Six years ago my CFG made the decision to ground our work in inquiry. The significant consequence of this decision was that every action we engaged in became purposeful. Our actions were based on real questions about our practice—questions that nagged us about a unit, about instruction, about a student, about assessment. Once we had established questions, we looked at student work for a reason; we observed each other for a reason; we explored texts, we participated in protocols—all to explore each other's very real questions. This engaged us and sustained our work, year after year.

For my first cycle of inquiry, I chose to examine my practice around my unit on The Great Gatsby. My tenth-grade social studies colleague and I usually team-teach most units. However, when I began the study of The Great Gatsby, my partner was teaching an integrated economics unit with our math teacher. Left to my own devices, I reverted to a traditional approach to the novel. I lectured, assigned study questions, and quizzed students daily. I paid absolutely no attention to the need to differentiate instruction for the wide levels of ability in front of me each day in our heterogeneous classroom.

My first homework check demonstrated that 30% of students had not attempted the assignment and another 30% had incomplete work. Classroom discussion was abysmal, and students were disengaged and disruptive. I countered with assigning the second chapter, eight comprehension questions, and a quiz the next day.

Well, they showed me! 40% of students got a zero on the quiz and 5% earned less than 50%. The other 55% received higher than ninety; clearly, there was no middle ground. Students who had the reading in-hand knew well, and those students with different areas of intelligence would not. We continued in that vein for the entire novel. The final exhibition for that unit was to write an analytical paper addressing The Great Gatsby as the quintessential novel of the 1920s. Egads! What I thinking—half of my students were unable to read the novel and I am asking them to write about it and I used the word “quintessential.” It was almost as though I had set out to see just what a failure I could create. I eventually saw that I had lost a valuable teaching opportunity. We all felt beat up by this experience. I could not afford to let this series of mistakes with future students.

I wondered how I could improve student engagement, creativity, and academic achievement while studying The Great Gatsby through the development of authentic curriculum. The following are the steps I took to establish a question for inquiry:

Step 1. Create a vision for change.
I examined my data:
• 30% homework and 30% incomplete work
• Poor class discussion
• Daily quiz – 40% of students scored a 0
• Essay – How is The Great Gatsby the quintessential novel of the 1920s?
• 40% of students did not do the essay
• 90% of students indicated The Great Gatsby was their least favorite unit

Step 2. Formulate a research question.
I needed to keep in mind that good inquiry questions are those that:
• cannot be answered yes or no
• do not begin with “why”
• could not be easily misinterpreted
• are not too narrow or too broad
• do not already have an answer

Step 3. Turn the vision into a question.
What would I like students to do differently; what outcomes do I want? I know that I wanted this unit to be interdisciplinary in nature. I wanted students to have a clear understanding of the historical perspective this novel offered for a specific time period. In a conversation with a colleague, we noticed a parallel between art styles and writing styles in Fitzgerald’s novels.

We wondered whether... (continued on page 17)