

RE/DIS-COVERING THE PROMISE OF FREEDOM THROUGH INQUIRY – PART 1

By Darryl Toerien and Lee FitzGerald



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This article asserts that it is through inquiry learning that education can regain its promise of intellectual freedom, alongside, not in opposition to, Explicit teaching. (Please note that Explicit teaching is the term we've used in this article and the next one, although Explicit teaching is often termed Explicit or Direct Instruction. The NSW Department of Education uses the term Explicit teaching). **We invite you to share this article widely in your schools, with your Principal, with Heads of Department and Teachers.** Part 2 of this article, to appear in the December issue of ACCESS, will be addressed to Teacher Librarians (TLs) specifically.

What is inquiry?

It is "a stance of wonder and puzzlement that gives rise to a dynamic process of coming to know and understand the world and ourselves in it as the basis for responsible participation in community" (Stripling & Toerien, 2021), which is a fundamental human response to the world we find ourselves in.

What is inquiry learning?

Inquiry learning is more than a set of skills, more than an information literacy model, but rather, is a pedagogical model aligning the content taught in a school to one of a very limited number of models that truly deal with inquiry learning as a whole school pedagogy. This is a rare state of affairs in Australian schools, except for those which operate the International Baccalaureate, in which "inquiry, as a curriculum stance, [pervades] all programmes"

(Tilke, 2011, p. 5). But it is true that inquiry is pervasive in the Australian Curriculum, at least in Science, History and Geography. (Lupton, 2012; FitzGerald, 2015). What is the best way of ensuring that students gain and maintain the necessary competencies to address tasks involving inquiry? This article suggests that it is by using an inquiry learning model in schools, supported by your library and TL.

What is the case for an inquiry learning model in schools?

■ Unease about education and the information environment

Against a backdrop of student issues such as absenteeism, including school refusal, wellbeing and behaviour challenges, reported on frequently, is there a feeling of unease amongst educators about the information environment students are living in? Are we afraid our students may not have the skills to navigate an information environment characterised by “total noise” on the one hand – the “tsunami of available fact, context and perspective” (Wallace, 2007) – and misinformation and untruth on the other?

Other common misgivings amongst educators, such as these ideas:

- You can't force students to learn.
- They can only learn from curiosity.
- Misinformation abounds in a totally un sound information world.
- Untruth and dangerous manipulation of personal identity occurs in social media unchecked.
- AI has enhanced the ease of cheating. How can the positives of AI be included?
- There is a prevalence of assessment that depends on rote learning. How can this be a valid response to the limitless nature of information, and how can it prepare students for the world of work ahead of them?

In its strategic plan, the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) (2022) notes the following urgent global education challenge:

Curricula and assessment processes continue to be heavily skewed toward

transmissive teaching and passive, reproductive learning. In the curricula of many countries, the memorisation of facts and routines, although important, takes overwhelming precedence, leaving limited time and space for the development of deeper conceptual understandings, critical and creative thinking, and skills in applying knowledge. In almost all countries there is now a high level of interest in providing learners with a broader range of competencies and attributes, as well as improved levels of personal wellbeing, to better equip every learner for their future.

In this regard, Darryl notes:

The process of acquiring knowledge, or learning, is not merely memorisation and reproduction in tests. This is sobering, because it raises questions about the extent to which we conflate [them], and the extent to which our instructional efforts and resources are directed at memorisation and reproduction in tests. Given the near-total reduction of learning to this, it perversely seems that whatever sophistication we may have gained in our understanding of learning from the ‘science of learning’ has not been directed towards engaging students in the learning process of acquiring knowledge, but in engineering learning through the teaching process. This threatens to make true Ivan Illich’s exaggerated accusation that the principal lesson that school teaches is the need to be taught (Illich, 1971). Our first and foremost task is to engage students in the learning process of acquiring knowledge, which is fundamentally an inquiry process, and empowering them to do so. This is challenging, as it inverts much of what we do, and how we do it (Toerien, 2024).

To what extent does the present emphasis on Explicit teaching impact a true inquiry learning program?

Barshay (2024) gives a sound summary of the debate over Explicit teaching, which has been to the detriment of inquiry learning, pointing

to the sensible conclusion that both can and do and should exist alongside each other. As Toerien (2020) points out:

Unfortunately, educational debate in this area is very polarised, and each side describes the other in caricature. **Instructionists** on one side are described as believing that knowledge is king and the **only** purpose of teaching is to transmit knowledge from one generation to the next, and **constructivists** on the other are described as believing that it is not possible to transmit knowledge effectively, so let's not bother at all and teach skills instead. As is generally the case, caricatures are unhelpful and inaccurate and stop us engaging with the genuine arguments, so we end up needing to pick a side, rather than locate ourselves on an educational spectrum... Direct instruction is **not** the only alternative to **minimally guided inquiry**. **Guided** inquiry is an excellent and highly successful alternative. (We need)...greater clarity about what inquiry is, and is not, which is what much of the criticism from Explicit teaching is directed at (i.e., poorly designed and supported inquiry, or something that passes for inquiry, but isn't).

And as John Dewey (1956, p. 17) concluded, long ago now: "the fundamental issue is not of new versus old education, not of progressive against traditional education, but a question of what anything whatsoever must be to be worthy of the name of *education*".

Degraded experiences of inquiry learning

There have been iterations of inquiry learning in schools that may well have led Explicit teaching theorists to their dismissive attitude to inquiry learning, and this might also be the case in many schools. Postman (1969, 1979, 1996) made a list of these, and included as the last one, a prescient warning about too much focus on direct instruction. The list includes:

- divorcing inquiry as a dynamic process and skills from learning important content
- reducing inquiry to a mechanical process divorced from a spirit of wonder and puzzlement

- divorcing inquiry from *both* a spirit of wonder and puzzlement *and* a dynamic process and skills, and so reducing it to a thoughtless fact-finding activity
- overengineering learning through teaching methods based on 'hard evidence' from the field of cognitive science.

The TL role in inquiry learning

There is a great deal of misunderstanding about the TL role in general, amongst school leaders, teachers and students, and even amongst TMs, and the greatest level of misunderstanding is in the inquiry learning role. A 2017 literature review (Dobber et al, 2017, p. 194) highlighted difficulties many teachers have in how to implement an inquiry approach in their teaching. TMs in Australia at least have long been involved in inquiry learning and are uniquely qualified to add to the mix of skills needed for inquiry, given that they are all trained in information fluency, inquiry learning, as well as being qualified teachers. However, there is a continuing lack of awareness from the school community that they have in the TL a partner who can provide the support teachers need at all stages of an inquiry unit, from design to assessment. As Monteil-Overall confirmed (2010), "In general, teachers do not appear to be aware of how teachers and [teacher] librarians are expected to work together nor of the underlying reasons for teacher and [teacher] librarian collaboration" (p.32).

Monteil-Overall (2005) presents the ideal involvement of TMs in inquiry learning, as Model D, Integrated curriculum, where an inquiry program based on an inquiry learning model is embedded throughout the school. Research (Garrison & FitzGerald, 2021) surveyed 109 TMs across the country, which showed that while many TMs are involved in inquiry learning, from discrete information skills lessons, to collaborative involvement in the design, teaching and, to a lesser extent, assessment of inquiry learning units, such high-level collaboration is rarely achieved. The main reasons seem to be pressure of content-driven syllabuses, a lack of expectation that the TM will be a collaborative partner right through the inquiry learning unit of work, and now, a perceived divide between inquiry learning and Explicit teaching.

If an inquiry learning model is essential to learning, why don't more schools base their curriculum on such a model?

Darryl comments:

In my experience – including 13 years in a school offering British A-Levels alongside the IB Diploma Programme, and in our last two years, the 3-year IB Middle Years Programme leading to British GCSEs – a school is always only more or less supportive of an inquiry stance and process. This is because schools are made up of individuals, some of whom are in leadership positions, who will be more or less committed to an inquiry stance and process, and this includes TLs. This situation is complicated by confusion about what inquiry actually is, and how to effectively support it. This means that any given school is educationally always a more or less contested space – who and what is education for, and how do we best achieve that? – with more or less fruitful collaborations, and this is even before we get down to practical challenges like levels of staffing and funding, which need to be balanced against competing instructional priorities. This admits to no easy answer, but I draw strength from Dallas Willard's observation that reality is what we have to deal with, and that the only true measure of success is dealing with reality (2014).

What does an inquiry learning program look like?

An inquiry learning program will be based on an inquiry learning model, such as the Stripling Model of Inquiry; FOSIL; The Alberta Model of Inquiry; and Guided Inquiry Design. The number of true inquiry learning models is small, because they are wider in their meaning than information literacy, or information skills. They are characterised by being part of a whole school pedagogical approach which is focused on inquiry, such as may be found in IB schools.

Stripling (2017) describes an inquiry learning program:

Providing a framework of the inquiry process is only the first step in empowering students to pursue inquiry on their own. The next step is to structure teaching around a framework of the literacy, inquiry, critical thinking, and technology skills that students must develop at each phase of inquiry over their years of school and in the context of content area learning (p. 52).

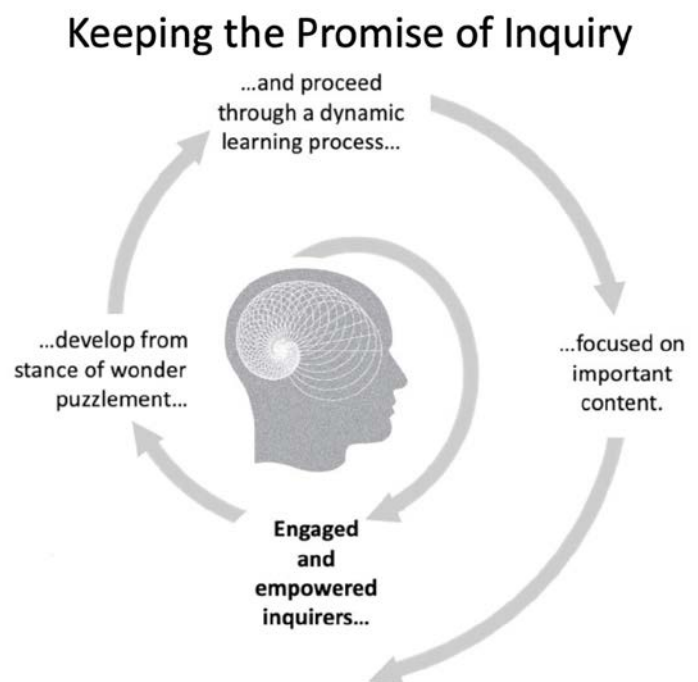


Figure 1: FOSIL spiral of authentic inquiry learning

■ An inquiry learning program begins with the school vision and mission statement:

The inquiry-based learning program at Blanchelande College, a PK-12 school, is the logical outworking of our statement of purpose – our distinctive reason for being as expressed in our Mission and Aims – which is to enable “terminal freedom...the fulfillment of the deepest potentialities of the human being in the world” (Maritain, 1962, p. 10). This affirms that the students who graduate from school are immeasurably more than the sum of the measurable grades that they graduate with, which is not to devalue the latter. Rather, this values grades subordinately as a means to the end of the terminal freedom, which is visualised in the Portraits of an Engaged and Empowered Inquirer at Grades 12, 8, 5, and 2 (Figure 2 | tinyurl.com/38xatkfv to enlarge).

Portrait of an Engaged and Empowered Inquirer at Year 13 (Grade 12)

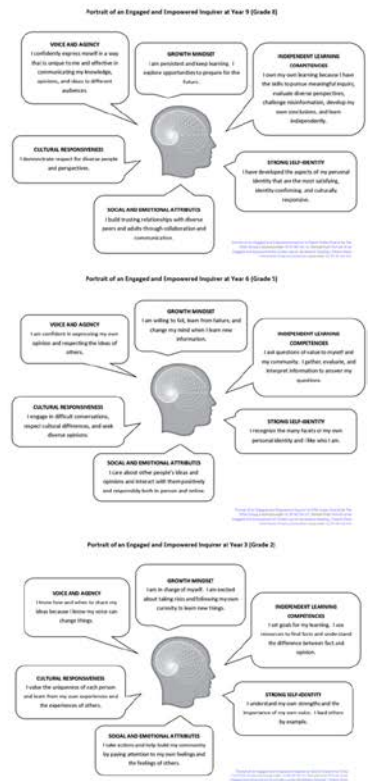
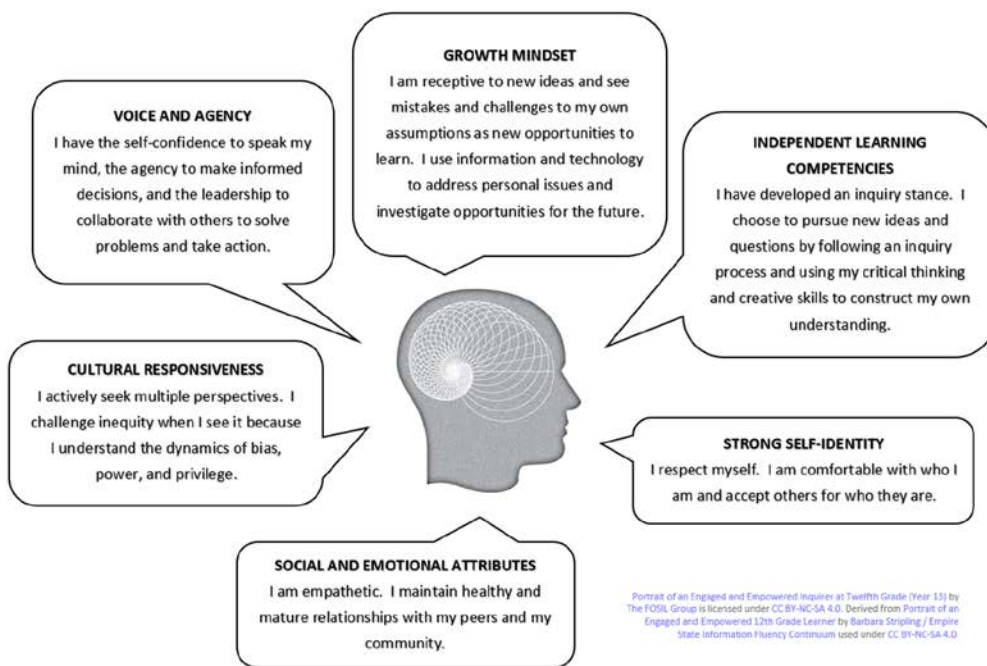


Figure 2: Portrait of an engaged and empowered inquirer at Grades 12, 8, 5 and 2

Inquiry, then, is a stance and process that is directed towards learning disciplinary content, and in doing so students develop as engaged and empowered inquirers. Figure 3 (tinyurl.com/mr4nb2rd to enlarge) shows how the Portrait Attributes of an Engaged and Empowered Inquirer, which are developed systematically and progressively through collaborative curricular and extra-curricular inquiry, increase terminal freedom.

The program is built around interdisciplinary Signature Work inquiries in transition years, namely Grades 1, 5, 8 and 12, although Signature Work is not limited to transition years. Signature Work is inquiry that is directed towards understanding a problem or question of deep personal interest and as such, it proudly bears its maker’s mark in the form of their signature, which vouches for the maker’s integrity and guarantees the authenticity of their work. It is interdisciplinary because there are inevitably meaningful curricular links between two or more academic disciplines when the subject-matter of school is actually “Life in

all its manifestations” (Whitehead, 1929, p. 10). Signature Work, especially in transition years, enables us to benchmark the purposeful development of priority inquiry skills, which forms the backbone of inquiry-based learning throughout the school, whether curricular or extracurricular (Figure 4 | tinyurl.com/2ymzp72y to enlarge).

Reflections on these Signature Work inquiries, and others, may be found in the FOSIL Group forums, specifically:

- Extended and Higher Project Qualifications <tinyurl.com/3sa7h4s6>
- Year 12 (Grade 11) Interrogang!? Inquiry Course <tinyurl.com/ypf36a6p>
- Year 9 (Grade 8) Interdisciplinary Signature Work Inquiry <tinyurl.com/rncyxzsu>
- Year 6 (Grade 5) Interdisciplinary Signature Work Inquiry <tinyurl.com/4avpncs>
- Year 1 (Grade K) Signature Work Inquiry <tinyurl.com/4mwe8pz4>

The inquiry-based learning program is supported by and enacted through the following:

- Curriculum Planning and Preparation Policy
- Academic Integrity Policy
- Extension Policy
- Appraisal Policy and Procedure
- Unit Plan Template (Essential Questions, as well as explicit reference to FOSIL Inquiry Cycle Skill Sets)
- Lesson Plan Template
- Regular contributions to teaching staff professional development sessions
- Annual report to the Education Sub-Committee of the Governing Board
- Attendance at all SLT Academic Strategy Meetings.

For a more in-depth discussion of FOSIL, which includes its philosophical, epistemological and pedagogical foundation, see *As We Begin, So Shall We Go: FOSIL as Means to a Transcendent Honourable End* (Toerien, 2024).

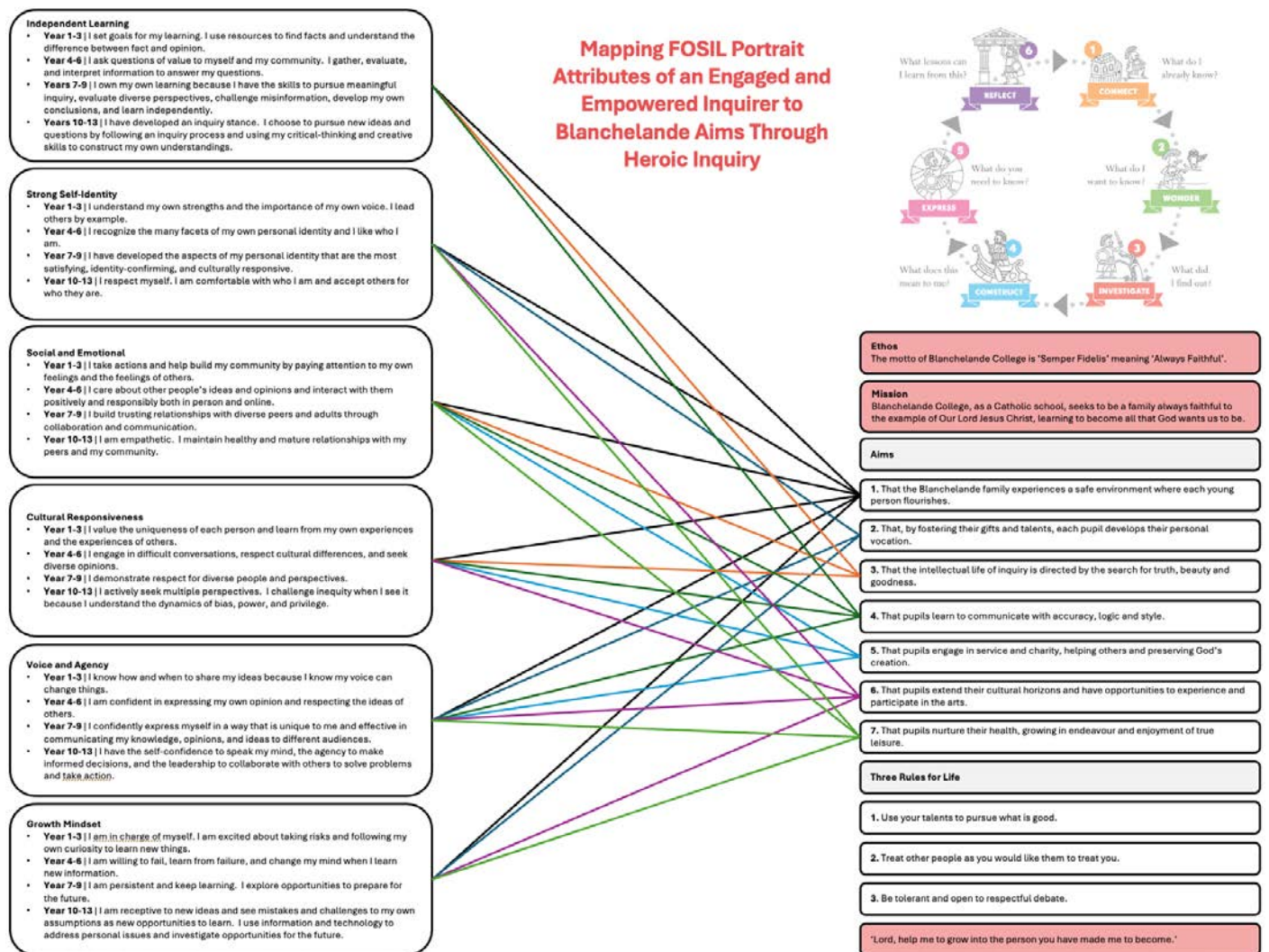


Figure 3: Mapping FOSIL portrait attributes of an engaged and empowered inquirer to Blanchelande aims through Heroic Inquiry

Signature Work in Transition Years

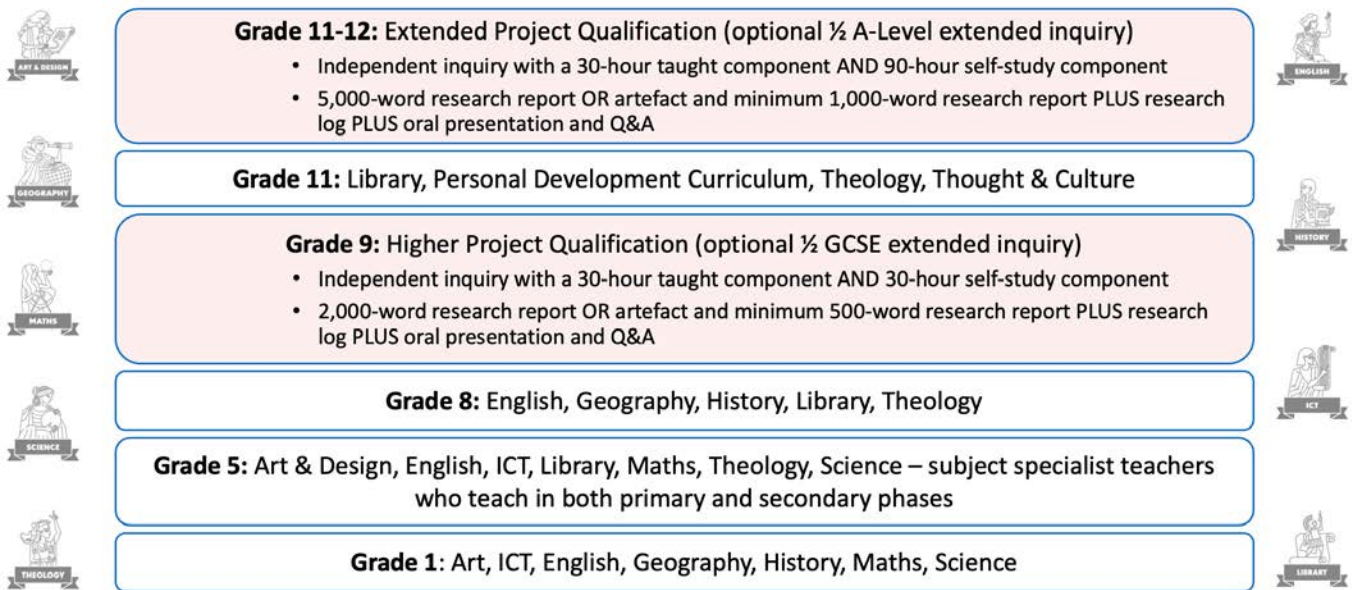


Figure 4: Signature work in transition years

As the outgoing Principal of Blanchelande College, Robert O'Brien, commented on the combination of a liberal education philosophy and library and TL that supports it:

Although the creation of a well-proportioned library space and a suitable budget was a highly significant and symbolic statement of intent, this material and financial aspect proved to be relatively simple to achieve. Our vision was for a library that facilitates liberal education in the truest sense – students capable of independently inquiring into subjects and learning to question perceptively and think deeply. However, it took the appointment of a teacher-librarian with insight into the inquiry process and the subsequent creation of an Inquiry-Based Learning department for us to begin using this vital resource to effectively equip students (and their teachers) with the knowledge that enables them to get more knowledge for themselves. As evidenced in this submission [for the SLA Enterprise of the Year Award 2023], the embedding of FOSIL-based inquiry across all key stages and subjects is well underway, as a consequence of which the Library has become integral to the educational process of the school, to the great and lasting benefit of our students.

Post script

We recognise that, in most Australian schools, the underlying pedagogy is not only inquiry, but a school specific, complex blend of pedagogical theories that fit the school's educational mission. However, many tasks across the curriculum are inquiry-based. The suggestion is that, an inquiry learning model, such as FOSIL or GID, is used uniformly in inquiry tasks, across the school, in ways similar to the signature works in Blancheland College. And please make sure your TL is a teaching partner across the tasks.

An article follows in which Alinda Sheerman from Broughton College describes her work with inquiry learning in her school, and the necessity for a balance between Explicit teaching and embedding an inquiry learning model across the school.

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