

# 'Every Kid is Motivated': Action-oriented Ideas to Revive Students' Curiosity

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If there's one concern about distance learning that educators have during these times, it's that students are having difficulty being motivated. A lack of motivation is perfectly understandable given the severity of the pandemic, the financial hardships and the shortcomings of video conferencing platforms. But that doesn't necessarily mean teachers can't prioritize motivation and curiosity, which were already suffering pre-pandemic because of the way schools often rely on tests and grades to drive student learning.

Educators navigating distance learning are grappling and experimenting with ways to capture students' **interest** through social media, polls and **stickers on their faces**. In addition to those strategies, they've also found ways to stoke curiosity and motivation that are not completely out-of-the-box solutions.

## How does curiosity work and how can we spark it?

Curiosity is “a drive like hunger or thirst” according to Harvard Graduate School of Education professor **Elizabeth Bonawitz**. “It’s something that allows us to drive our attention and our cognitive resources towards opportunities for learning.” In a recent HGSE **webinar**, she and others explained how curiosity influences meaningful educational experiences.

Curiosity is not a trait that is “fostered” in children. It isn’t like a set of skills that can be taught because it exists in each and every one of us. Curiosity needs the right conditions and encouragement, so instead of focusing on how to create more curious young people, educators can concentrate on developing opportunities for students to be curious. Students might often be concerned about getting the right answer on tests, for example, but Bonawitz recommends **embracing the ambiguity** of questions or assignments with open-ended answers so students can have the space to wrestle with their assumptions about the world around them and put forth predictions.

## Why motivation is critical in conversations about curiosity

“Every kid is motivated,” says Los Angeles-based educator **Geneviève DeBose**. “What are different kids motivated to do and why?” She supports middle school English Language Arts teachers and students with planning, instruction and assessment. She notes that educators and parents can lean into opportunities that really speak to young people, such as connecting with their peers, and content and tasks that are meaningful to them. Social and emotional learning is foundational to nurturing connected learners, and DeBose says this can be achieved at the beginning of a class by having space for kids to check in with each other and the teacher (this can be through an icebreaker question like “What is the weirdest food combination you think tastes really good?”). Teachers can also make sure students have an opportunity to engage with each other during the class session through discussions or collaborations in small groups. They can also have a check out at the end of class by completing a task or answering a question that closes out the activity. One recent memorable check out was asking students to share one line they were proud of in the chatbox to wrap up a unit on fictional narrative.

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Connections to peers and teachers in particular creates a sense of safety and empowerment for students, making way for them to ask questions and express curiosity without fear or embarrassment. In more typical circumstances, having more time with a teacher is beneficial to learning because students can assume that teachers will provide lessons and activities that are aligned with an accurate assessment of their skills and abilities. Because students are

experiencing less one-on-one time with teachers, it may take more effort to establish the same trust in teachers that enables engaged learning.

While remote learning is creating new ways to educate students, Bonawitz notes that rapport between students and teachers is harder to cultivate as classrooms move to video conferencing platforms. Adding to that, teachers are even more pressed for time these days, notes DeBose.

“So much of the work that we do is building relationships with students, so that we can know them as people, which really then allows us to tap into figuring out what's going to motivate them,” said DeBose. “Because we have an understanding of their interests and their stories and their experiences, we're much better suited to create instruction that takes all of those things into account.”

Since those connections are harder during distance learning, DeBose urges lessons that are **culturally responsive**, student-centered and timely.

“If kids cannot connect to what they are learning and the people that are around them, they are far less likely to be motivated to actually engage and learn,” she said. In these times of crisis, it becomes vital to make classroom content related to what students are experiencing in their day to day lives. HGSE professor **Jal Mehta** similarly suggests incorporating more variety and responsiveness into classes, saying teachers should “enable kids to propose different ways into topics.”

In practice, DeBose recommends activities that give students specific responsibilities when they are taking on class activities in groups, such as screen sharer, time keeper and a vibe checker. That way, “they all have a particular leadership role that impacts the success of the group.”

### **Fostering curiosity and motivation in your classroom**

In some ways, distance learning has paved the way for students to have more positive school experiences. With shifting schedules, children have the ability to **get more sleep**, and online learning has released students from the anxiety of having to perform in classroom settings. In best cases, students are proving that they are able to thrive and learn in a variety of conditions.

“This work is so hard, period. But it's even more difficult under these circumstances,” says DeBose. Because today's educators have been tasked with reaching **vulnerable students** in the face of unprecedented uncertainty, trying to revamp and restructure classes starts to seem like an enormous undertaking. To counter this pressure, DeBose suggests **connecting** with other educators, prioritizing personal time and planning ahead as ways to free up bandwidth to iterate lesson plans.

With educators' efforts in mind, there are three subtle moves that could bring about a significant change in approaches to cultivating classroom engagement.

### **Remember your own genius**

Drawing from [Dr. Ghody Muhammad's 2020 book \*Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework\*](#), DeBose advocates for teachers having faith in their own resourcefulness and ingenuity in navigating the pitfalls of the pandemic and its effects on teaching and engagement. As an educator herself, she says definitively, "What we are doing is so incredibly hard and we are doing good work." In the face of blank screens from disabled videos and things outside of their control – like hybrid teaching or suddenly going online – teachers can benefit from seeing and modeling their own genius, intellect and curiosity as they try to draw these responses from students. To do this, DeBose shares her own learnings with her students, such as talking about being a beginning capoeira student. "I would tell my kids stories like 'Yesterday I got kicked in the head!' It's really modeling that curiosity, that vulnerability of not being good at something and that you're still doing it. And I think also modeling that you are seeking out opportunities to grow and learn."

### **Less is more**

Mehta has been advocating for education institutions to "[Marie Kondo](#)" their curriculum, applying the decluttering expert's principles to keep only things that spark joy. He says it's critical to lean into the approaches that engage students and allow for space for those ideas and practices to grow. While most teachers are under pressure from curriculums and standards, he rationalizes that "If it's really important, there will be another chance to learn it, and if it's just nice to have, you can let it go."

### **Empower student agency over their curriculum**

Empowering [students to feel like they have agency over their curriculum](#) can be as simple as offering a few options on assignments and classroom activities or asking for feedback on what is working, according to Bonawitz. These small actions can have a huge effect on whether students feel like they are the drivers of their own learning.

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The pandemic has restricted so many young people's everyday activities and interactions. That's why the ability to choose can go a long way. Bonawitz says, "Students feel more motivated and engaged when they have more control over what is happening." While that's no surprise, it's a welcome reminder in our current educational landscape.