

Co-Inquiry

Documentation, Communication, Action



Shareen Abramson

One afternoon while the preschoolers nap under the supervision of her co-teacher, Monica heads for the staff meeting room at the Huggins Early Education Center. It is time for the center’s weekly co-inquiry meeting, a structured, professional dialogue on classroom projects. Monica is making today’s staff presentation on her class’s investigation of road construction.

The teachers take their seats in a circle, facing one another. One is ready to videotape the presentation so that it can be reviewed later. The center director is serving as facilitator for the meeting.

Monica is well prepared with documentation of the children’s activities and learning as they investigate road building. Her project notebook, organized in chronological order, has her written notes and observations, including the children’s comments during construction activities and group discussions, and a number of photographs showing specific interactions of the children and examples of their block constructions. A bigger folder holds a collection of the children’s drawings of roads, which include their captions and descriptions.

Monica even has prepared a two-minute video clip of the children working with large blocks on the playground. The video is in the VCR, set for the episode she wants the group to view.



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Photos courtesy of the author.



Some of the participants did not attend the previous co-inquiry meeting on Monica's project, so she begins with some background information. She tells how the project emerged from preschoolers' interest in making roads for their cars, and summarizes the work. The three- and four-year-olds have pondered, "What is a road?" From her notebook, Monica reads aloud some of her observations and some of the children's initial comments:

Kayla: "It is a street that cars drive on."

Jacob: "It has signs with it and dots with it."

Hailey: "Where the bikes go."

Braelen: "It's where you race on and where you drive on. The pipes are under the road."

Colten: "A motorcycle. It's a road, motorcycle drive, go beep beep. My mommy go to work and my daddy go to work."

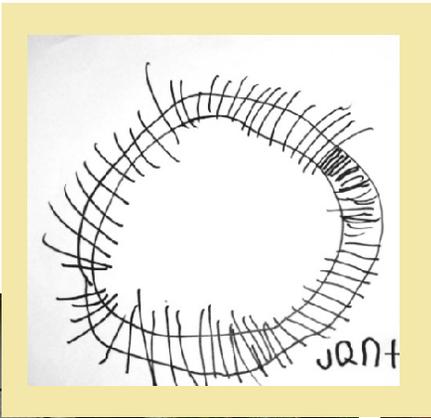
Joey: "Street is like metal stuff, glass. Trucks drive on it."

Kayla shows the others where to put the blocks. She wants them to use the long blocks.



Monica next moves to the main focus of her presentation. She explains that whenever a specific problem or question comes up in her classroom, the teachers try to extend the children's thinking. In this case, when the children wondered how roads were constructed and what they were used for, the teachers initially asked the children if they'd like to draw some of the roads they envisioned. Monica displays several of the drawings and reads the children's descriptions, revealing their different conceptions of roads.

She tells how the teachers then invited the children to use their drawings as a blueprint to build a road. Five children volunteered to recreate their road drawings using the large outdoor blocks.



The children decided to work together on the constructions, one drawing at a time. They had good success in making a rectangular road from a drawing by Kayla, but they encountered problems in making the round road shown in another child's drawing. Finally, Monica shows a video clip of the children working on the project.

After the presentation, the co-inquiry group begins its dialogue, starting with comments and questions, then offering ideas to further expand the road investigation the following week.



Co-Inquiry and the Scientific Method

1. Define a problem or issue
2. Raise questions
3. Hypothesize possibilities
4. Observe and gather data
5. Analyze and interpret data
6. Continue the cycle of inquiry as new questions emerge
7. Decide on a possible plan for action

“Co-inquiry makes me want to keep going in my own educational pursuits. Also, you get to show people your work. I think you are also helping another teacher. When someone is having a problem, you can say, ‘Let me share this with you. I can offer it to you and maybe it will help you, too.’”

THE OPENING EXCHANGE BETWEEN TEACHERS (above) is an example of a co-inquiry (collaborative inquiry) meeting, which is a key component of the teacher education program at California State University. These meetings provide regular opportunities for teachers to engage in a dialogue about their own questions on teaching and learning. Documentation of a classroom event like the one described by Monica serves as a “memory” of experience. As the roads project unfolds, the co-inquiry group engages in animated discussion, examining the words and actions of the children and teachers. Co-inquiry meetings are designed to produce new insights into how the teaching-learning relationship is realized in the everyday action of the classroom and to lead to improved teaching practices.

What is co-inquiry?

The co-inquiry process was originally introduced by John Dewey. Dewey (1933, 1938) believed that teachers construct knowledge through inquiry with the assistance of colleagues and faculty, who help them refine and clarify their ideas about their learning and teaching experiences in the classroom. Teachers see classroom problems or questions as possibilities for learning and growth rather than as stressful and inhibiting. To address an issue, it may be necessary to seek out information and other resources, consult with others, and acquire new skills. Over time, a problem can lead to new experiences, deeper understanding, and positive changes. The inquiry proceeds through a series of steps based on the scientific method (Dewey 1938). (See “Co-Inquiry and the Scientific Method.”).

Co-inquiry is very similar to inquiry except it is carried out by a group rather than an individual. It is a collaborative process that involves joint action and interaction and is often used in human services settings to help effect change (Wells 1999; Bray et al. 2000). A group of people agrees to study a problem over a period of time by conducting research and holding meetings to examine findings and arrive at solutions. The group establishes a common purpose, research orientation, and commitment to action. Such projects sustain the group’s interest, questions, and search for solutions. When undertaken by a small group of learners, co-inquiry stimulates different ideas and perspectives. As a result, participants acquire knowledge, skills, dispositions, and values.

Communication processes play a central role in the co-inquiry process. Co-inquiry relies on the sharing of ideas and understandings in both capturing and conveying the children’s experience through the documentation and as the adults exchange ideas in the meeting discussions. Wells (1999) proposed the term *communicative literacy* to describe the ability for expressing meaning using the standard symbols of the culture—such as language, music, visual arts, and drama. Different ways to communicate ideas multiply the possibilities for meaningful, high level exchange of ideas and expand understanding.

Co-inquiry can enhance adult learning and professional development in a variety of settings (Bray et al. 2000). Studies in early childhood settings show a positive correlation between professional development experiences, teacher collaboration, and program quality/child outcomes (Honig & Hirallal 1998; EdSource 2005). Co-inquiry also leads to better understanding of children’s learning styles, abilities, and interests and new ideas for improving teaching (Himley & Carini 2000; Kasl & Yorks 2002; King 2002; Langer, Colton, & Goff 2003; Hatch et al. 2005).

“When we discuss our projects, we are able to reflect, get more input, revise, and come up with new ideas. This process of co-inquiry helps us to take the ideas back to the classroom and use our knowledge and materials to continue the project with the children and parents.”

The co-inquiry process at the Huggins Center

The Joyce M. Huggins Early Education Center (Huggins Center) is a demonstration training and research center serving families with children from three months to ten years old. Huggins is also a student teaching site for early childhood majors at California State University.

Since the center opened in 1994, we have evolved our own particular way of doing co-inquiry. Our process represents a synthesis of ideas from the last 13 years of our professional development experiences, which have included workshops and sessions on the Reggio Emilia approach at NAEYC conferences, programs hosted by Reggio-inspired schools, and the traveling exhibit of children’s work from Reggio schools in Italy.

The co-inquiry meeting has been used successfully by teachers in the center and among student teachers and other student groups, as well as by teachers with parents and with the children in the classroom. These meetings help create a culture of dynamic, professional interchange with the goal of improving teaching and learning. We have found that it is a practical way for a group to collaborate and learn from one another. For participants, co-inquiry heightens the focus on the meaning of development and learning and promotes study and research.

In our co-inquiry process, participants progress through three stages: documentation, communication, and action. As the opening vignette illustrates, professional learning experiences focus on a question, issue, or interest rather than on a topic or curriculum area. Teachers assume the role of researchers through inquiry and co-inquiry (Hill, Stremmel, & Fu 2005). As their “evidence,” they use documentation, a multisymbolic tool for recording and representing children’s learning experiences (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman 1998; Rinaldi 1998). Documentation of children’s learning is essential to our inquiry process. It provides a common reference point for teachers in talking about children’s learning experiences and the challenges of teaching (Carter 2002; Abramson & Atwal 2003; Cadwell 2003; Project Zero 2003). It also serves a dual purpose by providing specific observations and examples of children’s early learning for meeting standards or other performance-based assessments (Edwards 2006).

Documentation facilitates interchange among children, families, teachers, and the larger community by improving communication and understanding of the importance of early education. Through this documentation process, educators can explore questions, examine children’s thinking, and plan and respond to new problems, situations, and ideas (Gandini & Goldhaber 2001).

In presenting documentation and having dialogue, Huggins teachers learn from each other’s responses and questions, gain new perspectives,

and gather ideas for future classroom experiences. In this supportive atmosphere, newer staff and less experienced teachers learn about the school philosophy, get to know the program and the teachers in other classrooms, and appreciate the value of meeting together to examine documentation. The meetings foster mentoring relationships, teacher confidence, and renewed classroom enthusiasm.



Three-stage structure

“The [co-inquiry] meeting forces me to dig deeper into children’s learning and really get at what they are trying to communicate. It gives me many perspectives from other teachers and not just my own. I see new things each time we revisit documentation in the meetings.”

A key feature of the Huggins co-inquiry process is the explicit structure used for the co-inquiry meeting. A protocol or structured format fosters the teacher’s skill in reflecting on children’s work and analyzing it in greater detail, resulting in improved student performances. (A good method is described in the Web site Looking at Student Work—www.lasw.org/primer.html.) This protocol ensures that everyone has an equal chance to speak, and it leads to thoughtful listening because participants are clear on their roles and when to offer their comments.

The three-stage structure—documentation, communication, and action—helps the group move toward tentative hypotheses and planning. The paragraphs that follow outline the protocol we follow at Huggins. There are six steps, each illustrated by an example from a co-inquiry into a peer-relations problem experienced in one classroom. Together, they show how to conduct a co-inquiry meeting.

Documentation

1. A teacher begins by presenting documentation of a classroom experience to the group. The presentation should consider a problem—an observation of a situation of interest or area of confusion—rather than a specific project, topic, or learning activity.

Example: A Huggins preschool teacher who changed classrooms mid year is the presenter. She shares her observation notes on an issue concerning peer relationships. The children seem to be having difficulties in waiting their turn, sharing materials, and limiting their disagreements and conflicts during play.

Communication

2. Each participant takes a turn responding to the issue, describing an interesting, important, or provocative aspect of the experience.

Example: The other teachers comment on aspects they see as important. One teacher points out that the mid-year arrival of the teacher may have caused stress for the children. Another teacher observes that the issue seems to involve taking turns rather than personal animosities or differences. The group discusses why children who have been together for some time might be having these difficulties.

3. In turn, each participant asks a meaningful question concerning the implications for teaching or learning. (Questions are not necessarily answered at this time; they may require additional reading or classroom research.)

Example: Teachers ask: “Are the same children involved in most of the conflicts?” “How are activities organized?” “Are there possible parental influences?” One teacher wonders, “How do children acquire skills in taking turns, anyhow?” The director describes an article on peer conflicts (Katz 1984) that she thinks may be useful and offers to make copies for the group.



To read the **Co-Inquiry Journal: Interchange in Education**, view multimedia documentation, and join the discussion, go to the co-inquiry Web site and blog: www.coinquiry.org

“I remember coming to the first meeting and not wanting to say anything. Now I look forward to the meeting and talking about the documentation. I can do a workshop for other teachers and share my work with the children. I can put a workshop together and not be shy, timid, or worried about what someone may say. I can take constructive criticism as well as positive feedback.”

Action

- Participants continue to talk, and they brainstorm about how the classroom experiences could continue to develop.

Example: The presenting teacher’s colleagues suggest possible actions to take, such as talking with the children about the problems; reading the documentation of conflicts to the children; and offering learning experiences that require turn taking and cooperation, like a science experiment or cooking project.

- Based on the comments, questions, and ideas from the co-inquiry, the presenter creates a “plan of possibility” to explore with the children in the coming week.

Example: Returning to the classroom, the presenter shares her meeting notes with others on the teaching team. They have a class discussion with the children and suggest doing a group project. The children talk about what it means to take turns, and they share activities they like to do with others at school and at home.

The classroom teachers plan and carry out several activities, and cooking emerges as a favorite of the children. The teachers know that cooking is both educationally complex and socially challenging. It requires children to do many things cooperatively (such as reading recipes; using ingredients and utensils; following directions; measuring, pouring, and stirring; and watching the time), and the teachers can document each step. Cooking also invites family participation, because parents can send in recipes and ingredients or visit the classroom to make favorite recipes with a small group. In cooking together, the children not only practice taking turns and cooperating, but also discover the importance of individual and group efforts. The teachers learn new strategies for developing positive peer relations and parent participation. The classroom becomes a more communicative, collaborative, and caring community. To view selected documentation on this example, go to the Co-Inquiry Blog at www.fanslerece.org/cooking/2006/07/cooking_project_1.html.

- Documentation of the new classroom experiences is discussed in future inquiry meetings, continuing the co-inquiry process.

This protocol provides structure but allows flexibility. At times, some questions or comments may lead participants away from the topic, but they still should be addressed. After such discussions the facilitator suggests a return to the protocol.

The role of the meeting facilitator

As coach, model, and catalyst, the facilitator’s role is to be a bridge, helping connect and build ideas, expanding on key points, providing history and other contextual information, giving examples and definitions from relevant research, and recommending further reading (Kennedy 2004). The facilitator helps the group accomplish its goals in the time allotted for the meeting and in a fair and respectful manner.

Typically, the facilitator is someone with experience in and knowledge of early education—for example, an experienced teacher or a director who is good at abstract thinking but who also can enter the day-to-day world of the teachers. Often the program administrator has the background to offer expertise on teaching and learning and identify resources for taking next steps. Serving as meeting facilitator helps this individual grow along with the teachers, because co-inquiry helps her or him become more aware of program and staff assets.

The facilitator encourages active, open, and sensitive listening (Rinaldi 2002) and assists the group in doing action research with documentation. He or she helps the group work through their differences and observes group dynamics.

Facilitators demonstrate an attitude of acceptance for divergent interpretations, raise new questions, and suggest alternative viewpoints regarding a child or situation. It is important for them to acknowledge and recognize everyone's efforts. For example, here is what the facilitator said at the end of the meeting described in the vignette:

"The more we experience this co-inquiry process of sharing, the more I can see how it affects the work you are doing as teachers. Our reflection causes all of us to think more about our work and its importance and value in children's lives. It's a privilege and an honor to work with you and see the great work you are doing . . . an unfolding journey for all of us, speaking of roads. Many times I think back over our meetings and about what happened, and I wonder what the next part of this co-inquiry is going to reveal."



Co-inquiry's benefits to teachers

Co-inquiry is a low-cost, practical strategy that offers enormous benefits. At Huggins, we continue to experiment with the process and extend its use to various situations, such as college courses, meetings of student teachers, and discussion groups for workshops and conferences. (See "Holding a Co-Inquiry Meeting" below.) It helps teachers see the significance of their work, gain fresh insights, improve their documentation skills, and acquire communicative literacy. Teachers also learn to better understand and assess children's abilities so they can address learning standards (Langer, Colton, & Goff 2003). They become more passionate about their work and their school and feel revitalized in working with children and families (Tegano 2002; Abramson & Atwal 2003).

As part of a co-inquiry group, teachers develop a sense of belonging and closeness with other teachers. The process helps create a culture of professional development in which teachers learn to accept differences of opinion, articulate their thoughts, and project and plan constructive action to improve teaching and learning. As Rinaldi observes, "Knowing how to work in a group—appreciating its inherent qualities and value, and understanding the dynamics, the complexity, and benefits involved—constitutes a level of awareness that is indispensable for those who want to participate, at both the personal and professional levels, in effecting change and building the future" (2001, 29).

Co-inquiry depends first and foremost on the professional contributions of individual teachers and their willingness to engage in dialogue, document and observe, and mentor and learn from one another. When teachers commit to the process, co-inquiry becomes integral to the life of the school and transforms that life for the better.

Holding a Co-Inquiry Meeting

- Reserve a quiet, pleasant room with comfortable seating to promote an atmosphere of congeniality and trust.
- Provide a computer workstation with a TV and VCR or DVD player. Participants will be able to view audiovisual documentation and access the Internet to find additional resources.
- Stock a nearby shelf with professional books, articles, and other materials to stimulate ongoing learning and professional dialogue.
- Consider weekly meetings lasting one to two hours. To allow sufficient time for dialogue (10–30 minutes per presentation), schedule no more than two presentations (10–20 minutes each) per meeting.
- Prepare an agenda with the names of presenters and their projects, and distribute it prior to the meeting.
- Give all staff, whether teacher or assistant, novice or veteran, a chance to take part. Teachers can rotate their attendance so classroom activities can go on without requiring additional help. In early education programs, afternoon naptime is ideal. In schools serving older students, co-inquiry can be part of the weekly staff meeting.
- Ask teachers to take notes in a designated meeting notebook to maintain continuity. One notebook per classroom works well. The teacher who attends the meeting adds to the notebook and then uses it to update classroom co-teachers.
- Require staff to get written parental permission for documenting children and to explain to families how the documentation will be collected, used, shared, and displayed.
- Use an educational video, professional article, or notes from a tour of another school to spark discussion if the whole group is new to documentation. The teachers can brainstorm and plan how to create their own documentation for a later meeting.
- Ask the director to support documentation by supplying each classroom with a digital camera (or several classrooms could share a video camera). A teacher familiar with photography can demonstrate some camera techniques, especially how to take close-up shots to show what children are doing.
- Encourage teachers to work in pairs or with volunteers to take notes, photos, or videos for documentation.
- Open co-inquiry meetings to others gradually. As teachers become more comfortable with the process, they can invite parents or teachers from other programs to attend the meeting and participate, a few at a time.
- Encourage interested staff from the same or different programs to organize their own group if co-inquiry is not possible during school hours. Such a group is often referred to as a learning circle or teacher study group. The participants may meet on a regular basis (perhaps once a month) before or after work, or on the weekend.
- Consider electronic co-inquiry via e-mail or listservs designed for networking and collaboration, such as Projects-L and Reggio-L. The Co-Inquiry Journal and its blog (www.coinquiry.org) are new tools to facilitate virtual interchange among educators (Abramson et al. 2005).

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