

4 Ways to Use Student Curiosity to Deepen Learning

These intentional shifts can help teachers foster engagement and inquiry

By Ben Talsma — May 01, 2024 ⌚ 4 min read



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Kids are curious creatures. Spend a little time in any classroom and you'll find yourself the recipient of countless questions ranging from the strange to the profound. From pondering the diversity of dog breeds to contemplating our place in the universe, these questions are not just students' random musings but pathways to deeper understanding of the world around them.

I find these questions fascinating. They serve as a powerful reminder that every advancement in human knowledge stems from individuals who dared to question the world around them. As a learning specialist committed to supporting educators across the country, I've been privileged to see the diverse ways in which teachers cultivate that curiosity and use it to create transformative learning experiences.

Sadly, we educators don't always take advantage of our students' innate curiosity and can get comfortable with a certain way of doing things. Many of us follow daily routines and standard practices and end up missing out on those invaluable "whys" that poke at our students' imaginations. It doesn't have to be this way, though. We can offer students of all ages a deeper, more experiential way of learning. It all starts by making four intentional shifts in the classroom that can help teachers foster engagement and inquiry.

1. Encourage student exploration.

In our approach to teaching, it's crucial to move away from rigid expectations about how students "should" learn. Emphasizing specific ways to do something can limit student curiosity and engagement. Instead, educators can promote a culture of exploration and student agency by letting students construct their own understandings of the concepts explored in class.

One way to do this is through the What's My Rule? learning strategy. In this method, the teacher categorizes examples and nonexamples of a specific concept into two groups without revealing the concept itself. For instance, "I like warm hugs," is an

example of a complete sentence, whereas “A big red dog,” is a nonexample. Students are then challenged to explain why the items are sorted in this manner. This sort of engagement encourages students to explore the rationale behind the sorting, which allows them to understand the concept without the teacher explicitly telling them what they are supposed to learn.

2. Allow students to make choices.

Another essential ingredient to unlocking student engagement and inquiry is the idea of choice. Prioritizing autonomy can enhance students’ involvement in the learning process. Allowing students to choose how they tackle problems or seek information empowers them as active participants in their education. This could look like a choice board on which students are presented a 3x3 grid of options for how to explore a subject and are challenged to complete any three that make a row. It could also involve allowing students to choose from a selection of independent variables to explore during a scientific investigation. Or you might create a Hyperdoc with approved sites for research and allow students to select which ones look most promising or appealing. However choice is built in, the key is to provide students with autonomy to increase ownership over their learning.

The What Else Do You Know? strategy is a straightforward addition that can be applied to any learning assessment. Conclude the test by prompting students to share additional knowledge that wasn’t covered on the assessment. This gives students the opportunity to showcase what they’ve learned beyond the assessed material and—with a heads-up at the beginning of a unit—motivates them to pursue their curiosity and engage in independent research that they can apply to this question.

3. Make students explain their thinking.

Teachers can create frameworks that prompt students to justify their thought processes and enhance their grasp of concepts. Instead of solely acknowledging

correct answers, educators should provide students with opportunities to elaborate on their reasoning in innovative ways to foster critical thinking.

The Three Whys technique is particularly valuable in this regard. Here, the teacher invites students to answer a question and then explain why they believe their answer is correct. After they provide their reasoning, the teacher prompts them to explain why that reasoning is valid. This cycle is then repeated once more, compelling students to get to the root of their understanding and allowing the teacher to examine student reasoning to find the root of misunderstandings.

4. Encourage students to innovate.

Delegating some intellectual responsibilities to students can foster their growth and independence. One wonderful way to do this is by employing the Teach the Future strategy. This involves having current students craft lessons for next year's classes to apply what they've learned and strengthen their understanding. This not only helps teachers assess a student's comprehension of the material, it also provides teachers with additional resources and reinforces students' learning as they consider how best to convey knowledge to others.

Embracing these shifts in learning can transform our classrooms into dynamic centers of curiosity and innovation. Let's dedicate ourselves to creating learning environments that ignite a lifelong passion for discovery in our students. By doing so, we'll not only enhance their educational journey but also pave the way for the next generation of thinkers, creators, and inquisitive minds.

Editor's note: An earlier version of this essay appeared on eSchool News.

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