



DESCRIPTIVE INQUIRY AT BANK STREET

Building Intellectual Community
while Responding to Accreditation

BRIEF

February 2018

Over the 2016-17 academic year, Bank Street graduate faculty and staff participated in a school-wide Descriptive Inquiry process to examine their programs and pedagogy. Descriptive Inquiry is a phenomenological process based on close observation, documentation, and description and is shaped by the use of a family of descriptive processes developed by the Prospect Center, such as the Descriptive Review of the Child, the Descriptive Review of Work, and the Descriptive Review of Teaching Practice. As part of the process, the faculty met regularly to share practices and to strengthen Bank Street's well-established programs in teacher and leader preparation, museum education, and child life. They also used Descriptive Inquiry to respond in meaningful ways to external accreditors. They were organized so that the chairs of each group were concurrently members of the "Assessment Task Force," which was responsible for analyzing programmatic data and making recommendations for improvement. Dean Cecelia Traugh initiated this work, drawing on her extensive experience implementing Descriptive Inquiry in higher education settings, in order to help faculty members reflect on their practice, improve program quality, and build organizational coherence.

This report describes the second year of an ongoing and multi-year process. This year, 2017-2018, the faculty is engaged in the third year of the work of the program assessment inquiry.

The inquiry work has taken on some new aspects as it weaves itself more closely into programmatic work. The department chairs and dean moved to tie the inquiry work more closely to Bank Street programs in two ways: naming key ideas important to the Bank Street approach and asking that these ideas serve as lenses for study.

As a result of their choices, this year the faculty has formed groups around curriculum, development, assessment, inquiry, and research. Each group has selected one or two lenses to focus their work. These lenses are: Developmental-Interaction, Racial Literacy, Language: Access for Emergent Bilingual Students, and Artistic/Experimental Spirit. Another example of growth is how the chairing of each group is being done. The chairs of each 2017-18 group are new to the process and not members of the Assessment Task Force as they were last year. The new chairs meet regularly with the dean to share their group's work and to practice the discipline of describing evidence.

The implications of this work get clearer to the faculty with each year of work. It is an important step for the work to begin to be integrated as a new strand in the carefully woven fabric of Bank Street's programmatic and assessment work.

*The dean
introduced
Descriptive
Inquiry as
a means
of building
intellectual
community
across the
Graduate
School.*

COMPILING THIS REPORT

To build the Graduate School's capacity to engage in Descriptive Inquiry, Dean Traugh organized the faculty into several inquiry groups that met monthly. The work of the groups was to systematically and collectively examine aspects of their educator preparation practice to identify strengths and areas for improvement. Faculty members were assigned to groups based on issues they named as important to their program and teaching. In those groups, they designed questions for self-study, collected and analyzed evidence, and eventually made claims about their courses and programs and identified areas for improvement or for further inquiry.

While the inquiry is in its third year, our report chronicles the second year of this process, following an initial year in which the dean introduced Descriptive Inquiry as a means of building intellectual community across the Graduate School. During the year of this study, each of the groups was led by a member of the "Assessment Task Force," which was charged with making recommendations for programmatic improvement tied to the CAEP accreditation standards. The Assessment Task Force met every three weeks to plan for the faculty inquiry meetings, discuss their progress, and build their own collective practice of inquiry by employing a Descriptive Inquiry method.

In January 2017, we began to study how this process unfolded to better understand how Bank Street faculty were engaging in inquiry. We asked:

- 1. How, if at all, do individual faculty members and the organization as a whole make use of the inquiry process to examine and share current curricular and instructional practice?**
- 2. How, if at all, do they build new ways of working on individual and collective problems?**

DATA SUMMARY

GROUP	DATA TYPE	(n=)	ORGANIZATIONAL LAYER (I=individual, G=group, O=organizational)
Whole Faculty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All monthly faculty inquiry notes • End-of-year reports • Dean interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 16 • 5 • 2 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I, G, O • I, G, O • O
Assessment Task Force	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting transcripts and notes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8 transcripts • 9 sets of notes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • G, O
Focal Inquiry Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monthly meeting transcripts • Monthly debrief interviews with facilitator • Pre and post interviews with focal inquiry group members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 • 5 • 16 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I, G • I, G • I, G

FINDINGS

To answer these questions, we examined three layers of the inquiry process across time: individual, group, and organizational (see Data Summary). Data include meeting notes from all six inquiry groups over the course of one academic year; observations and transcribed recordings from one group that we selected as a focus based on their examination of a central pedagogy of Bank Street – modeling; observations and transcribed recordings of the Assessment Task Force; transcribed interviews with the dean; summary reports from each of the groups, and transcribed interviews with the faculty lead and participants of the focal inquiry group. We used both inductive and deductive codes to arrive at our findings.

Drawing from three theoretical models appropriate for understanding organizational change in higher education settings (Kezar, 2001), we coded our data to see in which ways, if at all, the inquiry process helped the organization to:

- 1. Evolve in response to external demands (evolutionary model);**
- 2. Construct knowledge together (social cognition model); and**
- 3. Create cultural norms that supported systematic examination of practice with the purpose of program and pedagogical improvement (cultural model).**

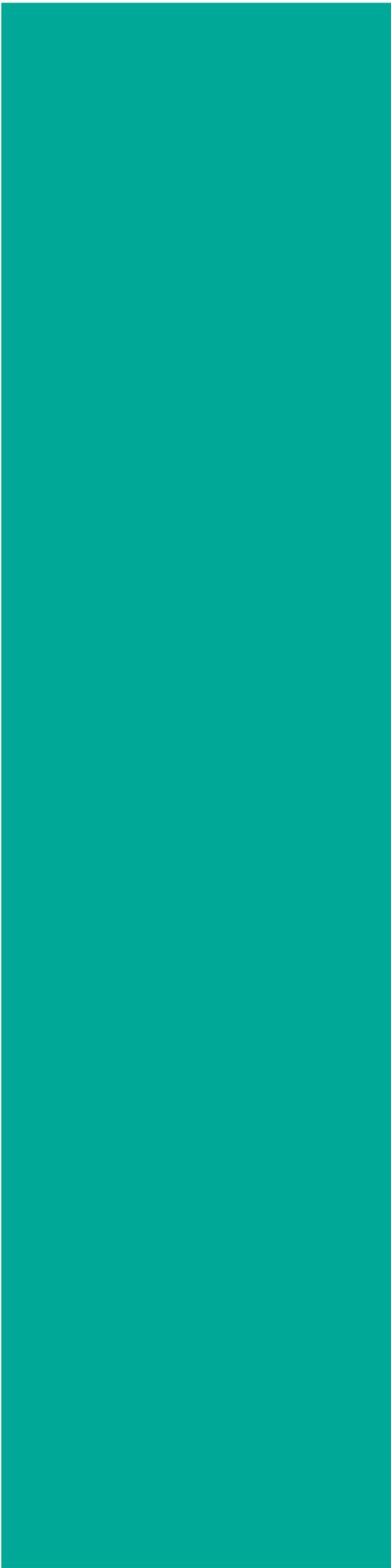
Our data indicate that using the Descriptive Inquiry process on a school-wide scale shows great promise to move an education faculty toward coherence and through a process of program improvement. Faculty members and administrators reported several benefits of participating in the process that was led by the dean and the Assessment Task Force. Our theoretical frame enabled us to identify change along multiple dimensions. For example, the evolutionary model of change allowed us to see that faculty members grew in their appreciation for the use of evidence in designing learning for future educators, which will help them meet the criteria set by their external accreditation body.

The social cognition model helped us see the opportunities for cross-programmatic learning, access to peer feedback, and opportunities for self-reflection that the school-wide process facilitated. Finally, the cultural model of change enabled us to account for an increase in collegial interaction and camaraderie, as well as comfort with taking an inquiry stance toward teaching and programs. These models also served to highlight the significant challenges the dean and her leadership team encountered as they implemented the process. Challenges fell into three main categories:

1. **Learning**, which describes challenges related to the learning required in practicing a new discipline at both the personal and institutional levels
2. **Structural**, which describes the systemic and logistical impediments to implementing a large-scale inquiry
3. **Cultural**, which describes the shared meanings, values, historical memory, and interpersonal aspects of the institution that shaped how faculty and leadership enacted the inquiry

Finally, we also found that this institution met these challenges with solutions appropriate for a higher education context focused on developing educational practitioners. These solutions included strong leadership and robust models of the inquiry process, opportunities to practice and dedicated time for collaborative learning, and structural supports that fostered leadership development across the institution.

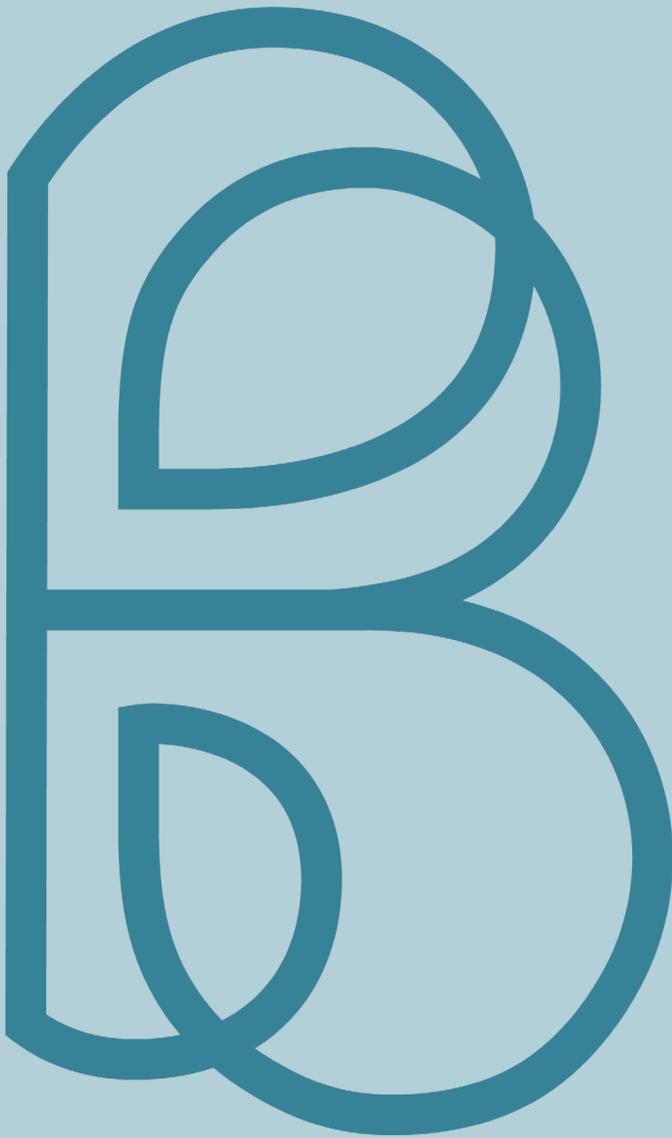
The cultural model of change enabled us to account for an increase in collegial interaction and camaraderie, as well as comfort with taking an inquiry stance toward their work.



This report of Bank Street's efforts to implement Descriptive Inquiry on a school-wide scale offers a counterexample to the highly rational compliance orientation to assessment of future educators and preparation programs that has permeated much of the discourse on educator preparation. This report focuses on how individuals, professional learning communities, and the organization as a whole were able to collect and systematically consider qualitative evidence as a means of meeting the accreditation standards and their own commitment to deep reflection on teaching and learning.

Our findings indicate that while this process is slow, it is meaningful for the individuals who participate and can bring about significant change in the discourse and habits of mind that permeate an institution. Faculty members reported increased collegiality and time for reflection, and have begun to seek and use evidence to answer questions about program quality and student learning. However, our findings also show that even in a highly value-aligned organization such as Bank Street, structural challenges such as scheduling, "siloed" programs and areas of expertise, and simply a lack of time complicate the implementation of this initiative.

And, perhaps because of its highly value-aligned culture, Bank Street also experienced noticeable cultural resistance to systematizing processes for examining evidence and making arguments about their teaching and programs. The dean and her leadership team worked steadily at overcoming these challenges, by modeling Descriptive Inquiry, by building key individuals' capacity, and by planning for a multi-staged process over several years.



The Learning Agenda

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