

LETTERS Inquiry Learning (A Series)

MacKenzie's response (*ABT*, 71[5], 264-266) to my letter misrepresents what I said. I did not query the validity of inquiry learning at the university level because of a paucity of evidence for it. An absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

I did not say that doing research on a topic cannot constitute open inquiry. Scientists who examine evidence through written documents may very well be doing inquiry (at some level), provided they are analyzing empirical data themselves.

I did not provide examples of questions inappropriate for the university level. Rather, I gave those examples of the only case of open inquiry at the undergraduate level I have been able to find to show that they were being used to practice data analysis rather than to draw conclusions that constituted a part of the course content, which I think is the usual connotation when it is claimed that an inquiry approach is being adopted in a course.

I did not ask for data showing that inquiry works. Rather, I asked for evidence that open inquiry works at particularly higher levels of education. Indeed, I'm a passionate user and advocate of inquiry learning, being very aware of the positive impact that inquiry learning approaches can have in both the cognitive and affective domains.

Looking at the other two contributions made in the response, one appears to further suggest a lack of understanding of the distinctions I am trying to advance and the other appears to be just plain wrong. First, answering the question of whether or not stress causes grey hair may or may not be an inquiry activity as I have suggested it be defined (i.e., students answering a scientific question by analysing raw, empirical data themselves). I'd suggest that having students "research" this question by retrieving and synthesizing the conclusions of others does not constitute inquiry in the spirit of the inquiry model for learning/teaching.

Second, the claim is made that open (Level 4) inquiry is the hallmark of graduate-level education. I disagree. My own experiences, together with the information that I have received from others, suggests that research at the masters and doctoral levels, for example, in science proper is very, very rarely a Level 4 experience but rather more typically Level 2 (perhaps with a hint of Level 3 at times). Either I am wrong, or the response does not reflect the standard definition of open inquiry found in the literature.

In short, the response fails to address the considerations I am trying to share and, as a result, does not further the discussion. In fact, it appears ironic that the confusing nature of the response provides evidence for the need for the very kind of clarifications that were the focus of my original letter.

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