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How Can Teachers Foster Curiosity?

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Fostering curiosity is the key to learning, yet it's difficult to achieve in the classroom. This is in part because curiosity itself is so misunderstood. While we can change pedagogy or curriculum, for the most part, students who want to learn, will. It's usually because they're curious.

Because all students can learn, much of educational reform has been dedicated to bolstering numbers in the "meets expectations" category of student assessment. We have lost sight of an important clue in helping our students succeed—that curiosity is an essential ingredient in *wanting* to learn.

Students who do well in school are often curious or ambitious. I'd argue that the best learners—a term not necessarily synonymous with "best students"—have curiosity in abundance. Ambition can come from parental pressure and cultural expectations and be resented, tinging learning with negativity. And, while curiosity can inspire learning, it can also be an impediment. Curious students can act impulsively and intensely.

What is curiosity? The word is associated with the irregular form of the Latin verb *cura*, which can mean worry or care about or cure. The word closest in meaning is inquisitive, which also has a Latin root: *quaere*, to search into, to seek.

Curiosity is a seeking and an exploration. No matter what branch of the etymological tree is climbed, a striking theme becomes clear: Curiosity is not about finding, but exploring. It almost has a spiritual sensibility about it, as though to be curious is to embrace a Buddhist koan—the path is the goal; the goal is the path.

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Research supports this view. In 1994, George Loewenstein, a professor of economics and psychology at Carnegie Mellon University, **wrote an overview of curiosity literature** for *Psychological Bulletin*, an American Psychological Association journal.

Loewenstein noted that curiosity has three attributes: intensity, transience, and associations with impulsivity. All three are pejorative terms in the traditional classroom. Loewenstein also referenced studies from the *Journal of Educational Research* in which an elementary student's curiosity is defined thus: a child "reacts positively to

new, strange, incongruous, or mysterious elements in his environment by moving towards them, exploring them, or manipulating them ... [he] scans his surroundings seeking new experiences."

Curiosity is inherently dynamic and propulsive, not sedentary and passive. Most traditional instruction depends on the latter state and seeks to control the former. This is true especially of the interrupting student or precocious child who wanders about, ignoring the lesson while remaining intent on some mission of his or her own. As Loewenstein stated: "Curiosity tends to be associated with impulsive behavior. People who are curious not only desire information intensely, but desire it immediately and even seek it out against their better judgement."

Teachers have turned to technology to satisfy this insatiable urge to explore. Something new is just a mouse click away. This virtual expression of curiosity is dependent on the external stimulus of the screen. It's not internalized in the seeker, but the result of pixelated stimuli and insidious cybermarketing. Education that utilizes technology is unfulfilling. This is because of curiosity's paradox. Researchers have noted that once we satisfy our curiosity about something, we are a bit disappointed. It was the search that was fun—the result is always a bit of a letdown.

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Once we satisfy our urge, we're left in what Loewenstein calls a "neutral hedonic state." Basically, we are stuffed with the intellectual equivalent of Thanksgiving turkey, with brains uninterested in anything but napping. This may be why the virtual experiences of our students seem so hollow. Everything is easy to figure out by Googling it; we never get to prolong the heady rush of curiosity.

How can we transfuse this magic elixir into our national bloodstream? Unfortunately, from an institutional perspective, we can't. The moment curiosity is codified in institutional bureaucracy, it dies. True curiosity isn't derived from external sources—it has to come from within. We can nurture it with environmental factors, but can't create it.

There isn't much professional development in promoting curiosity in the classroom. Especially for schools that serve students from socioeconomic backgrounds that are traditionally underperforming, notions about curiosity research or development of inquisitiveness seem like well-intentioned but superfluous pipe dreams.

What our struggling students need, educational policy seems to say, is more time in school, more assessment, more-pervasive testing, and bureaucratic intervention.

Curiosity, it can appear, is a luxury the poor can ill afford; better for them to buckle down and get the basic, requisite skills to bootstrap themselves out of poverty and into gainful employment.

School could be a place for all students to experience unrestricted curiosity, but it isn't.

I was once a math and science teacher at a crowded urban middle school in Los Angeles. I exhausted myself trying to teach students a modicum of skills. Like other teachers, I put in obscenely long days working predominantly with students from poor neighborhoods, trying to impart a basic understanding of the math and science principles the kids would need for any shot at college-track classes in high school. What I didn't do was expose math and science for what they are—two of the last great frontiers for the insatiably curious, realms where imagination and dreams can intuit whole new worlds, places where wondering—wonderment—is the only tool you really need.

For students to be curious, they must feel worthy of seeking. They must feel entitled to ask questions and encouraged to stray, to explore, to seek. But what about the children who have had their curiosity dulled by the digital age; or for whom time to wander and wonder isn't a reality; or who have more-demanding, practical concerns than being curious about the world? How can we help them?

The ones who want to learn are easy. The question that stares us in the face every day is how to help all students, especially those for whom curiosity is in short supply.

The only rational answer to the conundrum of curiosity is to disengage our educational system from standardized testing and common curricula. Curiosity does not hold up well under intense expectation. Give agency to teachers, with the explicit message to slow down and provide students time to wonder and be curious.

Counterintuitively, our role as teachers is not to provide answers. Our role is to give time and free rein to inherent curiosity and questions, and let our students exist in the heightened state of hungering for knowledge.

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