

Inquiry-Based Learning

An Interview with Drs. Jane Rigler and Elliot Gordon Mercer

In your own words, briefly describe some of the characteristics of inquiry-based learning.

Inquiry-based learning engages embodied research that invites students to be curious about the topics at hand. This approach to teaching and mentorship guides students toward increased responsiveness and expanded creativity. In this model, students are tasked to engage skills for critical thinking throughout the learning process. Some inquiry-based learning involves facilitation and often, although not always, experiential activities are foregrounded over the distribution of information. Assessment of learning focuses on the ability to propose original and innovative responses to solving problems, rather than the repetition of known facts and demonstration of predetermined outcomes. Students apply previous knowledge to address new questions and employ past experiences to accomplish increasingly difficult tasks. This personalized approach to learning extends to ongoing problem-solving beyond the course.

What does inquiry-based learning look like in your classroom?

Through course activities, students are tasked to identify habitual patterns and blocks in their approaches to composition and performance, then guided in ways to examine and address these patterns and blocks through an inquiry-based creative process. Rather than giving students predetermined movement and musical material intended to be repeated, in our classroom we instead provide students with score-based compositional tasks encouraging individualized responses, inventiveness, and exploration.

Movement prompts, sonic ideas, structured improvisations, and environmental plans integrate into ways that inspire students to apply their creative sensibilities to embodying and carrying out a score's instructions. Students are invited to utilize their previous research and personal experiences to create associations that influence their actions and sonic/embodied material. In this way, they develop their personalized vocabulary with which to expand and refine their work. The in-class performance activities that result from student engagement with these scoring models are the basis for discussions during which students examine the outcomes of their work alongside the feedback of others. This instructional method leads to self-reflection and decision-making on how alternative performance approaches, as well as investigations of how the objectives or intentions of a performance study could be restructured or differently articulated when designing future performance material. These discussions emphasize the ongoing, process-oriented nature of performance, foregrounding how prior learning and the results of past performances integrate into a continuing creative practice.

Why did you decide to partner to integrate inquiry-based learning in your course?

There is a clear relationship between the ways sound scores form and the kinds of movement creation practices engaged in this course. In this partnership, we wanted to investigate these relationships. Dance students often experience difficulty in activating vocal sound and spoken text in their creative processes. Dancers are less accustomed to working and composing sonically, an integral skill to the

development and presentation of interdisciplinary performance work. In our partnership, Jane's expertise was engaged to locate and activate new strategies for fostering this creative skill, as well as to examine how this material might best be scaffolded to produce increasingly complex and innovative student work.

What challenges did you face when thinking about integrating inquiry-based learning?

Often, Visual and Performing Arts students do not engage in inquiry-based learning as a compositional process in the classroom. The presentation of new creative work is exceptionally personal and working experimentally in front of others often reveals the challenges and difficulties of the student in a way that feels vulnerable. This can lead to a self-consciousness that impedes the creative process. When thinking about integrating inquiry-based learning, we anticipated a need to strategically introduce course activities in a way that would challenge students without overwhelming them. One of the ways to address this vulnerability is to set up and maintain a peaceful, playful, safe and open environment through calming opening activities, embedded reflections, and non-dualistic activities that are inclusive for all bodies/abilities. In this process, multiple outcomes are invited and encouraged.

What were the most significant benefits?

An exceptional benefit of integrating this learning model was an increased adeptness among students when experimenting with new ways of working and communicating creatively. In this course, students demonstrated the ability to continue developing a personal approach to composition and performance. This learning model promoted a willingness to be more open to new ideas and explorations, as well as a creative playfulness lifted of judgment. Students benefited from increased identification of an individualized stylization, allowing each to understand their unique goals and intentions as an artist better. The discussion and analysis of scoring processes and resultant in-class performance work also expanded students' communication skills in the description of their work, responsive feedback to others, and collaborative devising processes. Integrating this teaching model provided students with the skills to pursue further inquiry-based personal research and creative work.

How would you rate the experience for your students? What do you think your students gained from experience?

In reflecting on the course, students articulated how this learning model consistently revealed connections between their life experience, art practice, and performance work. Creative processes and working models to which students were initially unaccustomed became increasingly comfortable resources that directly changed their understanding and experience of other artistic disciplines. Course reflections showed that students gained a broader understanding of the multiple possibilities for experimentation within the arts, as well as the ability to locate specific shifts in their creative practice as a result of engaging with these modes of experimentation.

What are some of the most significant challenges?

Inquiry-based learning in the arts demands an increasing comfortability with creative experimentation. In a group context, students may develop expanded self-awareness and acquire performance skills at different speeds. In this course, some students may be ready for increasingly advanced inquiry-based

tasks while others need to repeat previous tasks to accomplish core proficiencies. For this course, traditional academic evaluation and assessment procedures are less effective when using this learning modality. One of the challenges for instructors is to find new ways to assess students in a way that allows for honest and objective self-evaluations and reflections. Critical to this is a more in-depth understanding on the part of the instructors of each student's learning process. Communicating with students where they are underperforming and how they can address areas of growth in this type of teaching can guide students to address their self-perception as well as their personal beliefs about valuation in art. While critical to the process, such conversations can activate personal and emotional concerns beyond the art-making process. As facilitators, we need to address these concerns alongside the presentation of the creative material.