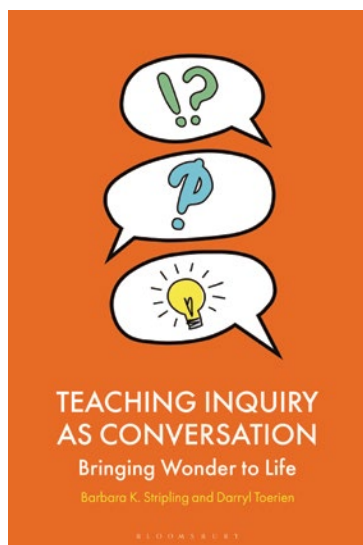


BOOK REVIEW

by Lee FitzGerald - Editor of ACCESS



Teaching Inquiry as Conversation: Bringing Wonder to Life, by Barbara K. Stripling and Darryl Toerien. Review by Lee FitzGerald.

This passionate, wide-ranging and inspiring book, written by two authors whose names are synonymous with inquiry learning, is based on the power of conversation. It is the result of years of conversation between the writers aimed at developing common and future-proof understandings of education and inquiry learning. It highlights inquiry as conversation-based for students, teachers, school librarians and administrators, and invites conversations between readers of the book. Key concepts are the nature of inquiry, the nature and purpose of a liberal education, whole child inquiry, and whole school inquiry learning. This quote sums up the importance of conversation: "When we have a conversation with someone... we ask questions, listen to answers, clarify our own ideas, challenge ideas that we don't agree with, and in the best conversations, end up learning about ourselves and what we believe." p15.

What is inquiry?

The book begins with, What is inquiry? "Inquiry 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 of responsible participation in community." p4.

Each of the nine chapters poses a guiding question, as follows:

How does inquiry enable a liberal education?

"A liberal education prepares.. all of our youth for productive participation in society by enabling them to develop fully in all areas of their lives." p9.

Why is inquiry more like a conversation than a research process?

The process of engaging in inquiry is like conversation, relying on repeated interactions with information, leading to critical thinking, demanding reflection, and founded on questions.

What were the thought processes that drove the formation of the Stripling model and the FOSIL model?

The stages of the Stripling model are Connect, Wonder, Investigate, Construct, Express and Reflect. Stripling's model developed "as the best way to teach students how to learn and build their own knowledge" (p28). These stages are the same in the FOSIL model, which is at the base of the whole school inquiry program created and led by Darryl at Blanchelande College, in Guernsey, Channel Islands. [The FOSIL website](#) abounds in support for whole school inquiry learning, is Creative Commons licensed and freely available to all.

What skills and responsibilities are embodied in inquiry especially in this increasing digital age?

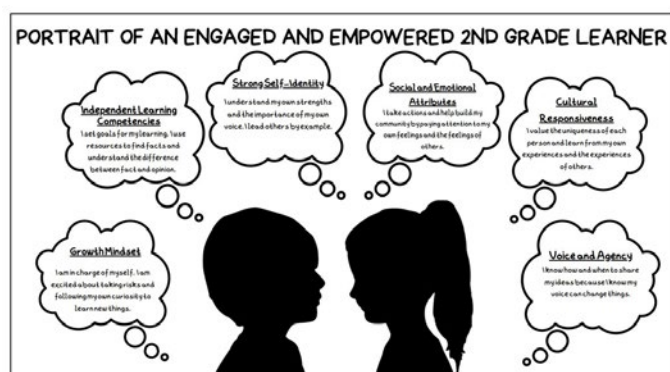
This chapter addresses the development of conceptual overviews of skills and responsibilities. Please see [Empire State Information Fluency Framework](#) (ESIFC) and [Skills frameworks](#) on the FOSIL website.

Why should we think of inquiry as a whole-child approach to learning?

The focus in this chapter is on relationships and whole child development through the library inquiry program - "rich, hands on learning experiences" (Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey) and the explicit integration of social, emotional and academic skills. p66. It takes inquiry beyond information literacy into the skills that all children need to develop, and for which inquiry provides a reliable framework, skills such as independent learning competencies, self-identity, voice and agency, social and emotional attributes, cultural responsiveness and a growth mindset. *Portraits of Engaged and Empowered learners* at Grades 2, 5, 8 and 12 provide a framework for the integration of whole child learning into inquiry.

How can we make the teaching of inquiry more digestible and continual?

The answer is through an inquiry program that uses FOSIL or another model to underpin it, and links with the *Portraits of Engaged and Empowered Learners*, drawn across Year 2, 5, 8 and 12.



Please see image below for a summary of how the inquiry program meets the curriculum at Blanchelands through the use of Signature works, which occur at Years K, 5, 8, 9 and 11.

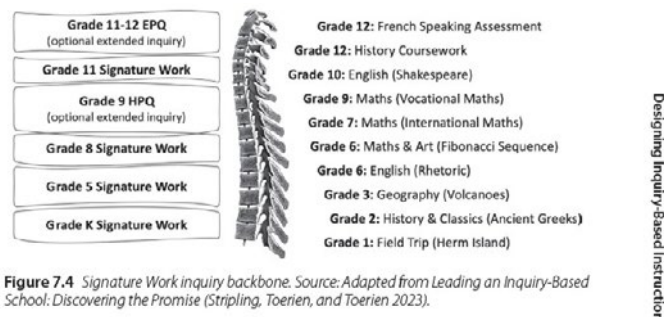


Figure 7.4 Signature Work inquiry backbone. Source: Adapted from *Leading an Inquiry-Based School: Discovering the Promise* (Stripling, Toerien, and Toerien 2023).

What is the role of collaboration in building a schoolwide culture of inquiry?

The authors make the point that learning is not usually collaborative, especially in high schools, and that academic departments tend to work in isolation. As Toerien points out: "There is a strong tendency in schools to view knowledge merely as information to be memorized and reproduced under highly controlled conditions." p91.

Essential diagrams in this chapter include:

- Figure 7.1 Spiral of authentic inquiry.
- Figure 7.2 schoolwide template for framing units through essential questions.
- Figure 7.3 Empire State Information Fluency Framework (ESIFC)/FOSIL inquiry skill sets created for this book, p96, which outlines the skills at each stage of FOSIL.

Toerien also emphasises in this chapter the importance of making sure disciplinary knowledge is taught through inquiry, so that the attitude of "inquiry learning being what we do if and when we have time left over from learning the important stuff" (p97) is overcome.

Why is there no magic formula for teaching inquiry?

While there may be no magic formula, there are many tried and true inquiry techniques, such as Direct instruction on key inquiry skills, for which ESIFC is very effective, Reflective learning, Collaborative learning, Conversation, Diagnostic, formative and summative assessment, digital literacy and ethics.

How do we create broad buy-in to teaching and learning through inquiry?

An interesting aspect of this chapter is about AI.

The challenge for educators is to figure out how students can use AI to enhance their productivity but not replace their thinking. --- careful structuring of assignments so that they require critical and creative thinking, the requirement of originality in the final product, interactivity and reflective thinking throughout the inquiry process, and the requirement that students show their thinking process on graphic organiser. p135.

The book concludes with final thoughts from Stripling and Toerien:

Toerien:

- We need to identify why we are underappreciated and what criticisms are justified. Then we need clarity of purpose.
- The AI role in controlling and manipulating us will rapidly outgrow its role in liberating us.
- [The Institute for the Advancement of Inquiry](#) is a forum for continuing this conversation.

And finally, Stripling invites us "with a great deal of humility to engage in a continuing conversation about Inquiry. I believe we will discover new truths together and the practice of school librarianship will flourish across the world." p142.

How does this book apply to Australia?

We have a strong and long tradition of inquiry through the library, which doesn't mean that it is embedded in the role of the Teacher Librarian (TL). In Australia, the role has been almost divided down the middle in the way TLs take it up, and the result is that TLs tend to either prioritise the encouragement

of reading, OR they focus on inquiry. Both roles are very difficult to set up, and continue, because of the minimizing of the TL role here in Australia, as well as overseas. A useful addition to practice for inquiry leaders could be **literary learning**, a concept originating from The School of Information and Communication Studies at Charles Sturt University, in the MEd(TL) degree, particularly in the subject Literature Across the Curriculum. Focus of this theory is using fiction to engage students across the curriculum, and can be very well used in inquiry units, particularly in the early stages of research – Connect/Wonder/Investigate when engagement is key.

This book addresses all the problems with initiating and continuing an inquiry program in schools. These are:

- Making inquiry a whole school endeavour (and not something extra to the curriculum).
- Seeing the library and the school librarian as a key person in the establishment of an inquiry program.
- Having an inspiring example on which to model inquiry practice. This is the Blanchelande College K-12 inquiry program, created and led by Darryl and Jenny Toerien. Points made by the authors are all supported by inquiry in action from Blanchelande.

What can we Aussie readers take from it?

- An enriched understanding of inquiry, as a conversation, which involves the whole child.
- A process whereby to make inroads into setting inquiry learning in its place in your school, and exemplars from Blanchelande College at every step.

This means:

- Conversations with school leaders about where the library program should meet the goals of the school and the education system in which it operates, and an expectation that it should do so. In Australia, information literacy outcomes are embedded in every syllabus, and in the General Capabilities and the Cross Curriculum Priorities highlight lifelong learning skills, which can be met by using inquiry learning throughout the school.
- Use of a model to frame inquiry across a school, e.g. the Stripling model, FOSIL or Guided Inquiry Design.
- Open conversations to embed inquiry, including a school-wide expectation of collaboration between teachers and TLs to

create, teach and assess inquiry tasks.

- A library program of whole form inquiry tasks, ranging across the school. The Signature works that occur at Blanchelande College are examples. They need to be at vital parts of students' growth across the school, K-12.
- Underpinning the inquiry program, a scope and skills sequence, like Stripling's ESIFC which is contextualized in Toerien's scopes and sequences. Our [Information Fluency Framework](#) provides such a scope and sequence.
- The emphasis that inquiry puts on process – recording it, having conversations about it, reflecting throughout – IS the most important learning of an inquiry unit, and should be assessed as more important than the final product. It also helps with inappropriate uses of AI, as student process is visible throughout the inquiry.

References

- Darling-Hammond, L & Cook-Harvey, C. (2018). *Educating the whole child: Improving school climate to support student success*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/education-whole-child-report>
- ESIFC. (2025). *Empire State Information Fluency continuum*. <https://slsa-nys.libguides.com/ifc>
- NSW Department of Education. (2026). *The NSW Information Fluency framework*. https://education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/main-education/teaching-and-learning/curriculum/media/documents/Information_fluency_framework.pdf
- Stripling, B. & Toerien, D. (2026). *Teaching inquiry as conversation: Bringing wonder to life*. Bloomsbury.