

Guiding Growth & Change

How Two Made-In-BC Protocols Can Help Forge a Path Through Tough Conversations

by

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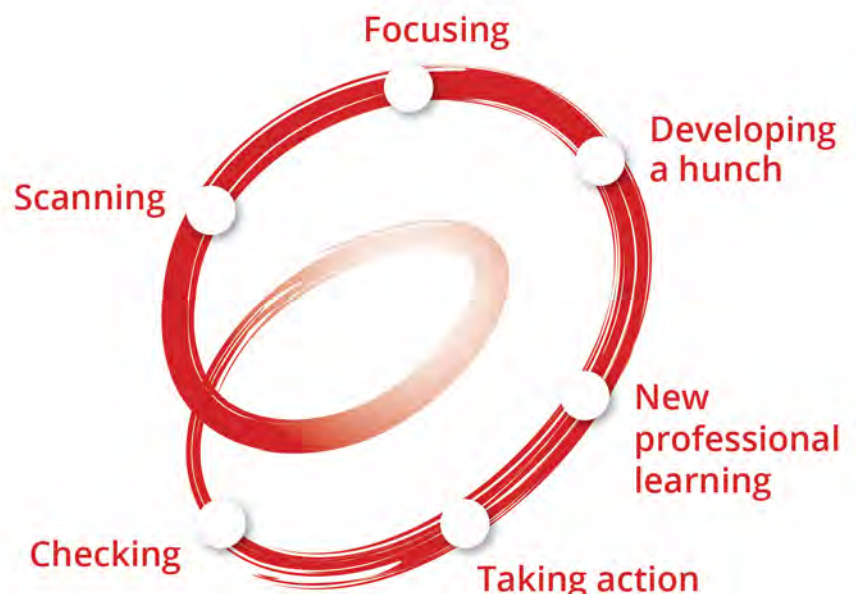
There are two made-in-BC protocols that provide a map for moving through the tough conversations sometimes required to improve educational experiences for learners: the Spiral of Inquiry (Kaser and Halbert, 2017) and the Decision Maker Moves (Failing et al, 2019). Used separately or together, these protocols require participants to get curious and creative, examine bias, hold true to proclaimed values, and work towards a worthy vision.

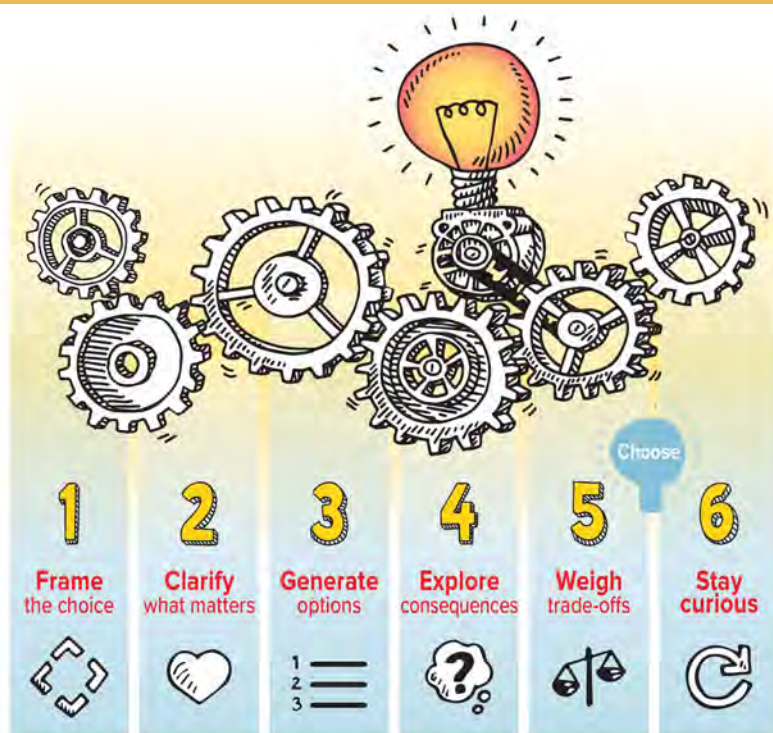
The **Spiral of Inquiry** is a student-focused, iterative, evidence-based model of collaborative inquiry, aimed at changing outcomes for learners in important areas.

There are six phases:

- Scan
- Focus
- Develop a hunch
- Engage in new professional learning
- Take action
- Check for impact

The Spiral Playbook (2017)





The **Decision Maker Moves** helps collaborators to arrive at the best possible decisions for their specific context.

There are six moves:

1. Frame the choice
2. Clarify what matters
3. Generate options
4. Explore consequences
5. Weigh trade-offs
6. Stay curious

The Decision Playbook (2019)

What makes this pairing so powerful is their sensitivity to context. No one can know your school in the way that you can – AND you can't know *all* of your school. In order to move towards any vision of students crossing stages with dignity, purpose, and options, school leaders need to invite the wisdom, perspective, and intelligence of educators in their school community; moving towards a vision requires collaborative inquiry, and collaborative inquiry is a process of decisions.

We show who we choose to be and who we want to become through the decisions we make.

No matter what your role, if you're a leader in any sense, these are vehicles for guiding growth and change, as exemplified by two vignettes from different districts and in different contexts within the K-12 system: elementary, and secondary/whole-district.

Vignette – Elementary: Brooke Douglas – Richmond

Our school story (school plan) is focused on improving students' ability to communicate their thinking and learning. We arrived at this focus by using the Spiral of Inquiry starting with *scanning*: asking students directly

and specifically about their learning. The initial stage was completed prior to COVID-19, and in returning to in-person learning this Fall, it became evident that our school story *focus* was still both accurate and reflective of our learners. This was definitely not the time to abandon that work, but rather to *take action* and look at it slightly differently given the impact of the pandemic on schools and school communities.

One of the impacts, of course, was school organization. We had to organize by cohorts – students and staff – by pairing each non-enrolling staff member with two enrolling divisions which would mean deciding carefully which cohorts would be paired with which non-enrolling staff.

It was critical to approach this decision through a lens that upheld our values and continued the work towards our Spiral, and was also sensitive to students' unique needs in the throes of the pandemic. I also wanted to make sure that we made the decisions in a way that honoured an individual's agency while ensuring we centered what learners needed (rather than, say, an individual teacher's preference to work with a friend).

In the clarification of what matters, the non-enrolling staff and leadership team outlined possible options

and weighed them against what we said we valued, what we said was important. We leaned heavily here on our health and safety guidelines as well as our focus in our school story, in our Spiral.

Some of the trade-offs were really challenging. This meant that not all classes would have access to library, or music, or a learning support teacher, and it was important to look closely at the potential impact of those choices.

We finally landed on a model we thought would serve student learning and keep people as safe as possible, where each individual was able to continue to work to their strengths, at least for most of the time. We also agreed to stay curious and to *check for impact* by revisiting our decision at a later date, to see if any tweaks were needed as we learned and saw more clearly how our decisions were playing out.

As the year has progressed, we have had cause to check for impact and revisit our decision several times. Each time we come back to what guides our decisions, and we measure our choices by our values, in alignment with the vision for learning and growth. Staff show strong support for decisions made in this way, the transparency and neutrality can be leaned on, the direction and focus remain steady and clear.

Vignette – Secondary and Whole-District: Brooke Moore – Delta

Prompted by more flexible reporting requirements and the roll out of MyEd (*I know: we were late to the party on this one*), I sent out a call for committee members to help decide how Delta would move ahead with Secondary reporting procedures. The committee would be tasked with making two decisions:

- (1) Which performance indicators Delta teachers shall have the option to use across grades 8 and 9 next year, and
- (2) What supports would be helpful for teachers who choose to use these performance indicators.

My co-chairs, Janet Thompson and Marne Hopkinson, and I designed two full-day sessions, using the Decision Maker Moves as our guide. Here is a look

at the agenda and a summary of what we did under each item, to illustrate what the meetings felt like. You can see that we organized the meeting by following the Decision Maker Moves in sequence.

Decision Maker Move 1: Framing the Decision

The main focus of our time together would be deciding which performance indicators Delta teachers would have the option to use across grades 8 and 9 next year. In this case, the frame and the committee's mandate are the same. Being clear about this frame as our boundary helped us stay on track later in the discussions.

Move 2: Clarifying What Matters

After reading relevant policy and procedures alongside current and rich research, committee members discussed what matters most for this decision frame. After small and large group discussions and individual reflections, we agreed on the values summarized here: equity, clarity, learning-focused.

Move 3 & 4: Generating Options and Exploring Consequences

The committee did not have the freedom to create options given our policy context, so we spent most of our time exploring the implications of each option, and looking at the pros and cons of each option against each of our values. For example, how does the term 'not yet meeting expectations' gel with our ideas of being learning-focused?

Move 5: Weigh Trade-offs, then Decide

This move had the potential for some pretty tough conversations, so my co-chairs and I set committee members up for success as best we could by introducing two conversation tools. I mention them here because the committee members found them useful in keeping the conversations respectful and productive:

The ladder of inference, a tool that helps us recognize when we are jumping to assumptions or conclusions, and then get curious about what beliefs are influencing us in that jump.

Sentence stems for tough conversations, a collection of things people can say to stay on track in a tough conversation, things like, “What do you mean by that?” or “What would an example of that be?” or “Can you tell us more about that?”

Emboldened by these tools, the committee members gathered in (*or, rather, we zoomed them into*) small groups, and discussed the trade-offs by building a consequence table together. A consequence table asks group members to score how an option measures up to each value. Once the matrix is filled in, a decision might be obvious. If not, more discussion is required to make the sometimes tricky trade-offs. Interestingly, each group came to the same decision even though they took different routes to get there. This consensus amongst the groups — which were intentionally diverse in terms of experience, roles, and disciplines — gave us confidence that we had landed in the right place.

Move 6: Stay Curious

Finally, the group was able to move to our last ‘deliverable’ – to map out supports that would need to be in place for teachers who opt to use the achievement indicators instead of percentages. The plan that resulted from this move clarifies how we will stay curious about the success of the decision. This is not a case of ‘set it and forget it’ – in order to keep learning and be responsive as we move ahead with our assessment for learning Spiral, we will need to take an active stance of curiosity and stay connected to the consequences of this decision.

It’s important to note that this decision around reporting is one point in a larger and on-going Spiral of Inquiry around how best to support teachers in using assessment for learning practices. While we did not include students or parents in this committee, they are involved in our Spiral of Inquiry around the assessment for learning Spiral of Inquiry, and we have plans to engage with them around this particular reporting decision once we hear more from the Ministry of Education about updates to the reporting order (*which, at the time of writing, have not yet been published*).

Conclusion

Within the *Spiral of Inquiry* and the reality of our everyday work, we are constantly being asked to make decisions which will either take us forward in alignment towards our vision or lead us astray. In a fast-moving world, it might seem antithetical to move slowly. However, in his book *Thinking Fast and Thinking Slow*, Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman shows how thinking slowly can help us avoid the many traps of our fast-thinking ways. Because our contexts are unique, there is no ‘one size fits all’ answer to any of the decisions we make in our leadership; thankfully, however, there is a map we can follow. Together, the slow-thinking nature of the Spiral of Inquiry, and the Decision Maker Moves, ensure we stay on a good path as we navigate the complexity of leading learning communities.

If you would like to learn more about these two models, you’ll be happy to know playbooks for both are available at the links below.

Kaser, L. & Halbert, J. (2017). *The Spiral Playbook: Leading with an inquiring mindset in school systems and schools*. C21 Canada. Available to order at www.noii.ca/spiral-of-inquiry

Failing, L., Gregory, R., Long, G. & Moore, B. (2019). *The Decision Playbook: Making thoughtful choices in a complex world*. Vancouver. Available at deltalearns.ca/decisions/the-decision-playbook

If you’d like to think more about the two models as they work together, you can download a paper specifically to this point at the link below.

Moore, B. (2020, June). *Spiral of Inquiry and Decision Maker Moves: A rigorous blend*. Delta, BC. <http://noii.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Spiral-Decisions.pdf>.

Finally, if you’re curious about how the Decision Maker Moves are being used in intermediate and secondary classrooms, please contact Brooke Moore or check out all the classroom resources at www.deltalearns.ca/decisions.



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"Simple inclusion leaves the structure that produced the inequality and exclusion intact; radical inclusion calls for a transformation of the structure itself." (Chenier, 2020)

