjects to promoting understanding of academic content at much higher levels by weaving 21st century interdisciplinary themes into core subjects” (Iowa Core Curriculum, 2007). 21st century skills bridge the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of students from the core academic areas to real life applications. The American Dream unit would address components of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills in predominantly two categories (as specified by the Iowa Core Curriculum, 2007): Civic Literacy and Employability Skills

#### **Civic Literacy:**

- Understand how the government established by the Constitution embodies the enduring values and principles of democracy and republicanism.
- Understand strategies for effective political action that impact local, state, and national governance.

#### **Employability Skills:**

- Communicate and work productively with others, incorporating different perspectives and cross cultural understanding, to increase innovation and the quality of work.
- Demonstrate leadership skills, integrity, ethical behavior, and social responsibility while collaborating to achieve common goals.

By connecting these common objectives and goals with my essential questions of the American Dream, the goals became personally relevant to the students. Without the essential questions, the “goals,” or the “what” of the curriculum seemed to float in isolation. Wilhelm addresses this disconnection between standards and meaning, stating: “After all, you can’t respond, argue, persuade, or present unless you have something interesting to respond to or argue about. Addressing standards such as these within the framework of a guiding question gives them greater purpose. Likewise, when unit activities flow from the guiding question, they won’t feel like a series of disconnected tasks” (2007, p. 45). Instead of struggling, as I did, to write an isolated compare/contrast essay, or put together a contrived persuasive speech in my high school language arts class, the essential questions of the unit would help students *invest* in the issues being studied, ultimately gaining a deeper understanding of the content, as well as the concepts and skills required by the school, state, and national guidelines for success.

### **Developing Learning Activities to *Engage***

Now that I had thoroughly planned the “what” of my unit, it was time to begin choosing the resources, texts, and activities that would engage, motivate, and encourage my students to delve into the process of inquiry. I began the process of what Jeffrey Wilhelm refers to as *frontloading*. “Frontloading provides the initial purpose, motivation, and background to get started with a new unit on reading” (2007, p. 73). I created a series of short, thought-provoking activities that would not only engage the students, but encourage them to explore their own initial views and prior knowledge on the issue at hand.

We began class the first day with a group of students, two lines, and a long piece of masking tape. Adapted from Erin Gruwell and the film, “Freedom Writers,” I asked my students

a series of questions about life, society, and dreams. As I read off a series of statements such as, “I work hard to achieve my dreams,” “Money comes easy to my family,” and “I sometimes feel as though I’m not living up to the standards my parents have for me,” students quietly stepped toward the line when their response was ‘yes,’ and backed away when it was, ‘no.’ This line game was not only fun for the students to play, but it gave me, as well as them, an opportunity to become more familiar with one another in an interactive, non-threatening way. Because the questions and topics we would be exploring throughout the unit were controversial, it was important to build a sense of community within the classroom. Sometimes it is difficult for students to open up in front of their peers, but the line game gave students an opportunity to speak volumes—without ever saying a word (Daritan, 2007).

After the line game, the students took part in a free-write activity, responding freely in their notebooks to four prompts: 1.) Describe the dreams your parents have for your life; 2.) Describe the dreams your friends have for your life; 3.) Describe your dreams; 4.) Describe American society’s dreams for you, a teenager, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This short writing activity involved strategies necessary to promote productive class discussion. The students were very open about sharing their free-writes in a class discussion. We discussed where our dreams or goals stem from.

*The following script is an excerpt recorded during a class discussion. To protect students’ privacy, their names have been replaced with pseudonyms.*

Me: Through our free-write, we learned that everyone dreams about different things. What shapes, or influences our dreams?

Davis: Life experiences.

Me: Expand on that. How do life experiences shape our dreams or goals?

Davis: Tupac is a perfect example. He had nothing growing up and because of that, he developed the motivation to be something better.

Molly: It also has a lot to do with your background. If you are from the lower spectrum, you might not have that much to offer in society; however, if you were from the middle or upper class spectrum, you have more to lose.

Chris: It could also be people that influence us. For example, if we had a really great doctor growing up, it might influence us to want to be a doctor.

Dillion: People's dreams are different because of where you live. For example, someone that grows up in the ghetto isn't going to typically dream big because of the stereotypes associated with them.

Jordan: I agree with that. Like, if you grow up in a rich neighborhood, then you know you are going to become something.

Davis: If you came from success, you have a better chance of succeeding, if you came from nothing, you have a better chance of being nothing.

Through a brief discussion such as this, students were already starting to unpack their initial views on the ideas of dreams, success, and the common ideologies that serve as an umbrella in our society. Students were clearly engaged in the topics and were able to see they shared some similar views, as well as some very different beliefs. The dynamics of the class were perfect for this type of discussion. The small laboratory school, set in the middle of a suburban university town, includes a diversity of students. The school includes a large number of university employee's children, as well as a large number of students who open-enroll from a

neighboring, blue-collar, urban setting. These students tend to be from lower working class families, single-parent households, and minority families. It was clear to see that some students, who grew up in a household of financial security, high expectations, and opportunities for upward mobility, approached the idea of dreams as limitless. Students from a household with less advantages, tended to have a more pessimistic outlook on achieving dreams. As I monitored the flow of conversation during this first discussion, it was clear it would be my role to bring resources, texts, and activities to class that would challenge these pre-existing ideas and provide new opportunities to explain, defend, and evaluate the issues at hand.

The next day, we spent time looking at the “American” side of the concept of the American Dream. Students walked into a classroom with the word, “Americans,” displayed on the white board. Together, we took turns writing and discussing common characteristics, stereotypes, or beliefs about American society. As the students shared their insights, we discussed the root of the descriptions, and their validity in society today. Words such as wealth, indulge, freedom, obesity, fast food, apple pie, white picket fence, immigration, and materialism covered the board. Through this short exercise, the students were able to draw some of their own conclusions and justify their perspectives. For example, Davis, a student open-enrolling to our school from a neighboring lower class, urban city setting commented that, “Americans have a false sense of freedom and a false sense of wealth.” After this discussion and word web, we tried to conceptualize a ‘working definition’ of the American Dream:

Molly: A chance for a fresh start

Jordan: Making the impossible possible

Chris: The freedom to strive for our dreams

Jackson: I think everyone in our country is living the American Dream

Davis: I do not agree with this.

Through this discussion, it was apparent that the definition of the American Dream is not clearly defined and understood in our country today. If it was a clearly defined ideal, there were many loopholes, or controversies about its accessibility to all Americans. A true definition of our inquiry topic of study was not achieved through this lesson; however, I believe I had achieved my chief instructional goal. The students were interested, engaged, and ready to dig deeper.

### **The Exploration Phase of Inquiry**

The next step of the inquiry unit was to give the students meaningful avenues to explore the big questions raised in the first two days of the unit. In our case, we were beginning with exploring the many viewpoints of the American Dream. Because the students come from a diverse group of backgrounds, it was important that they were exposed to a number of varying viewpoints. According to Miami's Museum of Science website:

In the Exploration stage (of inquiry), the students have the opportunity to get directly involved with phenomena and materials. Involving themselves in these activities they develop a grounding of experience with the phenomenon. As they work together in teams, students build a base of common experience which assists them in the process of sharing and communicating. The teacher acts as a facilitator, providing materials and guiding the students' focus. The students' inquiry process drives the instruction during an exploration. (2001)

We began with the first documents written about the American Dream. "Letters from an American Farmer," written in 1765 by Jean Michel-Crevecoeur, emphasized the freedom of America, the invisible powers and rewards for labors, the nationalism and pride of the family farm, and the absence of a defined social class system. The students compared this original document to our society today, analyzing many differences with attitudes, ideals, and goals of our nation's people. Next, I compiled a stack of poetry and songs about American society, written during influential periods in our history. Walt Whitman's joyous anthem, "I Hear America Singing," Langston Hughes' testament of inequality in the American Dream, "I, Too, Sing America," Sherman Alexie's idea of the dream from an Indian Reservation in "Poverty of Mirrors," Neil Diamond's famous song, "America," used as a pro-immigration rally at Michael Dukakis's campaign, and Roberta Hill's search for gender equality in her poem, "Dream of Rebirth," each offered a unique perspective on the American Dream, written through abstract, figurative, and poetic language. The students each chose a poem and worked on the skill of literary analysis. In order to analyze the rather complex poetry, the students had to research the context: when the piece was written, what factors influenced the writer, and the message they were compelled to send across with their words. Students used reading strategies to analyze the language of the piece: they looked up difficult words, identified allusions, and broke apart deeper meanings in metaphors and symbols. Once they began to piece together the lines of their poem, they worked to communicate their understanding through a thesis driven, literary analysis paper. In other words, the content was not the learning goal or chief focus of this activity. It was instead, the vehicle that was used to help students develop a deeper knowledge of the important skills in literacy, in this case, that of literary analysis.

In an 'integrated' language arts course, it was important to use the exploration phase of inquiry to not only deepen writing skills, but skills in the other four strands of literacy development: reading, speaking, listening, and viewing (Iowa Core Curriculum, 2007). One day, we looked at the concept of the American dream through images. Students analyzed underlying messages of newspaper cartoons and magazine advertisements. Students analyzed pictures; one of the well-known pop artist, Britney Spears, in a tight t-shirt reading, "I am the American Dream," and another of a glove, printed with a picture of the American flag, tightly clenching a wad of money. My goal was to *surround* students with this so-called American dream paraphernalia. I hung quotes on the wall: "Kill my boss? Do I dare live out the American dream?" (Castellaneta), or "The American dream is, in part, responsible for a great deal of crime and violence because people feel that the country owes them not only a living, but a good living" (Abrahamsen). I started a reading corner in my classroom, a nook filled with long and short reading material. Finally, we listened to music, written and performed during influential times in American History.

In addition to the resources I provided for the students, they brought their own resources to the table as well. They conducted a series of interviews, asking questions such as:

1. What is your idea of the American Dream?
2. What was the societal version of the American Dream when you were growing up?
3. How has it changed in recent years? How have Americans changed?
4. What are the differences between the materialistic and the idealistic values associated with the American Dream?
5. How do you define success? How does our country define success?

6. What problems are associated with the American Dream?
7. Is the American Dream the same for everyone?
8. What stands in the way of people's dreams?
9. Is the American Dream a reality for all?
10. How do you predict the American Dream to change in the future?

Students interviewed a diversity of people, all with different perspectives and attitudes toward American society. Through individual blogs and podcasts, the students sorted through their investigations, began to make connections, and explain their findings to their peers. For example, Langston Hughes' interpretation of the American dream during the Great Depression mirrored one student's grandfather's take on the American dream. The students were also able to see that where once, the American dream was a dream of freedom, rewards for hard work, and a community sense of pride, now has shifted more to the individual. Freedom is no longer valued, but taken for granted, money determines personal success, and national pride is seemingly more and more divided than embraced.

### **Initiating Student Voice in the Classroom**

In addition to the individualized student interviews, I also decided to make Fridays a student-led discussion day. Students individually signed up for a week of choice and were required to find and bring in an artifact that could be interpreted through the lens of the American Dream, as well as some discussion questions. Since true, student-guided inquiry is about the questions the students encounter when 'reading the world' around them, I wanted students to have an opportunity to control the conversation and dialogue.

According to Mike Schmoker's, *Results Now: How We Can Achieve Unprecedented Improvements in Teaching and Learning* (2006), "despite the importance of academic dialogue, most students don't engage in it until college or later" (p. 66). In fact, in one of his studies, only 0.5 percent of the 1,500 classes they observed took part in engaging discussions. Powerful, ongoing discussions give students the opportunity to talk about what they are learning, to test their ideas, and reveal their assumptions. Unlike the 'typical' classroom, lacking in these types of discussions, I wanted my students to engage in substantive conversation, to learn to articulate their ideas and build off their thoughts by critically listening to their peers.

These discussions did not 'work' without practice. In order for the discussions to work effectively, the students needed practice in writing and asking meaningful questions. I decided to utilize the popular method of a Socratic Seminar to initiate conversation and dialogue with the students in the class. A Socratic Seminar correlates perfectly with an inquiry based classroom. In a Socratic Seminar, the students sit in a circle to discuss a common text. Each student is responsible for asking higher order questions that move the discussion forward. The students are to respond to one another; thus, initiating sustained conversation instead of the traditional teacher-student, question-answer format. The teachers' role in a Socratic Seminar is twofold: They act as another participant in the Seminar, redirecting students, asking follow-up questions, considering other perspectives, encouraging certain students to refrain or join in. Their other goal involves performance based or formative assessment. Through a Socratic Seminar, students are assessed on their knowledge of the text, their ability to communicate their ideas effectively, and the listening skills they bring to the discussion. During the

discussion, the instructor is able to take notes on the types of responses students are contributing to the discussion.

During our student-led Socratic Seminars, I initially asked four students to sign up on each Friday, hoping to spend about five weeks on the given unit. Each student would then be responsible for guiding the seminar for approximately 10-15 minutes. To my surprise, we found we were only able to get through about two students each week. Their topics, texts, and questions were unique, creative, and controversial. One student brought in a paycheck, which started an in-depth argument of a money-driven American Dream, as well as the argument of whether money could or could not buy happiness. Another student brought in a picture of an Olympic athlete, a Jamaican-born runner wearing an American flag draped around his back. His questions focused on the immigrant's version of the American Dream, and how it differed from the American-born version. As the students discussed, I monitored participation, took notes, and formally assessed the students' responses. At first, I was apprehensive about giving up an entire class day to student-led discussions; however, I quickly grew pleased at the positive response from the students.

The student-led discussion format gave every student a chance to voice their opinions. Even the more reserved students were required to lead the discussion for a portion of a class period; this gave them a chance to take ownership in a leadership role. Siri, a usually quiet student in class, started a wonderful discussion one day, leading the students to walk out of the classroom saying things such as, "that was the most intellectual conversation I've ever had." Siri began her discussion by passing around a simple pin, a pin with the American flag printed on the white background and a simple phrase in small fine print on the bottom: Made in China.

To Siri, this pin represented her version of today's American Dream: "Since the death of the frontier, the dream has become shallow and hollow; people can be in debt, but they have two SUVs in their driveway" (student discussion, February, 2010). This statement was followed by a series of conflicting ideas about the realities of the American Dream in our society today. Then Davis, a student typically content with staying as unengaged as remotely possible during class said something that blew us all away:

Imagine a hallway with a big, brick wall, but no ceiling. The American Dream lies at the top of this brick wall. Everyone reaches for it, yet everyone has different means to help them. Some people have tall ladders, which makes it very easy to get to the top. Others have step stools and are only left reaching. (February, 2010)

The class sat speechless for a moment, then quickly praised Davis for his metaphorical insight. Using his metaphor as a scaffold, I replied with a question: "Say this is the case, Davis, then how do we solve this inequality? Is there an answer? How do step stools get to the top?"

Davis replied: "By stealing the ladders from the rich."

The metaphor developed by this student continued to be the focus for the remainder of our discussion. I could tell the students were left puzzled by his comment. One student, Tamryn, replied with confidence and honesty, "But what if the people with the ladders earned their way to the top? We shouldn't punish those people who have worked hard to have their wealth and success." What my students were engaging in on this Friday afternoon was a conversation they had probably never had themselves. Sure, they had been exposed, through the media, or in the middle of their parents' conversations, but for many of them, they had

never thought about society through this lens. They left class that day in rare form. Many of them continued talking as they walked out the door. Others were left with questions; left pondering these complex issues that may never be solved.

After school, I pulled two students aside to catch their thoughts on the inquiry based discussions. They had the following to say:

The discussions have been really good. We don't act like that on a normal basis.

Most the conversations we have in school usually don't consist of anything intellectual. Talking about the American Dream is cool because it's something that's real and because we're so diverse, we can learn so much about each other. I think everyone should engage in conversations like this. It helps you articulate your thoughts and think critically about everyday situations around us.

(Molly, 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Student)

Discussions are great because we can come up with ideas on our own. Also in discussions, we can learn perspectives. I understand the American Dream more now than I did then. (Jani, 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Student)

### **The Explanation Phase of Inquiry**

Although the exploration phase of my unit continued to be an ongoing, necessary component, the students delved into the 'explain' phase of inquiry through an American Dream literature study. Students critically read two plays: *Death of a Salesman*, by Arthur Miller, and, *A Raisin in the Sun*, by Lorraine Hansberry, and were required to write an argumentative, thesis driven essay that compared and contrasted the vision of the American Dream in both plays, as well as other sources they found connective and relevant. *Death of a Salesman*, written after

the brink of Post-World War II pride, nationalism, and wealth, shows the breakdown of the ideal nuclear family, a family caught up in conflicting dreams, false ideals of success, and capitalistic tendencies. There is much controversy surrounding *Death of a Salesman*, for example, Miller's portrayal of his main character, Willy Loman, as a tragic character, or the somewhat negative portrayal of the money-hungry salesman. Since the characters are quite complex in the play and an understanding of the historical context is critical, many supplementary activities were infused during this reading. The students kept track of meaningful quotes to later incorporate in their papers by completing ongoing quote logs, analyzed the development of the characters through a character poster assignment, took part in a standing debate on two of the characters' views of success, participated in numerous Socratic Seminars, and even picked the brain of my husband, a commission based insurance salesman, on the qualities, the goals, and the stresses that define a salesperson in our society, past and present.

During this unit, literature was not the only means to investigate the questions at hand. It was important to expose students to many different perspectives of the essential questions. For example, there are many viewpoints which support the idea of the American Dream, believing it is alive and well in our society today, at the fingertips of all who are willing to work for it. On the contrary, there is an ever-growing idea that certain factors obstruct people's paths to the American Dream, making it difficult, if not impossible for some to achieve it. To consider this question more in-depth, I used a variety of activities to open students' minds to the controversial opinions. The students viewed the film, "Pleasantville." They studied the genre of documentary by critically viewing, writing about, and discussing, "30 Days on

Minimum Wage.” This documentary tracks the life of Morgan Spurlock as he attempts to live on minimum wage jobs for 30 days. This documentary, along with its political commentary was a favorite discussion piece among the class of students, sparking a new debate on the impossibility of the American Dream. We analyzed a number of magazine articles, including one about Jason Smith, an NFL first round draft pick, who started his own lawn care service at the young age of ten in order to save money for living expenses. We discussed articles such as, “A Poor Woman of the Middle Class,” sharing the story of a single mother unable to ‘move up’ in the world of income due to her poor looking teeth and inability to get interviews. The students recalled their own connections, movies such as ‘The Pursuit of Happiness,’ or ‘The Blind Side.’ One day during class, I decided to have students play our own version of ‘The Game of Life.’ As students walked into class, they drew a random slip of paper out of a hat. On the slip of paper was a hypothetical life scenario. After drawing their ‘life,’ the students had to free-write about how their dreams, goals, or ideals might change because of their scenario.

The discussion that followed was eye-opening. Students were able to thoughtfully step into the life of someone else, a life better, worse, or perhaps, similar, to the life they lived on a daily basis. During this brief activity and the discussion that followed, students were able to draw many important connections to the inquiry theme of the American Dream, as well as the other texts, resources, and activities we had examined throughout the unit. It was wonderful to hear students compare their life scenario to a character in *Death of a Salesman*, or a student connect personally to their scenario by referring to a family member or someone they knew.

## Final Assessments of the Unit

During the final weeks of the unit, it was time to pull together the target skills, concepts, and content of the unit in a cohesive way that required the students to draw conclusions, justify their final explanations and perspectives, and share their growth throughout the unit. The students were required to demonstrate their understanding in two ways: a literary analysis essay and a multi-media project.

### The Literary Analysis Paper

Through a thesis, or focus driven paper, the students each had to choose one angle to examine deeper in a structured essay. Because *Death of a Salesman* served as our major text during the unit, I required that students connect to this piece, as well as the concept of the American Dream. Their challenge, however, was to take a unique stance to examine closely, with at least two additional sources of information to support their ideas. One student, whose father was a commission-based salesman, wanted to look at society's perception of salespeople, exploring how the oftentimes negative stereotypes impact the attitudes of salespeople. A foreign exchange student in my class chose to compare and contrast the goals and dreams of Americans with the citizens of her home country. Another student chose to examine the emphasis our country tends to place upon physical appearance. A different student chose to analyze the character foils in *Death of a Salesman* with the foils in her favorite graphic novel, *Watchmen*. Finally, I allowed a student to take a more personal stance in his paper, focusing on the effects of suicide on the characters in *Death of a Salesman*, as well as in his own life. Although each of them were encouraged to find their own focus for their paper, they also had a solid foundation of knowledge from our previous class material to turn to when

it came to writing their papers. My role, once again, served as a guide for the students, directing them to resources that would help support their papers. Because I was able to take an active role in formatively assessing students throughout the unit, I had extensive notes of topic ideas and comments that came directly from the students. This data was useful during writing conferences, as well as times when particular students faced difficulty moving ahead on their paper.

### **Creative Project**

The final project focused on the skills and concepts of the unit in a less-structured, non-linear way. Throughout our study of the American Dream, we were able to reach a consensus that the American Dream is oftentimes, different for different people. Factors such as socioeconomic status, age, religion, race, and culture deeply affect one's overall attitude toward the ideals in our society. Just as Arthur Miller seemed to take a rather negative stance on the future of the American Dream in *Death of a Salesman*, while a film such as *The Blind Side*, only reinforced the ideal of the American Dream, the final creative project required students to take a stand and communicate their stance in a creative way. One student chose to write a collection of short stories; another group of students created a documentary. The students not only had fun working in groups on a common goal, but they were challenged to draw conclusions and evaluate their understanding by creating a project to be shared with an audience. This project opened up many doors for discussion on the influence visual media has on our society and the influence of images and the ideas they represent on the perceptions, belief systems, and values in society and within cultures (The Iowa Core Curriculum, 2007).

## Chapter Four

### Results and Findings from Unit

The conclusions I was able to draw from this unit were extensive. Through formative assessment, evaluation of writing assignments, and conversations with students, I was able to see significant increases in levels of engagement, student choice, time spent on assignments, analysis skills, and motivation to participate in class discussions. The classroom environment became a place where students were in the driver's seat; they looked forward to attending class because class was about *them*, and often left class still discussing issues that were brought up during class.

As we know, students do not approach our classrooms as 'blank slates.' Each student sits in our classrooms with conceptual ideas based on their own personal experiences. These ideas are often deeply rooted and resistant to change. Throughout the course of this unit, students gained a deep understanding of the concepts by questioning their inherent conceptual knowledge. They not only deepened their understanding of the literature presented, they learned how to discuss literature. They learned how to write a good question, how to support their opinions with the text, and how to build on their understanding by listening to others.

Inquiry helped the students make connections. What we began to repeatedly see throughout the unit was that the essential questions studied in one unit could be applied to other literary works, whether studied in class or viewed by the students outside of class. Time and time again, students would connect *Death of a Salesman* to other texts. At the culmination of the unit, one student said: "I've been connecting various themes in literature. I've found myself analyzing the books I enjoy reading at home, looking for references to the American

Dream and finding character foils. A lot of books have the same basic few character models, as I discovered from analyzing and comparing *Watchmen* and *Death of a Salesman*.” This student was able to take her learning from the classroom and expand upon it in her daily life, making important connections that gave her confidence in her writing and a new lens to view literature.

Inquiry transformed the class from teacher-centered to student-centered. Although my role as the facilitator was clear, and although I talked more than any other individual student, it was not to *teach* the students about *Death of a Salesman*, *Pleasantville*, or any of the other resources we turned to, but to instead, create opportunities for students to learn and grow as intellectuals.

After reflecting upon several written assignments the students completed at the end of the unit, it was clear that the class discussions had the most significant impact on student learning in my inquiry unit. Because the questions often discussed were open and subject to many interpretations, I found that encouraging class participation was seldom a problem. Oftentimes, I found that the students who were typically more reserved in class were the thinkers, often unable to resist sharing their thoughts on the complexities of the questions in front of them. When asked how the class discussions allowed the students to expand on their prior assumptions, the students had the following to say:

Student 1: The discussions were very useful in expanding our knowledge of the subject matter. I learned a lot about opinions that opposed my own, provided by fellow students. It was like a supercomputer comprised of many different central processing units designed to work faster

and more efficiently; our class combined our mental strengths to create lively, stimulating discussion.

Student 2: I personally did less expanding and more absorbing. The discussions in class definitely allowed me to sort out prior assumptions and expand on them internally. Through this process, I was able to deepen my existing perceptions and ask better questions.

Student 3: I think class discussions are a huge part of the learning process. The student-led discussions really allowed me to make connections between the things we learn in class with the normal lives we live in.

Student 4: It was like a chain reaction. Once someone had an idea and shared it with the class, others wanted to agree or disagree.

Student 5: As I listened to other students' views, I was able to evaluate my own and justify my beliefs with evidence.

The paper writing process during the final weeks of the unit was another effective component of the inquiry unit. As the students discussed their ideas during class, I often took notes of possible thesis statements, arguments, and ideas for great essay topics. Then, as the students prepared to write their analysis or argument essays, I could share ideas that *they* came up with on their own. This boosted confidence, as well as gave them a clear focus and start to a sometimes daunting task. Because the concepts were easily accessible by all students, students of all learning levels were able to take ownership over their ideas and find resources to support their perspectives. By understanding the content of the paper, the students were able to grasp the conventions and formalities of a structured literary analysis paper far more than if they were assigned a paper about an isolated topic.

## Chapter Five

### Conclusions and Recommendations for Future

Inquiry based units completely transformed the way I now look at writing curriculum. My traditional, chronological study of ‘textbook’ American Literature evolved into an issue-based, question-based, inquiry approach to literature. After our study of the American Dream, many questions remained. Questions about how adolescents move to adulthood, or the reasons why many people struggle achieving their American Dream. To end the semester, we used the question, “How do we as citizens in America deal with others who do not share our perspective of truth, nationally or personally?” to investigate a study of the ‘American Teenager.’ We read J.D. Salinger’s, *Catcher in the Rye*, and the students completed in-depth teenage culture studies, researching the marked changes and similarities between teenagers from the 1960s to today.

The entirety of my yearlong American Literature course became shaped by six inquiry based units. Four of them were literature based:

Topic of Unit:	Essential Questions:	Major Texts & Activities:
Unit 1: <i>Culture Wars</i> : Stereotypes & Identity in American Indian Literature	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. How can we define stereotypes? Why do they exist? Where do they stem from?</li><li>2. How do <b>stereotypes</b> influence the American Indian culture? How is this evident in their writing?</li><li>3. How do Native Americans establish an <b>identity</b> within modern society? How do teens?</li><li>4. How can we overcome stereotypes in order to be ourselves?</li></ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. The short works of Sherman Alexie (short stories, newspaper editorials, poetry, film: <i>Smoke Signals</i>)</li><li>2. Film: <i>The Breakfast Club</i></li><li>3. Film: <i>The Searchers</i></li><li>4. <i>The Indian Mascot Issue</i>: A Debate</li><li>5. Extended Definition Essay</li></ol>

<p><b>Unit 2: <i>To Be Great is to Be Misunderstood: Understanding Conformity &amp; the Tran</i></b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What are the costs and benefits of being a nonconformist in our world today?</li> <li>2. Why is it difficult to be 'self-reliant' in our society today?</li> <li>3. How has technology impacted values today?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Into the Wild</i>: film and book study</li> <li>2. Emerson's, <i>Self-Reliance</i>, and Thoreau's, <i>Walden</i> – compare and contrast essay</li> <li>3. Transcendentalism in today's pop culture and music</li> <li>4. Nature journal activity</li> </ol>
<p><b>Unit 3: <i>The American Dream: A Reality or an Illusion</i></b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What is the American Dream? How does one attain it? How has it changed over time?</li> <li>2. How do we limit our dreams? Are our dreams societal or internal?</li> <li>3. Is the American Dream a reality for all?</li> <li>4. Do we as Americans have a moral obligation to help those who face difficulties obtaining their American Dream?</li> <li>5. What is the future of the American Dream? Are you hopeful?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Death of a Salesman</i> by Arthur Miller</li> <li>2. <i>Essay from an American Farmer</i> by Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur</li> <li>3. The poetry of Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, Sherman Alexie</li> <li>4. The music lyrics of Neil Diamond, Bruce Springsteen, Simon &amp; Garfunkel</li> <li>5. <i>Collected Works of Langston Hughes</i></li> <li>6. <i>Nickel &amp; Dimed</i> by Barbara Ehrenreich</li> <li>7. <i>30 Days on Minimum Wage/ Pleasantville</i>- Film Studies</li> <li>8. Literary Analysis &amp; Visual Media Project</li> </ol>
<p><b>Unit 4: <i>The American Teenager; Post WWII through the 21<sup>st</sup> Century</i></b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What does it mean to leave childhood behind?</li> <li>2. Who is the 'American Teenager?' What struggles do they face?</li> <li>3. Why does <i>Catcher in the Rye</i> speak to the adolescent?</li> <li>4. Is life a game? If so, what are the rules? What happens if one doesn't follow the rules?</li> <li>5. How do we as citizens of America and/or individuals deal with others who do not share our perspective of truth (nationally or personally)?</li> <li>6. Is American society responsible for altering our perspective of truth?</li> <li>7. Are we the people society perceives us to be?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. J.D. Salinger's, <i>Catcher in the Rye</i></li> <li>2. Student blog assignments</li> <li>3. Censorship Enrichment Activities</li> <li>4. Persuasive Writing</li> <li>5. Teenage Culture Study</li> </ol>

These units helped form a sense of cohesiveness to the year; it gave the content of the course meaning, allowing the students to make connections and build from one text, topic, or concept, to the next. It eliminated what Jennifer Buehler referred to in her article, "The Power of Questions and the Possibilities of Inquiry in English Education," (2005) as, "limping from one unit to another; there was no larger story I could tell about how my students were growing as readers" (p. 282). It was great to see students build connections from the previous semester's units. For example, during our unit on the American Dream, the students made multiple connections to American Indian writers like Sherman Alexie. Growing up on an Indian reservation, his American Dream was not always an ideal based on freedom and endless opportunity to succeed. Several students made connections to the common stereotypes regarding the American Dream; stereotypes of materialism, social status, and competition. Students were also able to connect to the Transcendentalist philosophy of simplicity, nature, and nonconformity. One day, after role-playing the different main characters in *Death of a Salesman*, a 10<sup>th</sup> grade student said, "Mrs. J, Biff Loman is a Transcendentalist! He's desperately trying to break away from the social norms and expectations put into place by his father! He is a nonconformist; Instead of going into business and succeeding based on income and wealth, Biff wants to work a carefree job in the outdoors." These connections not only allowed the students to gain a deep, conceptual understanding of the literature being studied, but it helped students see a *purpose* for studying it.

In addition to the four, guided inquiry units, I also decided to give the students a chance to create their own inquiry projects. One of the essential skills required of the Iowa Core Curriculum's literacy standards includes students independently reading a number of different

genres of books throughout their high school education. An advocate for encouraging free reading in high schools, I wanted the students to do more than just *read*. I wanted the students to do more than read a book of their choice and write a superficial journal reflection on what they read. I wanted students to read independently and engage in a number of different books; however, I wanted them to inquire and create as they read. This led to the creation of the independent inquiry project. Students were required to choose a topic about the world today that intrigued them. After choosing their topic, students shaped it into their own essential question. Then, they created a 'unit' of study, choosing two books, a classic and contemporary, one film, and two other written sources. Finally, through a project of their choice, the students had to make connections and draw conclusions from their five sources.

Here are a few samples of the projects the students created:

<b>Student:</b>	<b>Essential Question/Inquiry Topic:</b>	<b>Contemporary Literature Selection:</b>	<b>Classic Literature Selection:</b>	<b>Film Study Selection:</b>
Student 1	What leading factors ruin relationships?	<i>Speak</i> ; Laurie Halse Anderson	<i>Romeo &amp; Juliet</i> ; William Shakespeare	<i>Revolutionary Road</i>
Student 2	What are the different ways people are dehumanized in society?	<i>Maus I &amp; II</i>	<i>Fahrenheit 451</i>	<i>The Laramie Project</i>
Student 3	Can social alienation bring about unity?	<i>Trainspotting</i>	<i>The Catcher in the Rye</i> ; J.D. Salinger	<i>Donnie Darko</i>
Student 4	What are the boundaries between ethics and artificial life?	<i>The House of the Scorpion</i>	<i>Frankenstein</i> ; Mary Shelley	<i>Edward Scissorhands</i>
Student 5	What lessons can be learned from death?	<i>Tuesdays with Morrie</i> ; Mitch Albom	<i>The Awakening</i> ; Kate Chopin	<i>It's a Wonderful Life</i>

After selecting and creating their inquiry project, the students wrote an inquiry paper, examining their essential question by referring to each of their sources. In addition to the paper component, I required the students to create a multi-genre presentation to share their ideas with their peers. Through this project, I was able to draw many of the same connections

Buehler wrote about:

Seeing what Amanda was capable of as a reader – her ability to explore the complexities of characters’ lives in relation to their own, to identify the larger issues books raised for her to think about, and to articulate what her reading did for her – made me all the more aware of the ways that English classes tend to ignore rather than encourage these capabilities...I am convinced that if the work of the English class doesn’t support students in finding books that resonate with them, doesn’t challenge students to articulate the connections they find between the books they read and their own important questions, and doesn’t provide students with the tools that everyday readers use to make their reading processes meaningful, then the English class will not serve the majority of high school students in lasting ways. (2005, p. 284)

### **Final Remarks**

Coalition research scholar, Grant Wiggins, firmly believes the idea of a question-driven, inquiry approach to teaching and learning should be at the heart of a school’s mission. In examining one of the chief questions of a school’s mission, that is, ‘What are the aims of a high school curriculum,’ Wiggins says it must involve getting students to “use their minds well” (Cushman, 1989). Wiggins says that, “students should emerge from their high school career

with an integrated vision of *how to think* within the culture, which implies a broad understanding, not just narrow or rote expertise” (Cushman, 1989). In order for this type of curriculum to essentially ‘work’ in schools, classroom teachers, professional development leaders, and English educators must develop a similar, question-driven professional development plan. “Because the process of classroom inquiry is difficult to sustain when individual teachers are working alone, the field of English education needs to foster communities of inquiry. Professional growth and educational change become most possible when groups of teachers come together to reflect, to question, and to devise a collective course of action” (Buehler, 2005, p. 286). In a professional development environment built around growth and change, an inquiry based curriculum has the power to transform curriculum.

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