Joni Chancer Wins Fred Hechinger Award

BY ART PETERSON

One morning in 1995, Joni Chancer and her 5th grade students at Red Oak Elementary School in Agoura, California, were out on the school playground attending to the daily ritual of the flag salute. One girl's focus wandered briefly from the ceremony.

Looking toward the heavens she asked no one in particular, “Why is the moon in the sky in daytime?”

“Where else would it be?” answered one boy, in a voice suggesting little patience with this level of ignorance.

“But most of the time you can’t see it,” said the girl’s friend.

And the class was off. “The moon moves,” “No it doesn’t.” “The light from the moon comes from the sun.” “How could that be?”

This was the moment for which Chancer, recipient of the National Writing Project’s 1999 Fred Hechinger Award, had been waiting. Her students may have paid less than scrupulous attention to their patriotic duties that morning, but the girl who looked toward the sky that day was asking what Chancer calls a “genuine question.” A genuine question is one that grows out of a student’s or a class’s need to know. “It’s a question,” says Chancer, “that leads to observation, response and more questions.”

Chancer and others call this process “inquiry learning.”

Chancer had been waiting because a teacher cannot ask a genuine question for her students. She can only “plan for surprise,” to use a term that she has picked up from Creating Classrooms for Authors and Inquirers, (Heinemann, 1966), by Jerome Harste, Cathy Short and Carolyn Burke. So even though other teachers in the South Coast Writing Project (SCWriP), with which Chancer has been associated since 1983, were already experimenting with students observing and writing about the moon, Chancer had to bide her time.

Chancer made the best use of this particular surprise with her students and Gina Rester-Zodrow, “a colleague who has been with me every step of the way;” she followed a path that eventually led to Moon Journals: Writing Art and Inquiry Through Focused Nature Study (Heinemann, 1997). Moon Journals demonstrates a process that begins with questions that grow out of a close look at the moon (what are the spots on the moon?) and

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The Hechinger Award, presented in November at the NWP Annual Meeting, was established in 1996 by the NWP and the Center for the Study of Writing as a way of recognizing outstanding teachers who have successfully translated writing research into classroom practice. The award honors Fred Hechinger, the New York Times education reporter and columnist, who, at the time of his death, was also chairman of the Center for the Study of Writing Advisory Board.

In his letter nominating Chancer for the Hechinger Award, Sheridan Blau, director of the South Coast Writing Project at UC Santa Barbara, underscored Chancer's knowledge and use of research on writing. "She reads in the fields of her interest the way a publishing scholar reads. She believes she needs to know what has been written, because she'll be joining the professional conversation with her own writing and teaching."

Nothing in Chancer's own education prepared her for the cross-curricular inquiry education in which she and her students are now involved. "I was the product of twelve years of by-the-book Catholic education," she says. However, one of her first teaching jobs forced her to begin to move outside the box. In 1974, she accepted a position teaching kindergarten and first grade students in Australia. "In Australia I was what they call an 'infant mistress.' I worked with little kids, which I thought would be just fine, but there was a problem. They were migrant kids from Croatia, Sicily, China, you name it, and none of them spoke English. I spoke none of their languages. We started trying to figure out the world together. I became familiar with the work of Sylvia Ashton Warner, a New Zealander. I was impressed by the way she built literacy from the observations, knowledge and concerns of children. My students and I began walking out in the world, noticing. We made books. By the end of the school year, most of these kids were speaking English."

Returning to the United States, Chancer began working in open schools. "I was working in multi-graded classrooms and we were doing inquiry learning, though no one called it that at the time."

A major professional breakthrough for Chancer came when she participated in the 1983 SCWriP summer institute. "Sheridan Blau was always asking questions, the 'so-what' questions. I realized I needed to ask questions about my own practice the same way I insisted my students ask questions about their learning." Quoting Frank Smith, Chancer credits her writing project association as vital to her professional growth. "We learn from the company we keep," she says.

About ten years ago, Chancer went through a major professional and personal change. "You know the book When I'm Old I Will Wear Purple? Well I had my own resolution: When I am forty I will do art. I know a lot about art, but I had never looked at it as something that I could do. Then I decided, well, if I am going to learn art I had better hang out with artists. It's the same way a lot of us learned to write, we hung out with writers. When these artists found out I was a writer, they were often mystified: 'How do you do that?' they'd want to know. As I had exactly the same question about their work, we could understand and help each other.

Now, in her teaching, writing and art are the common threads that link inquiry studies. "When my students keep inquiry journals they are going through a process that goes back to Leonardo and that is also part of the work of modern artists like Frida Kahlo. The journals of these creators are filled with first drafts. With my students, a first-draft observation can become a poem, or perhaps a poem integrated with an illustration."

Increasingly, Chancer has been troubled about the future of inquiry learning. "In California, and a lot of other places the state is now telling districts 'we want scores. We want to test students to make sure they have mastered X.' Teachers then think they need to respond by producing a worksheet. 'See I've taught X skill.' But this little scenario says nothing about..."
learning. Sure, I want my students to write multi-paragraph essays. But I want the essays to have some center. Their writing needs content of the sort that can be generated if, for instance, they are writing about natural resources and they keep water retrieval charts and read *Island of the Blue Dolphins* and visit Anacapa Island. If we want real education to take place, a skills check sheet won’t do the job.”

This is not to say that Chancer does not believe that skills and skills teaching are important. “In my class, if a child needs phonics, he gets it. And I assess where he is, so I know what he needs.”

Chancer is now working on a new book on inquiry studies beyond *Moon Journals*, and she is still asking questions about her practice. “In a perfect world, each student would pursue his or her own ‘genuine question.’ I’d like it to be for everyone the way it was for one of my students whose father had moved off to Alaska, taking the boy’s sister with him. The boy wanted to find out about Alaska. He did not want to do a report on Alaska. He wanted to answer the question, ‘What is my sister’s life like there?’ By the time he finished his inquiry, he had a pretty good idea.”

However, Chancer says whole classes of students pursuing their individual questions all the time is not likely to happen. Unfortunately or not, a little thing called curriculum gets in the way. How can teachers integrate inquiry studies and the demands of the curriculum? One piece of advice: Focus on ways to build observation of variety and change into any subject matter. “In California, fourth-graders are required to learn about the desert. But my students live in Santa Barbara on the ocean, miles from the desert. We could not go there, but we could bring in succulent plants from desert locales to observe. We found many varieties and we watched them change. We found succulent plants all over town and we studied these.”

Recently, Chancer has had her students doing family journals. “Like the study of the moon, the study of families involves a journey. But while the observation of the moon moves from surface features inward, the study of family starts with the inner core, but then moves outward to look at the community and culture.” Parents as well as students are now writing family stories.

That’s what is happening with Joni Chancer now. We cannot be sure exactly what curriculum focus she and her students will be immersed in next month or next year. Whatever subject matter they are pursuing, however, we can be sure they will be observing, questioning, responding. They’ll be pursuing their learning not only as students but as writers and artists, scientists and mathematicians. They will go where their learning takes them. They will plan for surprise.”