The Wondering Litmus Test

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Welcome to the Wondering Litmus Test!

• Engagement in practitioner inquiry enables educators to take charge of their own professional learning and contribute to the knowledge base for teaching.

• Inquiry is systematic, intentional study by educators 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.
• While you may have already articulated the question that you wish to explore through the process of inquiry, it’s important to remember that . . .
“Rarely does any teacher researcher eloquently state his or her wondering immediately. It takes time, brainstorming, and actually ‘playing’ with the question. . . By playing with the wording of a wondering, teachers often fine-tune and discover more detail about the subject they are really passionate about understanding.”

- Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2010, p. 57-58
• It is important to take some time to “play” with your question!

• The purpose of this tutorial is to help you do so by taking the “wondering litmus test.”
The Wondering Litmus Test

• Chemists utilize a litmus test to determine if a substance is an acid or a base.

• You will use a litmus test to determine if the articulation of your wondering is truly valuable for gaining insights into your teaching and for meeting the learning needs of all students in your classroom or school this year.
• The wondering litmus test consists of a series of questions that help you reframe and refine your wondering until you have clearly and concisely articulated a question that generates excitement, enthusiasm, and intrigue.
• Begin by writing down the question you have developed to explore this year on a piece of scrap paper.

• Keep this paper by your side as you consider your wondering in relationship to each of the litmus test questions.

• You can use this scrap paper to tweak or even change your wondering as you progress through the litmus test.
Litmus Test Question One

• *Is your wondering something you are passionate about exploring?*
Because the acts of teaching and learning are complex, engaging in teaching and simultaneously studying the act as you are in the midst of it is challenging and difficult.

For that reason, teacher inquirers need to be passionate about what they choose to explore through inquiry. Being passionate about your topic will provide you the energy needed to sustain your research over time.
• **Before continuing with the litmus test**, look carefully at your wondering.

• **Did you chose a topic for study that you are passionate about exploring so you won’t lose the commitment necessary to sustain your research over time?**

• If not, talk to your teaching colleagues to figure out an inquiry question that piques your curiosity and ignites your passion for the provision of powerful instruction for your students.
Litmus Test Question Two

• Does your wondering relate to and build upon your school improvement plan, school goals, individual professional development plan, and/or district initiatives?
• While it is important to be passionate about the inquiry question, it is also important to remember that you are not engaging in the process of inquiry solely as an *individual*.

• Your school and your district have made a simultaneous commitment to continued improvement that can be achieved only through a *collective* effort by all.
• Because you are engaging in the process of teacher inquiry as a part of the your district and school’s commitment to excellence, it is important that your wondering build upon work that is ongoing in your individual school and/or your entire district.
• By tying your inquiry to the larger goals of your school and district, you will not only meet the learning needs of students in your individual classroom but also help your school and your district meet goals set for the organization as a whole.
• **Before continuing with the litmus test,** look carefully at your wondering.

• **Does your wondering relate to and/or build directly upon school improvement goals or district initiatives, helping you to synthesize the individual learning you are doing within your classroom with collective school and district goals?**

• If not, tweak your wondering so it aligns more closely with one or more school or district initiatives.
Litmus Test Question Three

• *Is your wondering focused on student learning?*
• The goal for everything you do as a teacher is student learning and growth.

• However, because the complexity of teaching springs forth many possibilities for exploration for every teacher inquirer, sometimes wonderings aren’t directly related to student learning/academic achievement and may instead focus on such things as behavior management, time management, and parent involvement.
While things like behavior and time management and parent involvement play a huge role in the classroom and are worthy topics for exploration through the process of inquiry, it’s essential to be sure that your wondering relates clearly to student learning so that, as teacher inquirers, you never lose sight of your goal – student learning and growth.
Before continuing with the litmus test, look carefully at your Wondering.

• Does your Wondering relate to the learning of your students in some way?

• If not, talk to your colleagues to develop ideas for explicitly connecting your original Wondering to student learning.
Litmus Test Question Four

- *Is your wondering a REAL question (a question whose answer is not known?)*
• When teachers embark on practitioner inquiry for the first time, they often begin the inquiry journey in a comfortable place, for example, focusing attention on a pedagogical approach to learning that has been successful in the past.
• Teachers often begin in their comfort zone because it feels safe, even empowering, to have the opportunity to document some of the great teaching and learning that is occurring in the classroom.

• However, if you stay on this path, you risk investing time and energy into an inquiry that will merely confirm something you already know rather than leading to new discoveries about your teaching.
Before continuing with the litmus test, look carefully at your wondering.

Is the wondering you selected something that, deep down, you already know the answer to?

If so, work to reframe or refocus your wondering in a more productive and valuable way.
Litmus Test Question Five

• *Is the wondering focused on your own practice?*
• In addition to the common practice of teachers beginning the inquiry process in their “comfort zone,” they also often focus their initial wondering on factors they may be frustrated about related to the teaching and learning context.

• When this happens, rather than being focused *inward* on one’s own teaching practice, a wondering might end up being focused *outward*, and framed around controlling or changing others (administrators, teaching colleagues, parents or students).
• The problem with a wondering that is focused outward on changing the actions and behaviors of others is that the actions of others are outside of a teacher’s control.

• An important premise of practitioner inquiry is that the only person a teacher can “control” is him/herself.

• Wonderings that focus on changing the behavior of others rarely lead to the important self discoveries about teaching that inquiry can reveal.
• *Before continuing with the litmus test,* look carefully at your wondering.

• Is your wondering focusing on *controlling* or *changing* the behavior of others?

• If so, try reframing the wondering in a way that helps you *understand* (rather than control) the behavior of others and which allows you to discover what *you* can do with those new understandings.
Litmus Test Question Six

- Is your wondering phrased as a dichotomous (yes/no) question?
• Recall that one of the major reasons educators engage in inquiry is because teaching and learning are inherently complex activities.

• Practitioner inquirers know that because teaching and learning are complex, it’s usually counterproductive to pose a wondering that requires a simple yes/no answer.
• As inquirers, educators do not solely ask if an intervention works.

• Teachers know that, when working with students, conditions are so variable that an activity that “works” with one learner might not work with another, and a lesson that “works” one year or even in one class period might fail in the next.
• As inquirers, educators are interested in finding out how and why something is working or not working, and even posing the question, “What does it mean for something to work in the first place?”

• To honor the great complexity inherent in teaching and learning, teacher inquirers generally do not phrase their wonderings as yes/no questions.
• **Before continuing with the litmus test,** look carefully at your wondering.

• *Is your wondering phrased as a simple yes/no question?*

• If you have framed your initial question in dichotomous terms, try reframing it using one of the following phrases:
  
  • *In what ways does* . . .
  • *What is the relationship between* . . .
  • *How do students experience* . . .
  • *What happens when* . . .
  • *How does* . . .
Litmus Test Question Seven

• *Is your wondering specific?*
• While teacher inquirers generally work to phrase their wonderings in an open-ended manner, they also work to make the wondering as specific as possible.

• Continuing to play with your wondering as the design of your study evolves and adding specific details to the framing of your wondering helps you communicate clearly the details of your study to other inquirers.
• Three key components you may wish to include in your wondering are:
  – Participants (e.g., third grade learners)
  – Intervention/Strategy/Action
  – Targeted Skills/Knowledge/Ability Outcomes

• Often these details are easy to work into your wondering as you think about other aspects of your study – your plan of action, how you will collect and analyze data, and a timeline for your inquiry.
• Keep close at hand this wondering that you’ve refined as you worked through this litmus test and, as you continue to flesh out other components of your inquiry, consider returning to your wondering to make it more specific.
Congratulations!

• You’ve completed the Wondering Litmus Test!

• Continue to refine your wondering as you design your study!

Great Job!