A Canadian Teacher Union and its approach to teacher inquiry: a west coast perspective

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Paper presented at the Canadian Society for Studies in Education (CSSE) conference,
Concordia University, Montreal, May 29-June 1, 2010
Introduction

This paper focuses on the involvement of a Canadian teacher union, the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (BCTF), in supporting teacher inquiry as professional development in British Columbia, Canada. Its purposes are to:

- explore and better understand the nature of teacher inquiry and the current and potential role of a teacher union in supporting teachers’ Inquiry as a form of professional development;
- consider the key areas of understanding generated during Inquiry, including the use of technology during inquiry projects;
- discuss the nature of collaboration with school districts, universities, and provincial government; and
- promote pan-Canadian networking linked to teacher inquiry.

This paper contextualizes the union’s approach to teacher inquiry within three areas of literature: professional development (Webster-Wright, 2009); professional learning communities (Mitchell & Sackney, 2008; Stoll & Louis, 2007); and teacher leadership (Danielson, 2006).

“During the past two decades, empirical research has demonstrated that effective professional learning continues over the long-term and is best situated within a community that supports learning. Such situated learning at work can engage individuals in actively working with others on genuine problems within their professional practice. Over this time rapid economic and social changes have been demonstrated to affect professionals’ practice with consequences for professional learning. In this changing workplace the importance of critical reflection in professional learning has been highlighted.

A consensus has developed within the educational research community that effective professional development is based on a notion of professional learning as continuing, active, social and related to practice. Yet this apparent consensus has had limited impact on PD practices, with a noticeable disparity between research findings and practices in most professions, even in teaching.” (Webster-Wright, 2009).

Webster-Wright describes an evolution in the literature on professional development. She argues that there exists a consensus on what constitutes professional learning but that the theory of professional learning is rarely reflected in professional development practice across a range of professions.

Some work has been done in Canadian teacher unions to identify forms of professional development which mirror the ideas expressed by Webster-Wright. Clark et al (2007) discussed issues that they believed might shift Canadian education systems’ thinking beyond considering professional development as a day or days where teachers attend and are recipients of PD. They argued that it is important to:
• consider a focus on ‘teacher learning’ rather than ‘teacher professional development’. This term was adopted in 2007 by major educational stakeholders in Ontario, including the Ministry of Education, the teacher unions, principals, school boards and parents’ organizations.

• focus on participants not the program, with less formal ‘keynotes and workshop’ approaches to PD, and more teacher discourse.

• beware of over-reliance on a guru, a guest speaker, often inspirational but whose influence fades as the next gurus appear.

• find a balance of approaches, perhaps using Guskey’s (2000) seven models of PD (training; observation/assessment; involvement in development/improvement process; study groups; inquiry/action research; individually guided activities; mentoring).

• find the time for both formal and informal learning, with a range of options proposed

• evaluate success, perhaps by fostering on-line discussions after the learning activities.

Teacher inquiry supported by the union includes action research, professional conversations, book study groups, subject or theme-based inquiry groups, appreciative inquiry, professional learning communities or learning teams. It utilizes approaches that include reflection on practice, collaboration, moving out of individual and private space to collective and public space, extending understanding of practice through critical discourse, planning and initiating some form of action for change and distributed leadership.

Data Sources/Methods

Current literature in the three areas stated above formed the first data source. Others include video interviews with teacher participants, Inquiry group facilitators, and local teacher association Presidents; document retrieval, including material from the union’s teacher inquiry project Wiki; data from reports generated for the BCTF and the BC Ministry of Education. Reflection on technology used includes the uses and applications of Wikis, videos, and web-based conferencing using E-lluminate¹.

Significance of the study

This research indicates that one Canadian teacher union is combining academic and practitioner research, and in so doing positioning the union to engage in discourse across boundaries to engage teachers, elected union officials and the academic community. By moving out of its ‘private union space’ and into more public forums such as CSSE, the union is choosing to move out of its traditional zones of discourse in order to participate in a wider discourse where its research, analyses and perspectives can be tested and challenged, a direction encouraged by Coulter (2002), who argued for teachers to move out of private space and into more public forums, an extension applied in this work to teacher unions.

¹ http://www.elluminate.com/
Teacher unions in Canada have mixed levels of interest in supporting the professional development of teachers. This paper builds a case for teacher unions to engage in direct support for PD through Inquiry by describing one union’s approach. With some exceptions, Canadian teacher unions also have limited collaborations with school districts and universities to both support PD and to engage in discourse about professional areas of teachers’ work, and this paper makes a case to extend such collaborations. It also offers a rationale for teacher unions to present and share their work with audiences external to teacher unions and invites discussion on the utility and merits of such an approach.

Finally, in British Columbia, a province (in)famous for the discord between government and teacher union, part of this research reflects a small but promising union-government collaboration. By exploring its progress and learning, the union is offering accountability both to government and to union members as well as inviting discussion on future collaborations – areas which have significant implications for any consideration of future efforts to develop Inquiry and to improve collaboration and relationships.

**Results**

Lessons learned are logistical, technological, and conceptual. Much has been learned in terms of the logistics needed to support multiple Inquiry projects at the central level (BCTF), and within local teacher associations. Technology has played an increasingly important role in terms of communication (web conferencing), video use (for both data collection and presentations) and in terms of a common and accessible repository of information (Wikis). Partnerships with school districts and a university have been positive and productive. While the BCTF’s co-ordinated Inquiry work is still a work in progress, a better understanding of Inquiry approaches has also developed, with a variety of methodological approaches encouraged.

The following claims and areas of understanding from this research are explored in the paper:

- There exists an improved understanding of the importance of facilitation, and how to build facilitation capacity.
- Community is an important part of the success of Inquiry.
- No single method of Inquiry is appropriate or necessary.
- Conversation and discourse is deepening our understanding and learning.
- A teacher union can offer leadership in professional development.
- A teacher union can be pro-active in building partnerships and improving relationships with school districts.
- Technology can play a useful part in supporting Inquiry.
Improved understanding of the importance of facilitation, and how to build facilitation capacity.

From the outset, the success of this teacher inquiry initiative pivoted on the role of facilitation. As it was considered to be fundamental to the efficacy and effectiveness of the group, it was decided to assign each local inquiry group a co-facilitation team. The teams were intentionally established with an experienced and non-experienced inquiry facilitator, so that reciprocal mentoring could play a part.

Most co-facilitation teams were composed of two BCTF teacher facilitators, with the support of a BCTF staff mentor. This indeed proved to be pivotal to the initiative’s success, and possibly a model worth replicating for other teacher leadership projects. While this model of training new facilitators appears costly up-front, it reaped dividends in just one year of implementation, when the newest members reported feeling confident and ready to lead an inquiry group the next year. This is a viable model for building capacity among new and experienced members of our professional learning networks.

At the May 2009 training meeting of the provincial facilitator group, some members reported feeling unfamiliar, unclear and uneasy about their role at the beginning of the process, and then elated, transformed, and optimistic about their development as a facilitator at the end of the school year. They stated that this initiative was excellent professional learning for them in terms of co-leading a group’s learning inquiry over six sessions, communicating and inspiring learning between the sessions, documenting what they were doing and related insights, and attending three weekend provincial PQT/Teacher Inquiry training sessions. The co-facilitation team in Kelowna summed up some of the benefits of co-facilitation (i.e.) working collaboratively this way: ‘allows for diverse styles and life experiences to be shared with the group, builds confidence, deepens the quality of designing and debriefing the inquiry sessions, allows for creativity and flexibility to arise in planning and leading the sessions, and taps into collective energy too.” This was very different from leading one-shot, one-day workshops and presentations solo.

The role of a facilitator was to offer and manage a process while participants control the content; to manage time and focus; to ensure equal participation; and to extend and deepen the learning through questions, both supportive and challenging. Facilitation was likened to “planned improvisation” where facilitators guide with plans and selected processes and protocols in hand. Or it was compared to “choreography” where facilitators manage the energy within the group and maintains focus on one content and one process at a time.

Over the course of the year, facilitators engaged in conversations and reflective feedback on leading inquiry groups. Topics included: a facilitator’s essential beliefs, core practices and processes, and a repertoire of inquiry processes/protocols. Facilitators also examined the significant role that context and culture play in creating an inquiry community of learning and in
moving a group forward to deepening levels of trust, disclosure, and authentic questioning of their classroom practice and student learning.

In addition, local inquiry group participants learned about this inquiry process/professional learning model through direct experience. Feeling confident, some implemented the protocols back in their schools with colleagues. In this way, three levels of inquiry learning community emerged:- provincial, local, and school. For example, some participants commented on the learning strategies (i.e.) process tools, they had gleaned from the experience and some had used with others, as “discussion and sharing of articles, research, and videos; journaling, observation skills and student case studies, jigsaws, fishbowls, tuning protocol, sort card, give-and-get, focus questions, etc.” All were taught experientially, followed by meta-commenting and reflection on meaning and future application.

A feedback comment from one participant reflected on meeting with other facilitators and considered the role of facilitators: “I found our meeting to be productive. I now better understand the format and concept behind teacher inquiry, where [the co-facilitators] provide the framework and structure of inquiry. Additionally, how they help to facilitate non-judgmental discussions that are personal and relevant to each individual. I also agree…that as teaching professionals we are often pushed into action (or should I say reaction) missing important think-time, that could help to move us (the teaching world) into acting more proactively.”

Better understanding of the Inquiry approach

The funding provided by the BC Ministry of Education for this project has allowed for the development of Inquiry projects in a number of BC school districts and in three BCTF Provincial Specialist Associations) PSAs. This scale has also allowed for some reflection and learning of how to approach and support teacher inquiry. While we have learned much from the logistical and operational support of multiple projects across a province, this section addresses some of the insights about what we believe contributes to the success of Inquiry. While we hope to extend this area of work, three areas of insight are shared below.

a. Community is an important part of the success of Inquiry

“From all of the dialogue in the Inquiry group, from all the talking we’ve done, one thing I think we can all agree on is that the collaborative time has been very useful. It has benefited us all in different ways. We’ve gone back into schools energized – it’s been a very good experience.”

(teacher participant in Inquiry group)

This applies to various communities developed during the first year. The first is community within the Inquiry groups. In some districts there already exist cultures of Inquiry where teachers are used to reflecting on practice with peers. But in other districts such cultures are
uncommon, and teachers in some Inquiry groups had a period of adjustment as the Inquiry community formed and matured. So it may be important to consider whether existing cultures of Inquiry exist and which teachers in Inquiry groups have accessed forms of professional development incorporating collegial Inquiry. Building such community provides an alternate space for reflection and dialogue. It takes teachers out of the immediate environment of their school while providing an adult learning environment shared with other colleagues. We have found that participants in Inquiry groups have valued the sense of community that has developed over the course of their meetings, and we have observed significant benefits in terms of reflection and discourse in such communities.

A second community developed during the first year is that of co-facilitators of each Inquiry group. Having two facilitators has allowed for partnerships between experienced and new facilitators which have provided mentorship. Rich dialogue and learning has occurred as facilitators met to plan, work with groups, and reflect on their experiences. This second form of community allowed for year-long dialogue about Inquiry processes, group dynamics and facilitation techniques. Parallel to these communities of pairs was a community of two formed at the BCTF, allowing union staff to plan and reflect in ways similar to the teacher-facilitators.

The third community was that of the facilitators and BCTF staff over the year. One way this community was built and fostered was through the project Wiki developed by the BCTF which allowed for posting of articles from professional development and Inquiry areas of literature, sharing reports, posing of questions, and exchanges of ideas. But more important than the Wiki were three meetings, in October, 2008, March and May, 2009. These two or three-day meetings allowed for formal training and learning exchanges in terms of Inquiry and facilitation approaches. They provided a forum for building and sustaining community linked to Inquiry support and facilitation. This evolution of the provincial community of inquiry facilitators was identified by the group participants in their reflections on the first year. Many commented on the collegial friendships that had blossomed from working side-by-side in all phases of facilitating an inquiry group: planning, delivering, adapting the agenda, debriefing, and self-reflection. Learning in the midst of the work, was identified as a powerful professional development approach. (notes from training session #3)

In terms of the BCTF’s approach to building community, our approach has evolved through analysis of existing literature about professional learning communities (Naylor, 2007) in which I argued:

“Examples of PLCs which are narrowly defined, and which require compliance, are illustrative of the forms of community which I would argue are not needed in education systems today. What is needed is promotion of a different notion of learning communities and collaborative inquiry, with the sharing of ideas about structures and processes which can be adapted to different contexts of schooling and systems. Teachers need to be encouraged and welcomed into forms of collaboration and community which are built on trust, offer approaches which engage them and
contain processes over which they have some control. Thus the concept of community might better be fitted around the needs of teachers rather than fitting them into a model where compliance or ‘fidelity’ is required.”

Thus, the BCTF is engaged in building professional learning communities but using approaches which minimize prescription and which maximize teachers’ professional autonomy. The significance of active teacher autonomy in professional development opportunities cannot be overstated. In one study of teacher development, (Sandholtz, 1999) found that experiences that provide teachers with autonomy, choice, and active participation were critical to effective professional development. Further, in many “collaborative” endeavors, the framing of research questions, data collection measures, and reporting of outcomes are dictated by those outside of classrooms who are often in positions of power (Erickson & Christman, 1996). Not only has teacher professional development been dictated by bureaucrats’ voices within school systems, but also by those outside of schools within the higher education research community (p. 503).

Inherent within this distinction is the element of the individual subject to the control of a hierarchy within an organization or structure. The autonomous professional chooses and is trusted to choose the areas of professional development he or she considers appropriate. There is no overt pressure to attend courses, hence minimal influence of an organization or employer on the individual. In contrast, the person being “developed” may be given a range of options for staff development, or may be more directly steered into a specific training unit.

One final ‘community-building’ that should be considered is between the BCTF and the Ministry of Education. While the BCTF acknowledges the support from the Ministry for the BCTF’s Inquiry work (a $315,000 grant was awarded to the BCTF from the Ministry in 2008), the ongoing Ministry-BCTF relationship is somewhat constrained by the fractious relationship between the provincial government and the BCTF over issues including the Foundation Skills Assessments (FSAs) as well as educational funding impacting services and staffing across the province. Perhaps the experience of post-Harris Ontario may be of some solace. In that province, the incoming Liberals invited a range of educational partners, including the teacher unions, to provide a range of initiatives in areas such as PD, with significant funding, to build relationships and collaboration. Yet such a possibility appears unlikely in BC, at least for some time.

We still have much to learn about the different types of community, and how they might best support teachers’ learning. Yet we feel that some understanding has developed both from our analysis of the literature and from our experience in developing an Inquiry approach.

b. No single method of Inquiry is appropriate or necessary

Some Inquiry approaches can be hampered by narrowness in terms of methodology which forces specific Inquiry methods. In the BCTF publication “Teacher Inquiry in the BCTF: A Focus for Supporting Teachers’ Professional Development” a range of Inquiry methods were considered appropriate. During this year we have also seen a range of approaches, with some groups
utilizing web-based surveys, others engaged in focused professional conversations. Some have used readings from relevant areas of literature as bases for discussion while others have used Action Research or Appreciative Inquiry. The commonality has not been the method, but the process of meeting over time with some structure, and the content and focus decided by participants.

As we have progressed with our understanding of methods, readings on methods and approaches have been distributed to facilitators to extend their exposure to current literature on Inquiry approaches (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) or professional development (Webster-Wright, 2009). We hope to learn more and to share more information with teachers and districts about some of the methods and approaches used to support Inquiry.

c. Conversation and discourse is deepening our understanding and learning

When Inquiry group participants meet, they talk. But the talk is facilitated so that it is focused, professional, and linked to learning, whether of students or teachers. One common tool used by most of the BCTF Inquiry groups this year has been developing group norms of behaviour at the start of an Inquiry group. In this approach, each group brainstorms what they want as norms, and then consensually decide what the norms for that group are. Most include norms such as respect for others’ statements and ideas, equal ‘air-time’ and no domination by individuals. Norms, once decided, are posted and referred to if they appear to be challenged or broken.

Inquiry groups use dialogue/conversational tools as one basis for exploration and understanding. We are learning more about how conversation can extend thinking, about how probing questions might enable deeper understanding. We are also building on the collaborative conversation model developed over years by BCTF staff. Sometimes we have observed that critical challenges might play a useful role, and have explored some of the literature on critical friends (Swaffield, 2004). Conversation allows for exploration, it allows for scaffolding of ideas so that others in a group, by using active listening skills, can offer input to extend thinking. The use of professionally-focused and facilitated conversation allows for the complexity and nuances of practice to be explored in depth and links to much recent literature on notions of ‘professional learning’ (Webster-Wright, 2009; Darling-Hammond et al. 2008) which stress moving focus away from prescribed and controlled professional development and towards professional learning which recognizes authentic learning concepts.

Some of the skills of facilitating, extending and challenging conversation and perspectives have been incorporated into the three meeting and training sessions that have taken place with group facilitators.

Facilitators consistently commented at the provincial training sessions about their growth as group process facilitators beyond ‘having a plan with interactive strategies’ ready. Their inner capacities to let go to the group, to relinquish their plan for the relevant topic, to be vulnerable,
and to use deep listening and questioning skills were emerging. Expertise was acknowledged as within the participants and within themselves, once the conversation

**The project as a catalyst for union discussions on professional development and building partnerships with School Districts.**

**a. union leadership on professional development**

There has been considerable interest in terms of the BCTF’s Inquiry approach during the first year of this project from local teacher associations and among BCTF members. One indication of this interest was that there were significantly more applications for funding than could be offered, both from local teacher associations in partnership with school districts, as well as from BCTF Provincial Specialist Associations (PSAs). This high level of interest was followed by discussion about the project in many BCTF locals across the province, starting with presentations at the BCTF summer conference in Kamloops in August 2008. These discussions focused on the nature and methods of Inquiry, the role of the BCTF and local teacher association in support of Inquiry projects, engaging school district administrators to consider partnership and collaboration, and why this approach was being supported by the BCTF and funded by the Ministry of Education.

In addition, there have been a number of requests from locals and school districts for presentations about teacher inquiry as professional development, with presentations taking place in districts across the province. At these presentations, some attended both by BCTF members, school-based administrators and by school district staff, there has been increased interest in both Inquiry and in collaboration between union and districts to consider how to support teachers’ professional development through Inquiry.

In the locals and school districts where inquiry projects have occurred, there have been frequent discussions with local Presidents and professional development Chairs concerning the particular Inquiry in their local and about the concept of Inquiry and its application in teachers’ work and professional development. Some locals have reported positive feedback from their members engaged in the Inquiry. One local teacher association President said:

*I am receiving very positive response about the Inquiry project from the teachers I speak to .......... I sat in quite a few of their meetings and I really got a super positive sense from them, and could see that they were very engaged.*

**b. Building partnerships with school districts and universities**

The projects have acted as a catalyst, fostering debate about professional development within and beyond the locals and districts where Inquiry has occurred. For a teacher union, supporting teachers’ self-directed professional development the projects models one kind of preferred
professional development, also opening up such modeling for consideration by teachers and by school district staff. They also provide the opportunity to create and extend partnerships with school districts.

At the outset of a local/district inquiry project, one district administrator commented: “This is an exciting initiative which fits well with the district focus on collaboration and our strong history regarding teacher involvement in action research.”

In most of the districts where Inquiry groups occurred, BCTF staff engaged in both formal and informal discussions about the establishment, operations and reflections of the Inquiry group with Superintendents or senior district staff. One Superintendent, during a presentation by Inquiry group participants to district staff and trustees, stated:

“Personally I believe that this is the best kind of pro-d there could be so we will do the best we can to find whatever funds we can find ..... let’s make it happen.”

Local presidents interested in the initiative stated that this project gave them a leadership opportunity with their Board. It allowed them to initiate a union/board professional learning experience, represented by shared resources, inclusive group participation, and common interest in a topic of mutual concern to the district, teachers, and ultimately, student learning. Being able to promote teacher leadership around an educational topic and promoting teachers learning together, resonated with the local union leadership of presidents and local PD Chairpersons.

In some of the districts, seminars were held where BCTF staff presented on Inquiry approaches to meetings of district staff and local union leadership. Such presentations encouraged management-union discussions about current literature on Inquiry as professional development, and how a three-way partnership (BCTF, School district, local teacher association) can support the development of Inquiry groups in their district.

In terms of university partnerships, there have been a range of partnerships over years, two of which attracted significant SSHRC funding. A current partnership with the University of British Columbia (UBC) involves working in one Vancouver elementary school where teachers are using Inquiry to consider their use of interactive whiteboards and how such use is changing their teaching and students’ learning. Teachers have presented at a previous CSSE conference and are currently in the process of writing chapters for a book on their Inquiry.

d. Developing teacher leadership

Building Inquiry builds teacher leadership. Facilitation reflects one form of leadership as teachers build skills to support group processes and by so doing support the professional learning of other teachers. Some of the facilitators are now being requested by locals and school districts to speak on teacher inquiry, reflecting a growing confidence among teachers that their peers can offer a leadership in terms of ideas and processes.
One of the most powerful descriptions of leadership applied in educational settings was described by Jackson & Payne (2002), quoted in Rhodes et al. (2004) and might well form the ideal of teacher leadership epitomized by facilitators in collaborative inquiry groups:

In the literature from the ‘learning organizations field’, it is viewed that leaders are stimulators (who get things started); they are story tellers (to encourage dialogue and aid understanding); they are networkers and problem solvers too. They tend to value a wider social repertoire than has been customary in hierarchical educational settings, in order to encourage openness and to foster and support relationships during times when members are wrestling with ambiguity. They will build trust. They will model improvisation and be comfortable with risk-taking and spontaneity. They will also care, deeply, about teachers and about children and about education because that is the source of emotional energy for others. Intriguingly they will be less personally ambitious, perhaps a long time in post, and will instead be remorseless about improvement. As leaders, they will place priority on the school as a context for adult learning. They will support staff at all levels to be able to make more sense of and interpret the emerging circumstances of school improvement.” (p. 115)

The use of technology

Discussions about the prevalence of technology and its impact on education abound in the educational literature, with consideration of ‘knowledge societies’; (Hargreaves, 2003); ‘new economies’ (Macdonald & Hursh, 2006); diverse modes of representation and expression such as visual and spatial expressions in multi-media forms, often transmitted through mass media (New London Group, 1996). Gee (2003) argued that video game producers have understood principles of learning that they have incorporated into video games that educational systems have ignored. Technology is pervasive in society, in terms of communications, and entertainment. Its use in education is expanding with concepts such as Universal Design for Learning (Rose, Meyer & Hitccock 2005). Technology has also impacted educational research, with sophisticated software for quantitative and qualitative data analysis. Access to such software has generally been limited to academic researchers, with practitioner researchers generally relying on somewhat conservative and mostly non-technological approaches to Inquiry. There are exceptions (Capobianco & Lehman, 2006;Mckay, 2006), but the few articles linking technology to teacher inquiry/action research tend to be written in either technology or subject-related journals rather than in journals linked to qualitative or action research/teacher inquiry. This suggests that any current interest in technology and teacher inquiry may be emanating from those with an initial interest in the technology rather than from those with a primary interest in teacher inquiry.

The union’s interest in technology (for the focus of this paper) is in terms of ascertaining its utility to support Inquiry. The project Wiki has utility in terms of:

- Project management
Everything from project application templates to individual and project reports are stored on the Wiki, providing a ‘one-stop shop’ for the union staff’s project management team of two. When a new article on teacher inquiry appears that we think has utility to the group, it’s posted. As we develop a resource, such as ‘An Inquiry group’s first session’ or ‘Tips for data collection and analysis’, it’s posted and can be retrieved by any member of the group as and when needed.

- **Accessing information for participants**
  Facilitators often need information and resources – Action Research articles, facilitation tips, issues related to group dynamics. Instead of one person requesting and receiving a resource, it’s posted so that all the group may consider its utility and application. When a relevant web page of YouTube video resonates, it can be posted and accessed.

- **Project reporting**
  Instead of trying to draft a report to present within the union and externally at the end of the year, on-going Wiki sections and entries provide both a frame and the content of a project report. With the writing of our year-end (48 page) report, much of the contents were simply taken from the Wiki.

- **Democratizing communication in Inquiry**
  The Wiki is limited access but is open to all the 18 facilitators. Each person with access can add and edit content, which means that the Wiki potentially can be a democratic space without hierarchical control over content and authorship.

- **Accessing the ‘spaces between’**. This has proved useful in the sense that Inquiry groups meet once a month, but during the spaces between meetings, participants and facilitators can access information, share strategies on topics as varied as facilitation, data collection and sharing useful articles from the literature.

In addition to the use of Wikis we are also using Elluminate web conferencing, as reported on in another section of this paper, and increasingly using video to capture teachers’ reflections on Inquiry experiences and approaches. In addition we are experimenting with a number of Web 2.0 technologies to document and share information about Inquiry.

**Expanding the Inquiry community**

The concept of Inquiry usually involves community and collaboration. As teacher unions increasingly develop Inquiry approaches, it becomes more feasible to develop a pan-Canadian community of teacher unions interested in Inquiry approaches. Such a network, while initially linking interested teacher unions, need not be exclusive to unions but might include university faculty and school district personnel who wish to share their approaches to supporting teacher inquiry. The capacity to develop such a community has to some extent been limited both by the decision of several teacher unions to end their affiliation with the Canadian Teachers’ Federation (CTF) and by an arguable lack of cohesive planning and direction within the CTF. Nevertheless,
there are tentative plans to connect Inquiry approaches in three provinces: BC, Alberta and Ontario, an idea to be discussed at the CSSE conference in Montreal.

**Conclusion**

The BCTF’s Inquiry approach is at a crossroads, with positive development of Inquiry in a range of school districts across the province, while also facing the end of external funding support. This paper and other work attempts to reflect on our experiences and learning in order to direct our thinking and energies as we move into another year building our Inquiry approach with whatever internal budgets and partnership contributions that can be found.

We better understand Inquiry through our analyses of literature and from our experiences while also recognizing that we have much to learn about facilitation, professional conversations, sharing and reporting our work. Our improved utilization of technology has energized various Inquiry projects, and enabled us to communicate more effectively across geographically-dispersed projects.

We also feel that in spite of limited funding we have established a solid base and enduring interest in building union Inquiry and in forming partnerships and collaborations with school districts and universities. This base and interest provides a sense of qualified optimism that union-led Inquiry in BC is sustainable and will continue as a form of teacher professional development promoting teacher autonomy and reflection on practice in communities of peers.

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