resource room

Inquiry-Based: An Easy Method to Get Started

By Catherine Sherlock

WildBC Facilitator and Communications and Sustainability Consultant

One of the central ideas of inquiry-based learning is that students' questions and ideas are at the core of their learning experience.

Like anything new, inquiry-based learning can feel awkward initially — for both teachers and students.

For teachers, the inquiry-based process is a lot more open ended (ie. scary!). Teachers take on more of a learning facilitator role.

Students who have become used to sitting back passively and being told what to do may also find the change unnerving. Some teachers in our programs have reported that sometimes it's the students who thrived under the old system who struggle most with the transition. One noted that it upended the classroom dynamics, and it was amusing to watch previous academic strugglers explaining and helping out the traditional academic achievers.

I recently experienced some new insights on inquiry-based learning at one of our own HCTF Education workshops. Our facilitator divided us into groups and gave each group an animal skull. We were instructed not to identify the skull, but rather to develop a list of questions about it.

There was a bit of resistance to this instruction. Even some noticeable squirming. After all, many of us are scientists and naturalists: we like identifying

stuff. One participant voiced her internal conflict: "As a scientist, my first instinct is to identify what animal it's from, but we were told not to do that."

We turned our attention to the skull and started brainstorming questions. It was very slow at first. Then suddenly, we were spewing out questions faster than our recorder could record.

"How many inventions and breakthroughs have occurred because someone probed more deeply?"

Midway through the exercise, I noticed something thought-provoking. I've spent more than your average amount of time looking at animal skulls. Loads of instructors and speakers have shown them in courses and presentations I've attended. I regularly stumble across animal bones when I'm hiking. I've checked them out in museums. And I've personally used them many times to teach others in environmental education and naturalist programs.

But as we developed questions, I started really looking at our skull. In a much deeper way.

Then it happened. I became engaged.

It moved from being an exercise for us adults to me really wondering about some of the questions.

- What was that formation?
- Why would it develop that way?
- What purpose did it serve?

I was looking at things I'd never really noticed or wondered about and was curious about the how, the why and the what.

As I pondered the process, I thought about the bigger meaning of this for human society. How many inventions and breakthroughs have occurred because someone probed more deeply? Because someone didn't accept a pat answer or questioned a long-held assumption? I realized how profoundly humanity needs these skills in our world.

Then the facilitator encouraged us to begin wrapping it up with the "3-minutes-left-in-the-exercise" announcement.

By then the scientists could hold back no longer. There was a brief discussion about what animal they thought the skull came from and a group consensus.

And a funny thing happened: once the skull was labeled with an identification, the interest in it evaporated. It was carefully wrapped back up and handed it back in.

Musing over this observation, I recognized there was also lesson in that. It reinforced what I've often heard: that we rush to label things and then dismiss them once we've tacked on a label as if we really know them. It's like we experience a discomfort in having an unknown and once we pigeonhole it, we feel we can place it neatly in a box and put it out of mind.

But our truth as humans is that our knowledge is quite limited. Developing a comfort level with recognizing we don't know keeps us open to discovering much more. We don't know where inquiring minds will take us, but we do know it's a skill we need for the challenges and opportunities ahead.