



## Learning through discovery: A case study in inquiry-based learning



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My name is Thomas Nulley-Valdes, and I'm a lecturer in Spanish Studies at ANU. In my language based classes, my Spanish classes, I use inquiry based learning as an active learning technique in the classroom. I've been using this technique probably about five years or more in the classroom, and I think that it really It's a wonderful way to, to learn.

I use it most especially when I introduce new grammatical content and things like that for the students that they might not be acquainted with. And hence the inquiry approach so that they can encounter this, a new grammar concept or a new idea. A new tense or something like that for themselves and try and figure it out and that's the kind of the process of the inquiry based learning.

There's a little bit more to it, but essentially, to set them I guess some material for them to look into and then arrive at some sort of conclusion for themselves. I always begin the activity with some sort of stimulus material, like I said, a reading or like a text or an interview that they can read and unpack and then analyse.

The content of before all this happens, I explained to them that this process is one that is, they might not be used to. We're gonna break up into groups. We're gonna look at the material, we're gonna find the new content, we're gonna analyse the new content, and we're gonna find the rule or the grammatical rule, or the conclusion or the answer.

I think that what it does is that the inquiry based learning puts the focus of the learning in the student's hands and the student's mind. What it does is it essentially is asking them a hard question, a big task, to basically equip themselves with the skills to analyse a problem, analyse a question, and to autonomously inquire after it and find a solution to that question, that problem.

And I think that's quite different to other methods, which might rely a little bit more on the teacher to explain a problem and break it apart. And I find that the difference here is that instead of the student needing to just remember or in some ways memorise sometimes, What happened in the class, or the kind of explanation of how it worked when the teacher explained it.

They're actually doing that working out themselves in their classroom. And not only is it more memorable, but I think that actually deeper learning takes place in that process. Because they're the ones that have to figure it out, rather than just being told and trying to remember it. I think that I've seen it most effectively deployed in that kind of second to third year level for sure.

So I see it work really well in a classroom dynamic that has basically in the first instance lost some of their inhibitions or their kind of fears about speaking out or, they have a level of confidence in their own ability. And I think as a teacher, you have a real role to play in that.

I always put them in small groups so that they feel a bit safer. It's not something that they have to do completely alone. Everyone has a voice in a little group and then they can have a voice in front of the whole group. Sometimes the groups really struggle, but what I do in the classroom is I always go around to each and every individual group to just check, how they're tracking, how you're going.

I afford them plenty of time to unpack and analyse the problem and figure it out, so I don't, I don't try and rush them, it has to take its time. And I basically check in and sometimes I'll ask them, what have you gotten to, what's your kind of. Hypothesis, I ask them. I have a bit of scientific language about it.

What's your hypothesis? What is your, what do you think's happening here? And then they'll say, they'll answer, we don't know, but we think it's this, maybe. And then when I'll say, I'll ask the question back to them, the kind of Socratic method of asking what do you think?

Are you, how confident are you? Have you tested your hypothesis with the other examples? Do they meet the criteria? Are you, do you think you're right? And then sometimes, you'll, in that, you're equipping them with that self checking, that kind of revision of their own learning. Are they Just taking a stab and then going do will explain the answer to me soon.

Or, you're trying to get them out of that mode and say actually no, I want to be I want to be sure that I've got it right. And so I'm going to double check and triple check that I have it right. And then when I come around and I've asked them, how are you going? And they've gone, yeah, we figured it out.

We think it's this. And I say, how do you know? And they say, oh, cause this example. And you're like, well done. You give them a pat on the back, one of the challenges of using a technique like this is that it is more time consuming, you could say, than just explaining new content from the teacher to the students.

It is going to require time to give them to work out that problem, to figure it out and to get to an answer in a way that they actually feel satisfied that they've figured it out, right? So that is one challenge, so you need to create time in your class to do that. You also need to be aware that, I think this works really well in small groups.

I think in large groups this could be quite challenging to do, because if you had, 30 groups to go and visit, you might not be able to make, meet them all and see what they're tracking in your lot of time. So smaller group classrooms, 30 students is probably a nice sweet spot I have found.

I've really only had it work in like tutorial settings. Mostly in a space, like a physical space where students can interact easily. I think another one of the challenges might be that that, like the frustration that students sometimes feel they're not always used to being in the driver's seat of their learning.

Sometimes they've assumed a backseat and they just want you to tell them the answer, please, . But the fact is you can't, you have to resist in this method, you have to resist and you have to ask those questions. You have to. Give them clues and tips and really, if they're struggling and throwing their hands up, obviously you've got to really pitch in and help them out.

But the point is to try and help them figure that out for themselves. The advice I would give is to just give it a go. That's the most, the best advice I can give you is to give it a go.