



# **DESCRIPTIVE INQUIRY AT BANK STREET**

Building Intellectual Community  
while Responding to Accreditation

**BUILDING INTELLECTUAL COMMUNITY**

February 2018

# BUILDING INTELLECTUAL COMMUNITY

Despite the predictable challenges that arose as the dean and her leadership team introduced and implemented the school-wide inquiry process in a higher education setting, as well as the challenges that seemed unique to the cultural and historical context of Bank Street as an institution, the dean and the Assessment Task Force made significant strides over the school year. Participants in the Assessment Task Force and the focal inquiry group were able to more readily articulate the purpose and value of the inquiry process over time, and expressed an eagerness to participate again the following year. They also got better at doing it and began to recognize the importance of, and even call for, more discipline in their meetings. This gradual but steady progress was carefully fostered by the dean, who took deliberate steps to model the Descriptive Inquiry process itself, as well as the facilitation of the process. Moreover, she built structures, such as the Assessment Task Force and reporting mechanisms, to build ownership and distribute leadership for the process across the institution. Finally, she carved out significant time for faculty to practice the work of inquiry and committed the School to the process over several years.

The dean had deep familiarity and experience with the process of Descriptive Inquiry and chose to use this method with the faculty as a means of both systematically looking at evidence of practice and building a general culture of intellectual curiosity about educator preparation practice within Bank Street programs. One way she worked toward this goal was by teaching the Assessment Task Force members directly about the process of Descriptive Inquiry. In each of the Assessment Task Force meetings, and at two faculty meetings, the dean was deliberate about modeling the process of looking at evidence. She did not take for granted that members of the group would know what she meant by description and set the tone by providing examples of how to work with evidence of their teaching in this way. The dean repeatedly modeled in the Assessment Task Force meetings we observed, oscillating between

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modeling Descriptive Inquiry and facilitation. This had the two-pronged effect of teaching her leadership team how to do the work of inquiry and also how to lead others to do the work.

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The modeling the dean provided was one aspect of a larger strategy to build intellectual leadership in the institution. She also created systems and structures that helped others build their own capacity, such as the Assessment Task Force comprised of faculty chairs, the collection of meeting notes, and a group reflection on the inquiry process, all of which helped instill a sense of purpose. The groups analyzed their conversations over time and worked with the inquiry group facilitator to debrief and plan next steps.

Learning Descriptive Inquiry at Bank Street required time, patience and significant resources to support the process. While having a researcher studying their group was an asset for moving the work forward, documenting the themes that emerged and helping the group summarize those was a skill that Dean Traugh hoped to develop in the faculty chairs themselves. However, she recognized that the leadership skills and intellectual community she was building was a long-term project. Investing in research of the process was just another indicator that Dean Traugh recognized the learning curve and was willing to give faculty time to practice Descriptive Inquiry, both as leaders and participants, and created supports, which often came in the form of time, to get better at it.



***The Learning Agenda***

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