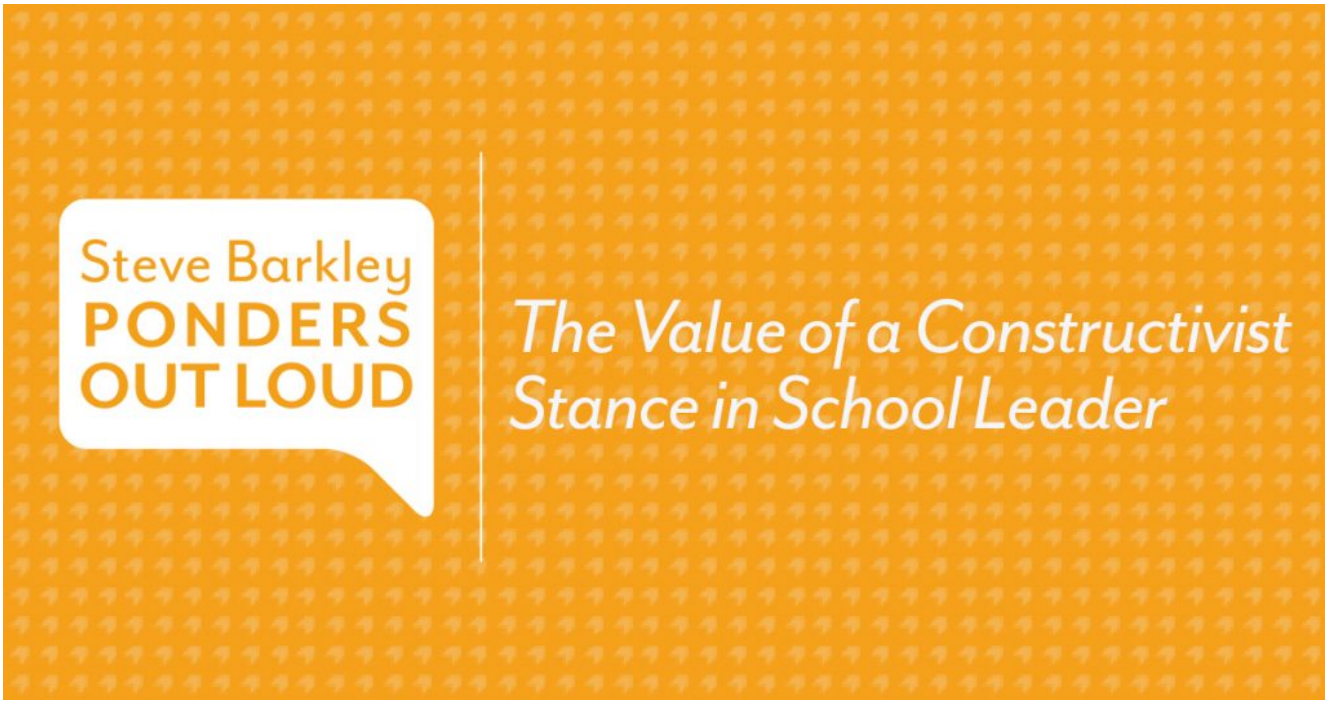
Podcast: The Value of a Constructivist Stance in School Leader



Jessica Vance, the author of "Leading with a Lens of Inquiry," describes how instructional coaches and administrators can guide teacher growth through inquiry. Leaning in…listening…and asking with curiosity. She describes the importance of modeling and maintaining spaces that honor agency, curiosity, reflection. and collaborative learning.

Connect with Jessica.

Subscribe to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast on iTunes or visit BarkleyPD.com to find new episodes!

PODCAST TRANSCRIPTSteve [Intro]: 00:00 Hello, and welcome to the Steve Barkley, ponders out loud podcast. Instructional coaches and leaders create the environment that supports teachers to continually imagine, grow and achieve. They model an excitement for learning that teachers in turn model for

students. This podcast is dedicated to promoting the important aspects of instructional leadership. Thanks for listening. I'm thrilled you're here.
Steve: 00:33 The value of a constructivist stance in school leadership. I had the opportunity to meet today's guest, Jessica Vance, at an instructional coach's conference in Texas. Jessica shared her interest in inquiry and she gave me a copy of her book. The title of her book is, "Leading With a Lens of Inquiry: Cultivating Conditions For Curiosity and Empowering Agency." A short way into the book, I knew that I wanted to invite her to join me for a podcast and happy to say here she is. Welcome Jessica.

Jessica: 01:06 Thank you so much, Steve. It's great to be here.

Steve: 01:09 I know that you have a very interesting job title, enrichment and environment coordinator. So I'm wondering if you'd start your introduction around your job title.

Jessica: 01:22 Yes. I tell all my students that it is basically the best job in the school and it really truly is. I get to engage with students and learn a little bit more about their interests and passions and cultivate community and learning opportunities for them to be exploring that, connecting with experts and the industries around the world also locally here in Austin and really developing partnerships to be able to support things that they're curious about and the things that they wanna learn a little bit more about. And then in tandem, getting to do some of that work with teachers and helping to support their instructional practices and embedding and integrating student interests. And then the environment piece comes into play because we back up to a nature preserve. And so we value place based learning and getting our students outside, engaging with the natural world around them, having them stop and pause and explore in some of our edible gardens and pollinator gardens and some of our

outdoor classrooms to really kind of tap into what is just right outside of the four walls of their classroom which of course has so many curricular connections, but also just that social and emotional wellbeing is something that we really value as a learning community together.

Steve: 02:38 Listening to your explanation there, I I have to share a short story. A whole lot of years ago when the testing craze first hit, there was a teacher that I met in Texas who worked at a school that had an environmental protected piece of property next to it. And the teacher shared with me that for years, she had done all of these activities with her kids. And during the summer, when she looked at her students incoming test scores, she was so stressed by how far behind there were that she made a decision she couldn't do the stuff. And so she put it off and she said that one day, about four weeks into the year, based partly on that, she couldn't handle the kids anymore. She sent them outside to do a a measurement of the silt in the stream that ran through sand they discovered that it had dramatically increased from the year before. Well, the long and short – that led to an overall total engagement and study and investigation that just went on and on and on. And at the end of the year, she posted the highest increase in students' standardized test scores across the school. So it was an awesome story and hearing you describe what's what's going on at your school there, your engagement in it, it just brought that registering back.

Jessica: 04:02 I love that. I love that connection. Thank you for sharing.

Steve: 04:05 Tell us what led to to your interest and study of inquiry.

Jessica: 04:10 You know, I fell into it actually by happenstance when I moved to Austin, Texas from California, about 12 years ago, and I accepted a position as a fifth grade teacher at an international baccalaureate school in the PYP

program. And I remember getting the job and talking to the principal, like, what is this IB thing? I wasn't sure I'd never heard of it before. And she's like, well, it's just best practice. Well, of course that's like a loaded statement. But I dove head in first and learn so much about constructivist values and a more student-centered approach to teaching and learning and curiosity and questioning and global perspectives. And so I think from that time, I've never looked back and I can't see teaching or learning another way, obviously leading in this way, hence the title of the book, "Leading With a Lens of Inquiry," and so it's just a passion of mine and it's something that I'm so glad that I just accidentally stumbled upon because it's made me who I am today.

Steve: 05:11 And my read of your book says that you see the exact same connection for teachers as for students.

Jessica: 05:21 Yeah. I stepped out of the classroom after about 10 years and always knewing knowing that I wanted to coach or lead because I had such strong leaders myself and I wanted to be able to be that for somebody else. When I was lost or stuck, I had some fantastic coaches and principles and other leaders who really stepped in and listened to me. And so I knew I wanted to give back. And when I stepped out of the classroom into the role of actually an IB coordinator, I did a lot of listening and a lot of learning and a lot of observing. And then from those actions, I just started to do some of the very same things that I did in the classroom with my students, listening being one of them. And then really like leaning in and asking questions, finding out a lot about my learners and the things that they were interested in.

Jessica: 06:07 And how could I connect that to the IB framework of what it is that we were exploring? And so, when I sat down with my principal after my very first year, she's like, how did you know how to do this? Like, you've never been a leader before, this is your first time out of the classroom.

I’m really surprised you were able just to find your way so quickly. What did you do? What did you read? And I said the same thing – I said, I just did the same thing I did with my students. And the connection right there was just super authentic. And so I’ve continued to get that feedback from others that I’ve coached along the way. They just said you do it differently, Jessica. And actually I interviewed a handful of teachers at my former school because I wasn’t sure if I could write a book, obviously you’ve written books.

Jessica: 06:49 And so there’s a lot of self-doubt. And what is it that I have to say, is it actually something that somebody wants to read or learn from? And so I interviewed a handful of teachers and all of them said the same thing as you did something different. I’ve never had a coach or a leader ask me the things that I was curious about and then lean in and listen, and actually do something with it. And so from there, feedback right there, right? Constructivist approach to learning and teaching is what convinced me that there was definitely something there and that looking at leadership in a different way was something that was missing from the role of leadership, especially in inquiry communities and schools.

Steve: 07:27 Well, there’s a section in your book that discusses the values of the constructivist educator as they’re applied to school leaders and you described them as that they invest time to model and maintain spaces that honor agency, curiosity, that you’ve just mentioned, reflection and collaborative learning. And I’m wondering if you’d kind of take those one at a time and and walk us through the key connection of each one.

Jessica: 07:57 Yeah. So honoring the agency of our learners means that we are giving space for their voices to be heard in an equitable way. That could be in the form of thinking routines at some staff development or some other professional learning, asking your learners what it is that they need, my principal does such a fantastic job each week of having a

weekly check in, and she says it's politely required. But it's just a series of a few questions, a handful of questions and usually one of them is like, "how are you doing? Is there anything that you need, do you wanna sit down and brainstorm?" Of course, there's some more targeted questions based off of some campus needs or some other action items, but really honoring the voice and then showing our learners that we're using it. Of course, that comes into play when we're developing our professional learning plan or campus goals.

Jessica: 08:48 So really leaning in and listening to the things that they want and then giving them the skills and the tools that they need in order to be able to activate their voice. We know in education that educators do not feel like they have a voice. So being real intentional about providing spaces for them to do so. I think that on campus that I was at that currently at a couple years ago, it wasn't that way and they didn't feel like their voices were honored or heard. And so I know that's something that we've been really intentional of with and mindful about doing for our teachers. Curiosity, again, if we're listening to our learners, we are leaning in and asking questions and listening, not waiting for them to tell us the thing that we wanna hear. What is it that we're listening for?

Jessica: 09:31 We're listening for patterns of thinking possible misconceptions, of course, their interests as well. So what is it that our learners are curious about and how can I as a leader in knowing a bigger picture and broader stance of where it is that we're going as a learning community, especially as it relates to our vision or mission statement, help connect those two pieces together. So there's this dance that we do as administrators and leaders, to be able to make that actually work within our given systems and it's definitely something that can be done. I'd say another example of this is we are all tied to teacher evaluation systems within our states or programs or countries or schools and

that’s fine. That’s a system that we have. But we’re really intentional about asking our teachers what it is that they’re curious about first, then looking at all those system things later, and then you get this more authentic opportunity of learning that unfolds during the year when you’re able to do so.

Steve: 10:32 I frequently describe that if I was interviewing for instructional coaches, curiosity is one of the top indicators I’d be looking for in the interview process. If you’re curious about teaching and learning, and when I figured out that that’s what basically what drove my success, I may have developed a lot of skills across the year, but I just find whatever’s going on in the brain in that teaching and learning process, whatever it is about the relationships, if a teacher starts a five minute conversation with me about something going on in the classroom, the curiosity just peaks – how’s she gonna make that happen? Why that’s gonna happen? What kids are gonna think about doing, I mean, I guess it’s the complexity of teaching and learning that make it such an exciting place for curiosity.

Jessica: 11:25 Yeah. I mean, it was evident when I saw you at region 13, right? Like even you presenting, I could tell you were curious about this topic because you shared so many reflections from your learners over the years and things that you noticed. So it was so evident in your language and in your sharing, it wasn’t something that you told me that you were, it was just how you embodied that disposition.

Steve: 11:47 Coaches are always looking for a list of the right questions. If you could just cut loose of that – if you’re listening and not curious, that’s probably not gonna happen, but if you’re listening and curious, it’s gonna emerge.

Jessica: 12:03 Questioning is a skill that we develop over time as well. I know a list of questions people are always

asking me the same thing – what questions do you ask? And I'm like, it's literally like the same five but you gotta be curious about what somebody's sharing, because the questions aren't magical unless you leverage that with other parts of being curious.

Steve: 12:26 The next piece you you listed was reflection.

Jessica: 12:30 Yes. Reflection is at the heart of inquiry. It's how our brains make meaning and so we need to be modeling and doing that as well. Of course, with reflection, as, you know, being a coach, when we are able to model reflection and where our thinking is going, it helps our learners to develop that skill as well. And reflection is not just sitting down and jotting something awe inspiring after you've had like a lesson. Reflection comes in in so many different ways. It's being curious, it's listening, it's stopping to pause to notice what is happening around us and then really to tuning in and dialing in and using that as feedback to respond to our learners. So yeah, reflection is something that I am modeling all the time and giving myself space to do. Too often, our lives are so busy and especially in education, we have so many things coming at us when really we're just reacting instead of responding with a lot more intention and a lot more mindfulness, that goes a lot longer of a way. So yeah, reflection of course again is at the heart of inquiry so it really should be of at the heart of who we are as constructivist educators, as well.

Steve: 13:43 As the school year's starting, I think a critical issue for leadership teams, for principals instructional coaches and their partnership to be reflecting on the past year as part of rushing into this year – I know the tendency is to rush out into this year, but we missed that opportunity on the learning of the past.

Jessica: 14:11 And then you go slow. When you go slow, you notice so many more things. And so going slow and modeling

that as a leader is so important so that way your teachers are doing that in the classroom with their students as well. And not just looking at the standards or other expectations is this checklist of something that I have to cover. And so modeling that reflective process and going slow and using questions to help us stop and pause is just such a valuable tool that we can practice as educators. Not always easy for sure, but is something that is well worth our
time and investment as well.

Steve: 14:46 The last one – go ahead.

Jessica: 14:47 Collaborative learning. Everything is always better together as you know, so providing opportunities for our learners to learn with one another and with ourselves. And I'd say that means going to team meetings and sitting in the learning, not just sitting on the side, but being in it with the teachers, asking questions, modeling your reflective thinking, and questioning. Modeling for them that you're learning as well. Of course like as a leader, teachers will look at you for the answer when instead we can shift our role as a learner, then it becomes this different space where we're learning with and for one another, and then we're able to offer more space for perspectives to come into the conversation, to guide our next steps together, to truly have it be a space where we're coming together and learning and reflecting with one another.

Jessica: 15:44 So that collaborative learning piece is huge and it's definitely non-traditional as it relates to leadership. And it's something that I love about my role and it's something that I truly believe that all leaders should actually be actively doing. I was actually just at a school in Cleveland on Friday, and I was suggesting to the principal and their IB coordinator, how often are you in classrooms? And they gave me all the list of the things that they have to do and I said, but you didn't answer me. How often are you in classrooms? And they're like, oh, I just don't have time. And

I said, you need to make the time. Your teachers need to see that you're connected to the things that they're curious about and those are some amazing learning opportunities that you're missing. So make the time, and I promise that it's going to empower you as a campus, empower you as a leader, and then really shift your role in the way that your teachers begin to look at you and how you guys come together.

Steve: 16:39 I started a lot of my very early work in in coaching – building peer coaching models kind of before instructional coaching was being talked about, getting teachers into each other's classrooms. And I'm wondering if you talk a little bit about a connection between peer coaching and inquiry.

Jessica: 16:59 Yeah. So I talk a lot about leveraging the power of learning walks is what I kind of like to call them instead of coaching. I think sometimes unfortunately, coaching doesn't always have a great feeling for teachers in school buildings. I know you and I were kind of talking about that a little bit before in regards to that deficit mindset piece, but the learning walks really, just that language, even just consider that language right there, learning walk, oh, we're gonna learn about something together. And so when we have some time with teachers whether it be at their team meetings or perhaps at some one-on-one time that I'm coaching a teacher, engaging in a learning walk really provides an opportunity again, for us to go back to those constructivist values of collaborative learning of really being curious with one another. And so going into classrooms and learning from one another and really giving a voice again, back to our teachers to know that they are two experts in the field and that the information and the knowledge doesn't just lie within me. And so it begins to create this collaborative culture that really is able to nurture inquiry because again, it puts the agency back in the center of the learning and of our learning communities.

Steve: 18:21 Could I ask you to take just a moment and describe, when you say learning walk, because what I find is the way a whole lot of other words can get twisted around and be a bunch of different things. I'm pretty certain there's something special in your learning walk that makes it connect with inquiry.

Jessica: 18:38 Yeah. So there's always a focus or some sort of target. And usually, I like to frame learning walks around a question because that nurtures curiosity, which again, is synonymous with inquiry and I don't frame it around a learning target. So I'm not saying we're gonna go look at phonics instruction. Again, if I'm still looking at something in regards to phonics, I wanna frame it around a question to begin to nudge my learners thinking in a certain way. So I'm really intentional about writing a question in order to evoke that. Of course I'm getting feedback from my learners about the things that they need, and then we'll engage in the learning walk and what that means is going into a classroom or a series of classrooms based off of that question. And then I always anchor it in some sort of thinking routine. Either I'll give them, it will be already just like on a sheet of paper, that's them for the, to fill out to guide and nudge some of their thinking along like maybe a see, wonder, a no, which is from the work of Ron Rechart and Mark Church, "The Power of Making Thinking Visible."

Jessica: 19:36 Or I'll just say, jot down your notes and then we'll come back to one of our learning spaces and reflect with one another. And again, I'm gonna anchor it in some sort of thinking routine or collaborative talk structure, because these are the things that I want our teachers to be engaging in with their students. It also slows down the learning, it slows down the thinking, it slows down the conversation. And so when we're in a classroom as the teachers are observing and looking at things, I'll often saddle up right next to them and perhaps I might nudge them a little bit further with some sort

of question or model my reflective thinking in that moment and say, “oh my gosh, Steve, did you notice what that student’s response was?” And I’m doing it in a genuine way, but again, I’m modeling language, I’m modeling reflection.

Jessica: 20:25 I’m modeling my curiosity in a way that’s gentle and the way that’s inviting and extends this invitation for exploration. And of course I have to read the room and not all of my learners want that or need that. But I’d say engaging in a learning walk that’s framed in a question and has thinking routines and space to truly reflect and discuss and talk about the learning are three things that I always consider as I’m designing and creating space for a learning walk. And if I don’t have time for one, for all of those three elements, then I don’t do it. I really need to make sure I can create the space and so I’ll make sure that I have the time in order to engage in all that. So that way the meaning is coming out of that learning walk and it’s not just another checklist of this thing that I did.

Steve: 21:12 The meaning is coming from the thinking that the participants are doing.

Jessica: 21:20 Yes, the meaning is coming from them. And I’m listening and responding to that. So if we’re engaged in a learning walk and they’re noticing the bulletin board that has nothing to do with the question, then, obviously it just kind of depends on the focus, but I might lean into that and say, tell me a little bit more about that. What’s striking you with that? And I’m looking for the cues of the things that they find meaning in. And if it’s, maybe it’s an interactive bulletin board, or maybe it’s a way to organize some things, then that’s a way that I’ll kind of take the learning possibly sometimes.

Steve: 21:51 So you’re learning too. You’re learning about your teacher students,

Jessica: 21:57 I am. Yeah. And I'm learning about the things that are important to them, and I'm responding to them in the moment. And
again, like if the learning has gone in a direction that I hadn't planned for but I want to, what I call is do a go back, I'll go back and I'll say like, hey, I'm super curious. We started this learning walk with this question. What does that mean to you now? Or have you noticed anything different? And I'll always do a go back. My learners know I do that all the time and it's out of genuine curiosity, not as a checklist of like, did you do this thing? But it's genuine curiosity of like, what's settling for you? And again, it's that gentle invitation to learn a little bit more about them and to support them in their work. So really trying to shift the role of "coach" in schools is definitely something that I think I write about in the book and I'm really passionate about in my role at my current campus right now, too.

Steve: 22:51 Well, Jessica, you proved that my intuition was right, that I knew this would be valuable and powerful. So thank you so much. Would you take a moment or two to tell listeners the best way for them to be able to connect with you, maybe with a question or find out more about your book and your work?

Jessica: 23:09 Yeah, so I have a lot of resources on my website. You can find me at leadingwithinquiry.com. So lots of things that I've used in my role as a coach and also as an educator. So I share a lot of things on there. I'm really passionate about sharing also on Instagram, you can find me on Instagram or Twitter, jess_vanceedu and I share my learning journey and my learner's journey in order to empower other leaders. And then of course the book as you so generously introduced this session with, but yeah, a lot of great ways to connect and I encourage your listeners to connect with me and questions that they have really honestly, and truly as you probably already know my learner's questions drive my next

steps. And it’s definitely evident in the resources and ways that I share and connect with others. So I extend an invitation to all of them.

Steve: 24:04 Well, thank you. We’ll be sure to put the link to your website and the lead-in to the podcast.

Jessica: 24:10 Thank you so much, Steve. It’s been so great to connect with you and learn from you and I’m very grateful for that.

Steve: 24:17 Thanks. Have a great day.

Jessica: 24:19 You too.

Steve [Outro]: 24:22 Thank you for listening. You can subscribe to Steve Barkley, ponders out loud on iTunes and Podbean. And please remember to rate and review us on iTunes. I also want to hear what you’re pondering. You can find me on Twitter @stevebarkley or send me your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com.