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Purposeful moments and planned journeys spark student curiosity

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17–21 minutes

How can teachers create space for learning experiences that will stick with students for life?

► At a Glance

- Students often report that school isn't engaging, but certain experiences stand out as sparking their curiosity and interest in learning.
- Purposeful Moments occur when teachers create brief experiences that expose students to new ideas.
- Planned Journeys are long-term learning experiences where students drive their learning.
- Spontaneous Moments and Fortuitous Journeys happen without planning but are more likely to occur when teachers create conditions where students can engage their curiosity.

School isn't very interesting.

At least that's how many students feel. According to a 2025 Gallup survey, a mere 58% of students said that their schoolwork challenges them "in a good way."

Thankfully, some of the other engagement measures are heading in a positive direction. The percentage of students who had a teacher who made them excited about their future rose from 70% in 2023, to 74% in 2024, to 78% in 2025. Teachers matter. But what do teachers do that makes a difference? What sorts of school experiences stick with students, even years later?

We set out to study those sorts of experiences by investigating alongside a dozen college students as they reflected on the K-12 experiences that had a significant impact on the development of their curiosity. While many moments in school may be forgettable, every one of our students could identify specific experiences that have impacted them to this day.

Purposeful Moments and Planned Journeys

The two dozen experiences our students identified that sparked curiosity tended to be structured as *moments* or *journeys*. Many of these experiences were structured and intentional, which we'll call *Purposeful Moments* and *Planned Journeys*. Table 1 outlines key aspects of both Purposeful Moments and Planned Journeys, based on our own observations as well as research on powerful learning experiences.

Purposeful Moment	Planned Journey
Short, high-potency, experience	Sustained, scaffolded, experience

Purposeful Moment	Planned Journey
Designed to be thought-provoking, induce emotions, surface a new idea or an old idea in a new way, and heighten curiosity	Designed to support students in sustained exploration (posing authentic questions and seeking novel answers) and to cultivate emotions to sustain engagement
Confronts students with a problem, question, dilemma, or puzzle	Supports students to develop new knowledge, insights, or understandings
Students are <i>engaged passengers</i> — someone else is driving the experience	Students are <i>active drivers</i> — students make meaningful choices throughout journey
Students reflect to make sense and meaning of the moment	Students reflect along the journey to consolidate their knowledge and understanding
Students develop interests and insights	Students develop passions and commitments

Table 1. Intentional experiences to spark curiosity

Other experiences that students recalled were more organic and happenstance, which we'll call the *Spontaneous Moment* and the *Fortuitous Journey*. These experiences required both luck and an openness to recognize the potential value of experience.

A deeper look into Purposeful Moments

Purposeful Moments are short, high-potency experiences designed by educators. For example, one student identified watching the movie "12 Years a Slave" in class as a Purposeful Moment. The experience "was so transformative and raised so many questions about how as a society we got to that point and fundamental questions about human equity. In that moment I realized the importance of history."

Confronting students with questions and problems

Purposeful Moments can include specific lessons, activities, simulations, or even conversations that are intentionally designed to be thought-provoking, direct students' attention toward a question or problem, or confront students with a dilemma or puzzle. Students may make connections to their own experiences or prior knowledge, piquing their curiosity further. For example, watching "12 Years a Slave" led the student above to reflect on her heritage and history.

Educators designing and driving

Purposeful Moments are designed by educators to expose students to new experiences and ideas, and students are along for the ride. As passengers, students may have visceral reactions to these moments, leading them to begin their personal journeys. This was the case for the student who watched "12 Years a Slave," a movie chosen by their teacher that led them to reconsider their own history.

Another student reflected on a field trip to a planetarium:

It was an environment I had never been in before. I had always loved science books growing up [and] the space section always intrigued me. Going to the planetarium gave me a glimpse into how far I could go and seemed to cement my love for space at that time.

Activating emotions

Purposeful Moments are designed to induce emotions that spark motivation and engagement. These emotions

can be both positive, such as wonder and joy, as well as negative, such as discomfort or even fear. For example, one student reflected on how a “patient zero” simulation experience was an “eye opening” turning point that prompted them to explore specific college pathways.

Not all such moments are part of a lesson. Another student recalled a Purposeful Moment in which they asked their teacher to change their grade. Pulling them aside, their teacher directly asked them, “Are you wanting [a better grade] for your own satisfaction or to appease your parents’ expectations for you?” This provocative inquiry from their teacher focused their attention on a genuine question and led to deeper curiosity about their own desires and dreams, separate from those of others around them.

Educators may not have designed these moments to elicit these specific emotional reactions, but, for students, the emotions seemed central in motivating their curiosity.

A deeper look into Planned Journeys

Similar to Purposeful Moments, Planned Journeys typically expose students to new ideas or present old ideas in new ways. However, Planned Journeys take place over days, weeks, months, or even years. Often, they occur through extended learning experiences, such as school projects or structured out-of-school learning opportunities.

One student recalled having to take care of a snail for a couple of weeks in elementary school:

I remember it being a lesson on patience and connected to a book we were reading about biomes. When I first got this slimy bug, I was thoroughly interested. It was so new and cool to me, especially the way the snail would move. I remember learning about what it needed to eat, where they typically lived, and how its natural habitat was being impacted by land degradation . . . When I started to care for the snail, it encouraged me to pay closer attention in school.

Creating space for students to seek new knowledge and insights

In Planned Journeys, teachers design experiences to help students develop new knowledge and insights. The snail project prompted learning around industrialization, evolution, pH levels, natural habitats, nocturnal sleep patterns, and the cycle of life for snails. Caring for the snail also inspired the student to conduct their own research. While caring for the snail, they noticed that the snail left behind a hard residue. “I wasn’t sure what it was,” the student remembered, “so I went and got a book from the school library and read about snails.” The project was compelling enough and wide enough to motivate the student to pose their own questions and pursue their own answers.

Students as active drivers of their journeys

In contrast to Purposeful Moments where students are *engaged passengers*, students tend to be positioned as *active drivers* within Planned Journeys. Rather than being along for the ride, students are driving a meaningful part of the process, frequently within thoughtful constraints.

One student described a research project for their Advanced Placement Spanish class during their sophomore year of high school. Students could do a deep dive into any Latin American country:

The information could be presented in any medium, the only catch was that it couldn’t be Mexico or Brazil . . . The guidelines were specific in what I had to have in the project, but I had enough freedom to make the project however I wanted.

Planned Journeys strike an intentional balance between teacher-imposed constraints on one hand and student choice on the other. Constraints can help guide students toward specific learning goals, while choice gives students opportunities to develop their own questions and interests and to experiment and seek answers.

Cultivating emotions

As was the case with Purposeful Moments, strong emotions frequently played a role in students' recollection of their Planned Journeys. The student who took care of the snail recalled, "I LOVED that snail, and was so sad when I had to give it back to my teacher." The experience also promoted positive interactions with their peers that made the experience memorable.

Leveraging the spontaneous and fortuitous

Curiosity wasn't always the product of thoughtful design. Sometimes, it seemed to just happen. One student recalled stumbling upon a TV show that sparked their curiosity and passion toward athletics. Another student recalled how their school had a culturally diverse student body, which offered an "incredible mix of cultures, languages, and stories" and opened their eyes to things they had never seen before.

Given that these Spontaneous Moments and Fortuitous Journeys can happen anywhere, anytime, the question for educators is how to cultivate a learning environment where they are more likely to take root and flourish. Schools can work toward building strong cultural norms that support curiosity. As one of our students aptly reflected, "Are these luck/happenstance experiences, or can we try to have more of them by being open-minded to new people and experiences?"

Even within seemingly Fortuitous Journeys, teachers can intentionally incorporate moments to spark student interest and curiosity. For example, consider the student whose curiosity about other cultures was sustained in their Fortuitous Journey through their culturally diverse school. They also recalled the Purposeful Moment within their journey of a potluck that included dishes from around the world, an experience they looked forward to at the time and now look back at fondly.

Additionally, teachers can engage in instructional practices every day that support curiosity. This may include modeling positive reactions to uncertainty, responding positively to students' questions, and encouraging alternative ideas (Jirout et al., 2022). Teachers can also place students in more active roles by encouraging them to ask questions to boost their curiosity and learning (Bonawitz et al., 2024). For any project, lesson, or classroom activity, teachers can ask themselves: "Is this more likely to cultivate curiosity, or squash it?"

Designing for curiosity

Beyond building cultural norms around curiosity in schools and classrooms, educators can also be intentional about designing their learning experiences to incorporate both moments and journeys. Looking across a lesson, a unit, a semester, or even a year, consider where Purposeful Moments and Planned Journeys may support the cultivation of student curiosity. Moments can provide an initial spark, and journeys can sustain a lasting flame.

For both types of experiences, students must be confronted with a question, problem, puzzle, or dilemma and given support to explore it. Inducing high uncertainty can provoke students' curiosity (Lamnina & Chase, 2021). Students are motivated to resolve puzzles, identify gaps in understanding, and pursue lines of inquiry. To cultivate experiences that motivate students in ways that develop new knowledge and understandings, educators need to consider student choice, their emotions, and the need for reflection.

Be intentional with student choice

Prioritizing student agency may look like giving students various degrees of choice in what they learn, how they learn it, and how they demonstrate their learning. However, many experiences students relayed to us included meaningful constraints on choice. For example, the student who did a research project focused on a Latin American country wanted to study Mexico, but the teacher intentionally removed that country as an option, while still giving students the agency to present with any medium they wanted. As a result, the student selected Panama and fell in love with the country, a passion that exists to this day. While constraints may feel limiting,

they can also direct students toward experiences and ideas they might not otherwise pursue.

The question isn't whether student choice should be present; rather, teachers should consider the purpose of giving students choice. That purpose can then inform where choices can enhance student learning, and what constraints on student choice may actually be productive. Limiting choice can be very useful when it pushes students to discover something new and unfamiliar.

Carefully consider the role of emotions

Emotions played a central role in students' recollection of their experiences. For many, these were remarkably positive emotions such as inspiration, empowerment, love, confidence, joy, and gratitude. For others, they included intense emotions, such as shock. Still others recalled negative emotions, such as dread, doubt, embarrassment, discomfort, and fear.

It stands to reason that any of these experiences may have induced very different emotions for different students within the same classroom. An experience that induced joy for one student may have induced dread for another. While our students recalled that their negative emotions ultimately shifted toward positive ones, it's quite possible that negative emotions played a detrimental role in other students' experiences.

Therefore, educators should take care to cultivate classroom environments where students feel safe and have time and space to process and reflect. Educators must be highly in tune with the emotional climate of their learning environments and intervene when necessary to ensure emotions are playing a productive role in the learning process, not an unproductive one.

Support student reflection and sense-making

There is so much fodder for curiosity in our world, but students need support in directing their attention toward, and making sense of, new ideas, dilemmas, and paradoxes. Reflection helps students make meaning of their experiences. David Kolb (2014), researcher on experiential learning, warns us that:

Truth is not manifest in experience; it must be inferred by a process of learning that questions preconceptions of direct experience, tempers the vividness and emotion of experience with critical reflection, and extracts the correct lessons from the consequences of action.

Interestingly, none of the students in our study specifically called out structured reflection processes during or following their experiences. One student who participated in an extended Planned Journey experience in the form of a student leadership program reflected, "I often questioned the value or transferability of what we were being taught. But only recently have I come to appreciate how formative those experiences were." Perhaps more explicit and routine reflective activities would have helped the students make sense of their experiences and deepen their curiosity.

Regardless, it was clear that all had spent time considering the experience's significance, even if it was on their own. Ultimately, if our long-term goal is for students to cultivate their own curiosities well beyond their time in our classrooms, we must help students become reflective individuals who are continuously making sense of their experiences.

Moving forward

Our choices as educators matter a great deal. A brief conversation, a well-designed lesson, or an extended project can stick with students for years. These experiences can spark an interest, open new pathways of exploration, and even set our students on new life trajectories. If cultivating curiosity is a worthwhile goal, we can't leave these experiences to chance. We must nurture learning environments that enable it and design and implement learning experiences that cultivate it.

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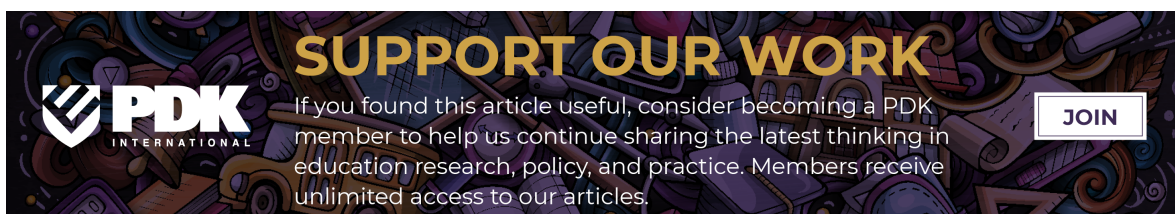
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