The Open University

Personal inquiry learning

Learning through collaborative inquiry and active investigation

Personal inquiry learning involves active exploration of a question that interests the student and does not already have a known answer. Students take control of the inquiry process and may use a smartphone as an inquiry toolkit. An inquiry might start with a teacher helping students to refine their questions, continue with students collecting and viewing data in their home environment, and end with students presenting results to the teacher or to the whole class.

For inquiry learning to work well, the problems that are studied should relate to students' experiences and interests. Students should be active learners who pose questions to which they genuinely want to know the answer, who carry out investigations that relate to their own needs and concerns, and who discuss emerging findings with peers and experts.

A central aspect of personal inquiry learning is that students take ownership of the inquiry process. For this to happen, they need a clear understanding of the process and their role in acquiring knowledge in a particular discipline. For example, if they are engaging in a scientific inquiry, they need to be supported to learn what types of question are scientifically appropriate, how these can be framed as valid inquiries, who they can find and trust to provide scientific information, what kinds of study are appropriate, why it is important to collect reliable data, how this can be analysed and presented as valid evidence, and how the results of an inquiry can be shared and discussed.

Personal inquiry learning at a distance

Find the topic.	Broad areas for investigation can be suggested by the teacher in a live session or via a website.
Decide on an inquiry question or hypothesis.	Questions should be developed by a learner or group of learners with advice from the teacher via live session, text, email, or phone conversation.
Plan methods, equipment needed, actions to take.	Inquiries should be realistic in the students' home environment. Smartphones include sophisticated tools – but a clock, ruler, camera, or sketchpad offer useful alternatives.
Collect evidence.	Provide guidance on ways of gathering reliable data.
Analyse and represent evidence.	This could be via computer programs such as Excel, Word or PowerPoint, via online alternatives, or via written reports.
Respond to question or hypothesis.	Responses can be shared with the teacher or with the entire class via a shared document or forum.
Share and discuss inquiry.	Options include a live presentation, a series of pictures, a written report, a poster, or a phone conversation.
Reflect on progress.	A useful framework for individual reflection is 'What happened?' 'So what (why does it matter)?', 'What next?' Class reflection could focus on how the separate inquiries relate to each other and to the subject area as a whole.

How did it go?

Let us know in the comments on the website www.open.ac.uk/blogs/innovating how personal inquiry learning worked for you and your students. Please share any tips that others would find useful, or link to examples of interesting inquiries.