

How to Ignite Intellectual Curiosity in Students

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I personally have never seen a student that was not curious about something. I have seen many students who have suppressed their curiosity when they enter school to such an extent as to be nearly undetectable, but it is still there. Human beings are hardwired to be curious and being curious is a major activity of childhood and young adulthood (and yet recently more and more students would rather be curious-looking).

Mix It Up a Little

So if we notice students are not curious in our classes, then we should first look at what we are doing, or not doing, that might cause this to happen. Of course I have some suggestions of places to inspect first.

- Is the classroom a bright, cheery, and inviting place?
- In the design of our lessons, do we purposefully try to engage as many senses as possible?
- As we teach, do we go to great lengths to include all students and not just the few who raise their hands?
- Looking at our lessons, in general, is the student doing most of the talking and working?

If the answer to any of the questions is no, then getting students to be curious again is a relatively easy fix: just change what we are doing or not doing. If all of the answers above are yes, then the fix is still possible, but we have to be patient. If we are trying to get our students to participate fully in the inquiry process, we have to remember that most likely, they have been conditioned to do the opposite of inquiry -- shut up and listen. Depending on the severity of the case, this may take a while to get them "unconditioned."

Inquire Within

Several years ago, I was involved with the [Ford PAS program](#), which has an awesome business and [STEM](#) inquiry-based curriculum. We brought in 30 ninth graders, from three different schools, for a nine weeks summer course. The first week when students were presented the inquiry lessons, they did not know what to do. They just sat there, silent.

The Ford PAS folks had anticipated this and created a course to help student learn how to do inquiry. Since the instructors of the summer program had the students all day long, for the first week, they used this introductory lesson and basically trained them how to ask questions, brainstorm solutions, collaborate with their groups, and investigate possibilities. You would not have recognized the groups after nine weeks.

No one had to tell them to ask clarifying questions, critically analyze or research; it was automatic, and instead of silence, an energetic buzz of conversation abounded when they were given their final assignment.

My point in sharing this is that if you are just starting inquiry, and have all of your other teaching ducks in order, then just be patient and for heaven's sake, don't freak out because of the silence during the first inquiry lesson. You have to be willing to let them fail a few times before they get it. Students are smart and they will remember what it is like to be intellectually curious and they will appreciate the liberty that you are giving them.

The Standards and Testing

You may object by saying, "But I don't have time to play games or do projects (or to allow students to be curious). I have to teach them (drill them) on the content of the state standardized tests!" I say to you, "So...? What is your problem? The students are the ones that have to take the test, let them worry about it."

"Oh, so you get graded on how well your students perform? Then it is in your best interest to help the students reignite their curiosity so learning is easier and more enjoyable for everybody!"

Just so you understand where I come from, I believe that there are many things in the current educational system that need to be changed, however, state standardized testing is not one of them. I firmly believe that NCLB, although not perfect, is a great step in the right direction. I believe this because I have seen administrators and teachers, who, previously concerned only about local grades and behavior for some students, now are concerned with all students actually learning something.

Although we have a long way to go yet, at least the state standardized testing sets minimum standards for teachers to attain (notice I did not say students). The main hurdle now is to get teachers to quit teaching right up to the minimum standards, but instead, to inspire learning beyond the them.

Give Time to Explore, Think, and Discover

I am reading an interesting book by Daniel Willingham called, *Why Don't Students Like School?* that I think will help you reignite the flames of curiosity. Willingham gets to the crux of the matter right away: It is not the state testing that is doing the damage. It is the teacher's reflexive response to state testing. Too many teachers assume that the best and quickest way to get information into students' brains is to tell them what they should know and then expect them to know it.

Willingham also introduces in his book the concept that, "Memory is the residue of thought." This means that we remember most what we think about most. If the students are interested and inspired to think about things for prolonged periods, then memory is enhanced. This is where inquiry, constructivism, and curiosity come into play -- providing opportunities for students to think about what they are learning. In this way, memory is improved, students do better on standardized tests, and, guess what? Students enjoy learning! Problem solved.

How do you get your students to be curious and want to learn? Please share your thoughts.

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<http://www.edutopia.org/blog/igniting-student-curiosity-inquiry-method>