The Inquiry Brief Litmus Test

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Welcome to the Inquiry Brief Litmus Test!

- Engagement in teacher inquiry is a core part of the work one does as a teacher.

- Inquiry is systematic, intentional study by teachers of their own practice.

- The process begins with the articulation of a wondering, a burning question that you, a practitioner inquirer, have about your practice.
• Once teacher inquirers develop a question, the next step is to develop a plan for their inquiries.

• This plan often takes the form of “an inquiry brief.”
An inquiry brief is a one-two page outline for your inquiry. It usually includes the following:

– A paragraph that provides the background for your inquiry and ends with a purpose statement.

– A statement of your Question/Wondering(s).

– An articulation of any intervention/action/activity you plan to try.

– An articulation of the ways you will collect data.

– A timeline for how your study will unfold.
• Similar to the wondering litmus test, the inquiry brief litmus test in this tutorial consists of a series of questions that will help you refine your plan for inquiry until you feel you have established the best possible route for your inquiry journey.
• Begin by creating an inquiry brief and printing it out to keep by your side as you progress through this tutorial.*

• You can edit your plan and make notes to yourself on this document as you answer each question in the litmus test.

* Note: A sample inquiry brief can be found on pages 113-114 of *The Reflective Educator’s Guide to Classroom Research* (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009).
Litmus Test Question One

Do your data collection strategies align with your wondering and all other aspects of your inquiry plan?
• When developing a plan for your inquiry, it’s important that each piece of your inquiry is in alignment with the others.

• For example, if the dilemma that led to your wondering was the quest to increase one of your learning disabled student’s multiplication fact fluency while simultaneously helping that student develop conceptual understanding of multiplication, you wouldn’t do activities with the students focused on fractions and decimals, and wouldn’t incorporate a progress monitoring tool designed to trace reading fluency.
• While this might seem like an outlandish example, it can be challenging to select data collection strategies that tightly align with your wondering and your plan for action, since teaching and learning are such complicated endeavors, and there are so many questions we could explore, actions we can try, and potential data sources we could invoke to understand our actions and the impact we are having on student learning!
• Putting together your plan for inquiry is like the old children’s song “The Old Lady Who Swallowed the Fly.”

• In this song, one fascinating swallowing of an object leads logically and sequentially to the next, building throughout the song to the swallowing of a cow . . .
She swallowed the cow to catch the goat...
She swallowed the goat to catch the dog...
She swallowed the dog to catch the cat...
She swallowed the cat to catch the bird ...

She swallowed the bird to catch the spider
That wiggled and wiggled and tickled inside her.

She swallowed the spider to catch the fly.

But I dunno why she swallowed that fly
Perhaps she'll die.
• Your inquiry should be designed to work just like the old lady, swallowing away in a planned, intentional, systematic and connected way . . .

• Your background dilemma, wondering, data collection and analysis strategies should all flow logically from each individual component of your inquiry plan to the next.
• The strategies you are invoking to collect data should make perfect sense in relationship to the statement of your wondering . . .

• Your wondering should flow naturally and logically from your description of an issue, tension, problem or dilemma in your teaching practice that led to your inquiry . . .

• Your selection of a teaching action, intervention, or strategy that you might try should make perfect sense in relationship to your articulated dilemma and wondering . . .

• The data you collect and analyze should emerge naturally from the action/intervention,strategy you employ . . .
Before continuing with the litmus test, look carefully at your inquiry brief.

Do all components of your inquiry align with one another?

If not, adjust and tweak individual components of your inquiry until each component aligns logically with the next.
Litmus Test Question Two

• Are you utilizing multiple forms of data to gain insights into your wondering?
Throughout the litmus test questions about wondering development and inquiry plan design so far, we’ve been reminded over and over again about the complexity inherent in the acts of teaching and learning as a primary reason engagement in inquiry is such an important part of teaching in the first place!

Teacher researchers inquire because they want to untangle some of that great complexity inherent in their daily work and engage in a continuous cycle of improvement, truly becoming the best teachers they can be!
As teacher researchers work to untangle the complexities of teaching, they know that any one data source, no matter what that data source is and how much stock others put into that data source (such as scores on a standardized test or observational notes that a teacher takes as she carefully observes a student at work), can only provide a limited perspective on the acts of teaching and learning.

Hence, most teacher researchers choose to utilize more than one source of data to gain insights into their wonderings, with perhaps one of the most prevalent data sources simply being student work.
• **Before continuing with the litmus test**, look carefully at your inquiry brief.

• *Have you incorporated more than one data collection strategy into your inquiry plan?*

• If not, consider the multiple possibilities that exist for data collection listed on the next slide and add additional data collection strategies to your plan that will inform your research.
Possible Data Collection Strategies

- Student Work
- Field Notes/Anecdotal Notes/Running Records
- Documents (such as lesson plans, curriculum guides, school policy, textbooks, IEPs, district memos, parent newsletters, progress reports, teacher plans books, and correspondence to and from parents, the principals, and specialists)
- Interviews (individual and group)
- Digital Pictures
- Video
- Reflective Journals
- Weblogs
- Surveys
- Quantitative Measures of Student Achievement (standardized test scores, assessment measures including progress monitoring tools, and grades)
- Feedback from Colleagues (often obtained through learning community or critical friend group work)
Litmus Test Question Three

• Does one of the forms of data you will collect include literature and/or have you already utilized literature to frame your wondering?
• Although we often do not think of literature as data, literature offers an opportunity to think about how your work as a teacher inquirer is informed by, and connected to, the work of others.

• No one teaches or inquires in a vacuum. . .
When teachers inquire, their work is situated within a large, rich, preexisting knowledge base that is captured in such things as books, journal articles, newspaper articles, conference papers, and Web sites.

Looking at this preexisting knowledge base on teaching informs your study.

Literature is an essential form of data that every teacher inquirer should use as to be connected to, informed by, and a contributor to the larger conversation about educational practice.
• **Before continuing with the litmus test**, look carefully at your inquiry brief.

• *Have you incorporated the exploration of literature into your plan?*

• If not, start collecting literature. Ask your teaching colleagues and/or support personnel in your district (such as the math coach, reading coach, PD Director, etc.) for recommendations of literature that connect to your inquiry topic and might inform your work. You may also utilize a search engine such as Google Scholar to find research related to your study.
Litmus Test Question Four

• Is the design of your study “experimental?”
• When teachers hear the word “research,” one image that is often conjured in their minds is that of a scientist in a lab coat, formulating hypotheses and setting up comparison groups – one to receive a “treatment,” and one to remain “the control.”
Because the word “research” carries so much baggage with it, it is not uncommon for first time teacher researchers to be drawn to traditional experimental study designs in the early stages of developing a plan for their research, assigning a child or group of children to continue business as usual in the classroom (serving as a control group) and a child or group of children to engage with the teacher in a new program, intervention or activity that is the subject of study.
Yet, rarely does it make sense for an action research study to take an experimental form, as teacher action research is generally about capturing the natural actions that occur in the busy, real world of the classroom.

In addition, by and large, a single teacher’s classroom usually is not a ripe place to design an experimental study since the sample size utilized in the study generally would not be adequate to indicate any statistical differences, and any one treatment variable would almost be impossible to isolate from intervening variables.
Finally, one would need to question the ethics of providing a potentially beneficial “treatment” to some children within a classroom but not to all.
• *Before continuing with the litmus test*, look carefully at your inquiry brief.

• Is your study designed with a “comparison” and “control” group?

• If so, try reframing the study design to capture natural actions that are occurring in the busy, real world of your classroom.
Litmus Test Question Five

• *Is the inquiry plan doable?*
The inquiry process is definitely one that causes energy and excitement for many teachers when they are given the opportunity to take charge of their own professional learning, sometimes for the first time in their careers!

This energy and excitement can sometimes lead to “Inquiry Overboard Syndrome.” Inquiry Overboard Syndrome occurs when a teacher gets so caught up in the possibilities when planning her research that the inquiry plan ends up resembling a plan for a doctoral dissertation or even an entire book!
• Teacher researchers know that a certain amount of realism is an important ingredient to planning an inquiry.

• Furthermore, practitioner researchers have the potential to make real and lasting impact on classroom practice only when engagement in inquiry becomes a part of teaching practice, rather than exist apart from it.

• Hence, a plan for inquiry must be doable and include the collection of reasonable amounts and reasonable types of data. Whenever possible, data collection strategies should emerge from what is a natural part of the teaching act already (such as the generation of student work).
Before continuing with the litmus test, look carefully at your inquiry brief.

Is what you are planning reasonable to accomplish given all of the many responsibilities that are already a part of your teaching work day?

If not, work to downsize your inquiry and limit your inquiry goals and aspirations to something that is reasonable to accomplish.

Remember, inquiry is a cycle -- You don’t have to do everything in one pass through the cycle!
Litmus Test Question Six

• Have you considered the possibilities of detours to your inquiry plan and built into your plan the flexibility necessary to take detours, if necessary, along the way?
Keep in mind that although you have utilized the first five inquiry brief litmus test questions to fine-tune the roadmap for your study, it is not uncommon for unexpected happenings to occur as you engage in the process of inquiry that may require you to take a detour from your plan.
• While you really can’t plan for the unexpected, teacher researchers know that it is perfectly natural and normal to make shifts in plans as an inquiry unfolds.

• Rarely does any teacher inquirer articulate a perfect plan on paper that is tightly constructed and plays out exactly as originally planned initially.
• The value of the inquiry brief is not to create a perfectly articulated document that will play out exactly as planned, but to get something down on paper to get you started on the next leg of your inquiry journey.

• As you begin to collect data and learn something that might shift the course of your journey, shift away!

• Have the courage to take detours in your plan if what you are learning from your data indicates that it is desirable and necessary to do so.
Congratulations!

• You’ve completed the Inquiry Brief Litmus Test!

• On to data collection! Happy Inquiring!

Great Job!