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# Descriptive Inquiry at Bank Street: Building Intellectual Community while Responding to Accreditation

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# **DESCRIPTIVE INQUIRY AT BANK STREET**

Building Intellectual Community  
while Responding to Accreditation

February 2018



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With deep appreciation to the faculty and staff who participated in this study. Your willingness to be observed, recorded, and interviewed will enable the larger Bank Street community to reflect on the ongoing process of learning a collective discipline.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
COMPILING THIS REPORT.....	3
FINDINGS.....	5
A. BENEFITS.....	7
B. CHALLENGES.....	10
C. BUILDING INTELLECTUAL COMMUNITY.....	13
CONCLUSION.....	15
REFERENCES.....	16

# INTRODUCTION

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?**

To answer these questions, we examined three layers of the inquiry process across time: individual, group, and organizational (see Data Summary). Data include meeting

## DATA SUMMARY

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

# FINDINGS

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.*

# BENEFITS OF FACULTY INQUIRY

With few exceptions, the focal inquiry group members identified benefits for their practice and the institution from participating in the inquiry group. One faculty member commented after the first two meetings, “It [the inquiry group] definitely helped me think more about my teaching,” and another explained after the same interval, “I’m finding myself within the last two weeks kind of saying, this inquiry’s impacting my practice, or at least my reflection around it.” These positive assessments increased as the inquiry group met over several months, and in the final interview, some faculty who had been reluctant or confused about the purpose early on were more convinced of its value. One faculty member, who, in the first interview, expressed difficulty tracking the group’s work because of multiple commitments, identified significant benefits in the final interview for the study. “The structure [of the inquiry] forced me to stop thinking about modeling as I know it and forced me to listen to fellow faculty who I respect. So it was good for me, because I can get locked into my own definitions.”

**Increased collegial interaction and camaraderie.** Nearly all of the faculty members spoke in interviews and reports about the joys of working with one another through the inquiry process. While the institution is relatively collaborative and collegial for a higher education environment, many organizational barriers to sharing practice and building relationships persist. One faculty member’s comment represents what was a widely-held view, “There’s something about being in a room with people [whom] I deeply respect. They have years and years of experience with students, and they almost always model themselves something I haven’t thought about, or ask me a question that helps me go deeper.”

**Cross-programmatic sharing.** Faculty members particularly appreciated the opportunity to work with their peers from other programs, or with whom they didn’t have regular interaction. In the final report, members of one inquiry group stated that the inquiry process had “allowed us to get to know each other better and to know each other’s work better.” And yet, another report explained, “The process of our work was impactful for the opportunity for the group to develop professional empathy for one another’s work. We were able to talk across and within one another’s work.” Another group reflected in their final report, “The fact that we represented quite a mix of disciplines allowed for a kind of reflection that is very different from what many of us are used to,” and “We all gained a lot from the mix of programs represented in our group.” This type of cross-program sharing felt like a luxury amidst the sometimes insular, day-to-day work within a discrete educator preparation program.

**Access to peer feedback.** Over the span of the academic year, the focal inquiry group members shared aspects of their practice with their colleagues. These included oral retellings of their work with students, artifacts from practice such as assignments and course evaluations, and examples of student work. In one example, when one faculty member shared a template she gave students for taking low-inference notes while observing a child, she said that she was trying to figure out why the template worked for some students and not others. After reviewing the notes of a student who used the template, the group discussed how the student might be interpreting the directions and how some of the template might be reframed to become clearer about the purpose. One group member suggested, “I’m wondering if the word ‘required’ is what confuses them. Maybe the title has to be different than ‘The required elements of session notes.’” This exchange, in which a senior faculty member offered advice, was representative of the type of conversations that unfolded in the group. Often, faculty members would offer their expertise, judgment or suggestions

to another group member with the apparent purpose of helping to hone the other's practice. Almost all faculty reported this as a useful aspect of the inquiry group. The faculty member who shared her template, for instance, saw the benefit as "seeing the effect of what you have implemented and how people [are] perceiving it and whether your intentionality or purpose comes across."

**Opportunities for self-reflection.** Along with receiving useful feedback from peers, the members of the focal inquiry group relished the self-reflection that occurred as a result of participating in the group. A frequent sentiment expressed in interviews was succinctly captured in one straightforward comment, "I think it was useful for me... It pushed me to think about my own practice." Again and again, faculty members not only asserted that participating in the group was an opportunity to receive feedback, but also that participating in the group engendered a self-reflective disposition that was spurred by listening to others. One person shared how this dynamic worked for her. She explained, "[When] my colleague shared about her group's process with the protocol, ...I felt [it] was really enriching for me. It made me think about my practice and stuff I tried prior but hadn't done this year."

**Increased appreciation for the use of evidence.** A subtler, but critical, benefit of the inquiry process was an increasing awareness and appreciation for the use of evidence to guide decision-making at the instructional, programmatic and institutional levels. Within the inquiry group a few members sought to use evidence to ground their conversations even when it was difficult for cultural and historical reasons within the institution. At an early meeting of the focal inquiry group, one member encouraged another to consider what evidence she might use to judge the effectiveness of a classroom activity: "Is there evidence?" she asked. Later in the conversation, when faculty were discussing aspects of assignments they thought were effective, the member again stated, "I'm pushing for evidence." Taking this remark to heart, another stated, "I do appreciate the nudge to make the implicit more explicit."

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As faculty members carefully defined what constituted evidence within the inquiry group, the chair of the group, along with the chairs from all of the groups, participated in a parallel process to develop their own capacity to define and analyze evidence. This group, the Assessment Task Force, was chaired by the dean who led the group chairs through a rigorous process of Descriptive Inquiry, in which members shared pieces of evidence from their own groups. The dean insisted that members separate value judgments and questions about artifacts of practice they shared with the group, and modeled doing so herself at every meeting. For example, in one session, she counseled, “If you are going to notice, that is one layer. What wonderings come out of this? I think it is really important that as workers with evidence, we understand the difference between these two things...Another layer is how we interpret them. I think we are bound to do those things together, I think it is helpful as chairs if we know the difference.”

In describing their work with their faculty inquiry groups, using evidence of their students’ learning became a more pressing issue for the chairs as facilitators. For example, at an Assessment Task Force meeting midway through the year, one chair described how the group she was leading bristled at the notion of structure, which made it difficult to develop a systematic process for viewing evidence. She told the Assessment Task Force that it was “helpful to use accreditation” as a reason for a protocol, but that “structure got their [her group members’] backs up a bit.” She pushed forward, though, taking careful notes to instill a sense of structure and coherence between meetings, and asking people to stick to the evidence. She reported taking deliberate steps to make time for faculty members to “give a little context” before looking at the evidence, so

their need for informal conversation rather than strict structure could be met. This approach showed how this chair and her group engaged in parallel learning about the role of evidence – the group learned how to create a comfortable and rigorous process for looking at evidence and the chair learned how to accommodate the culture of the organization while helping it meet its learning goals as well as demands from external accreditors.

# CHALLENGES IMPLEMENTING THE INQUIRY PROCESS

Higher education faculty essentially work within two institutions: the college or university by which they are employed and the larger academic and professional community in which their area of scholarship and/or professional practice is situated. This often creates a conflict for faculty who must balance the needs of the employing organization and the desire for rewards that come from academic and professional prestige outside of the organization. Additionally, faculty are hired for their expertise in discrete areas of study and/or professional practice but have wide latitude in what and how they teach. For these reasons, faculty members often have little occasion to work in coherent ways with others outside their narrow areas of specialization or the programs they offer students.

At Bank Street College, faculty are more likely than those in many other higher education environments to coalesce around shared practices and ideas. The College's long history of a shared educational philosophy and approach brings them together in ways that might not be typical of teacher preparation faculty in less value-driven contexts. However, faculty autonomy, "siloes" areas of expertise, and competing incentive structures outside of the organization were present and affected the regularity and depth of their work with one another. The inquiry group provided a rare opportunity to come together with colleagues, and some faculty reported it was a struggle to understand their colleagues' perspectives. While the faculty expressed near universal appreciation for the inquiry process, they encountered difficulty in crossing longstanding disciplinary and organizational boundaries.

The challenges that confronted the faculty and the dean as they embarked on this process together were, to a large degree, learning challenges. Individual faculty, groups of faculty, and chairs of faculty groups had to learn to describe, analyze, and make arguments based on evidence and support their colleagues to do so by examining documentation of their practice, their colleagues' practice, and students' learning. Despite frequent discussion of low-inference observation and notetaking as a fundamental component of the programs they led, faculty were often uncomfortable using the same techniques to examine documentation of their colleagues' practice. Faculty often struggled with simply describing artifacts of practice and regularly asked one another for more context.

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Exchanges in the focal inquiry group meetings typically included long discussions of background information about the evidence faculty were examining. Sometimes such exchanges occurred in the Assessment Task Force group meetings as well. Inquiring at length about the context surrounding the evidence meant that groups spent much less time especially in the earlier meetings directly examining evidence than they might have. In the Assessment Task Force meetings, however, the dean took a strong role in redirecting the group to evidence, and the group responded by acquiring a shared appreciation of the discipline of looking at the data before them. In the focal inquiry group, it took longer (after the facilitator had practiced in the Assessment Task Force several times) for the group to practice a disciplined approach



to looking at documentation in a low-inference way.

### **LEARNING CHALLENGES**

The learning challenges the faculty, the Assessment Task Force, and the dean experienced throughout the process were multifaceted. Faculty were learning the practice of describing data and struggling to differentiate between evidence and data. They were also learning about how to employ evidence in assessing their students' learning and their own teaching. Assessment Task Force members were learning how to support their colleagues to do rigorous inquiry across the Graduate School, and the dean herself was learning how to support the School to take an inquiry stance to their practice.

### **STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES**

Implementing the Descriptive Inquiry process across a complex organization was accompanied by perhaps unsurprising logistical challenges. These came in the form of scheduling conflicts for faculty participants, lack of time within meetings and across the year to go deeply into the ideas that were surfaced, and disorganization as the faculty inquiry group began its work, but this abated significantly over time. Given the time between meetings, the various programs the faculty participants represented, and some absences of the facilitators and group members, it was hard for the group to gain momentum during the first few meetings despite the clear interest in modeling as a topic of inquiry. The group then, had several organizational challenges to solve right off the bat: creating systems and structures to chronicle their work as it progressed, creating norms for communication within the group and between meetings, and accounting for differences in content expertise across the members.

For a group that did not meet regularly outside the faculty inquiry process, getting organized took a large share of the group's energy for the first three meetings.

This finding was triangulated by the final reports submitted by several other inquiry groups, some of which contained details about the challenges for faculty to organize themselves given the multiple demands on their time and communication issues, particularly in the beginning of the inquiry process. Overall, groups reported beginning to systematically look at evidence several months into the school year; most were underway by February or March.

### **CULTURAL CHALLENGES**

The strong philosophical stance that undergirds faculty work at Bank Street was both an asset and a challenge for implementing this process. Repeatedly, faculty members referred to the "Bank Street way" as shorthand for the shared values and practices that united them. This enabled faculty to participate in the inquiry process with keen interest because they were deeply committed to socially constructed learning experiences and sharing practice. However, it also led to a perceptible difficulty in analyzing one another's practice and a resistance to structures and norms that would likely have facilitated their learning the discipline of Descriptive Inquiry sooner. For example, faculty rarely challenged one another's assumptions about their practice publicly. In fact, comments that confirmed the approach that faculty used in their classrooms and then shared with the group were omnipresent in the faculty inquiry group sessions and, to some extent, in the Assessment Task Force meetings. These comments further reified rather than challenged, the group's assumptions about their practice.

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Interviews with faculty indicated that most felt the value of participating in the group came not from challenging assumptions that underpinned their own or their colleagues' work, but rather learning what others were doing and perhaps modifying their own practice as a result. This was particularly evident in the case of junior faculty who appreciated the opportunity to learn from senior faculty. In addition to the reluctance of faculty to question one another's work and expose themselves to potential critique, faculty also resisted disciplining themselves to do the careful work of Descriptive Inquiry. Because the faculty placed a premium on relational learning, individuals, and context, it was sometimes difficult for them to see the value in refraining from intuiting meaning and giving fulsome explanations of the context. It was also difficult for them to engage in a collective discipline because each person's experience was highly valued. Even gentle objections to implementing a structured process for reviewing evidence easily dissuaded the entire group from sticking with it.

*Because the work to build intellectual community and coherence across the institution was fraught with learning, structural and cultural challenges, a key element of implementation was time and practice.*

# 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

*She recognized  
that the  
leadership  
skills and  
intellectual  
community she  
was building  
was a long-  
term project.  
This required  
time, patience,  
and significant  
resources to  
support...*

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.

*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, the dean and the Assessment Task Force made significant strides over the school year.*

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.

# CONCLUSION

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, "siloes" 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.

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***The Learning Agenda***

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