

Celebrating the Curious Cat In All Of Us

by Ardith Shirley, NBTA Staff Officer

Recently I was doing a bit of research for a workshop when I stumbled upon the HIGHER LOWER¹ game. For those of you who have never heard of it before, allow me to introduce you to a frustratingly addictive little game that essentially gets you to guess what gets ‘googled’ more using data from global monthly GOOGLE searches. ‘Russia’ or ‘British Airways’? ‘The Beatles’ or ‘Marie Curie’? ‘Adoption’ or ‘Suffragettes’? Fifteen minutes after my initial eye roll, I found myself compelled to hit ‘Play Again’ for the 15th time when I mistakenly thought that ‘Jay Z’ was searched more than a ‘Jaguar E’.

About to dismiss the whole experience as a waste of time, I begin to analyze the situation with my teacher hat on – why had I felt so compelled to keep on despite other important deadlines? Other than a tendency for procrastination (I do my best work under pressure), I chalk it up to a healthy dose of good ole’ curiosity... after all, it did kill the cat! Or did it?

In her recent publication, *Cultivating Curiosity in K-12 Classrooms: How to Promote and Sustain Deep Learning*, Wendy L. Ostroff suggests that being curious is an essential part of the human consciousness, a joyful feature of a life well-lived. She further contends that curiosity is critical for human beings to succeed in both school and life as it compels us to learn by jump-starting intrinsic motivation. She provides a scientific link to brain research by pointing out that when our brains seek to satisfy curiosity we actually get a hit of dopamine, the pleasure-producing brain chemical that also happens to improve the powers of observation and memory and is even linked to enhanced cognitive ability.

For all of these reasons, Ostroff contends that cultivating curiosity in our classrooms (and in life) is a worthwhile goal. She goes on to make several worthwhile suggestions for teachers’ consideration:

Co-Create Curiosity – Rather than answering questions, the teacher’s role morphs into asking as many questions as the students. It is the antithesis of a top-down classroom structure. Start by thinking – What am I curious about? Share with your students. Ask them the same and you may be amazed at the multitude of ways it will connect to your curricular outcomes!

Try ‘Kid watching’ – In 1978 Yetta Goodman suggested that the best form of learning assessment is ‘kid watching’. One of the suggestions Ostroff makes is to use the technique to become aware of the natural curiosity in each of your students. Start by providing a block of ‘unstructured’ learning time (perhaps a free play or choice activity in earlier years, perhaps an autonomous discussion, lab or project in later years). After such a period, challenge one another to finish the sentence for each person in the class: “Cassidy is curious about...” “Dylan is curious about...”, “Jayden is curious about”.

“When we as teachers recognize that we are partners with our students in life’s long and complex journey, when we begin to treat them with the dignity and respect they deserve for simply being, then we are on the road to becoming worthy teachers. It is just that simple — and that difficult.”

–William Ayers, *The Mystery of Teaching*

Foster Intrinsic Motivation – Ostroff contends that externally imposed grades

and endpoints can shift focus away from curiosity. A proposed technique to shift focus back to curiosity is to do an ‘Effort and Learning’ project or activity where students understand that only the effort and the learning process will be evaluated rather than the traditional end product.

Bolster Imagination And Creativity – Celebrate mistakes! Our end game should be growing learners and some of the most powerful learning comes through risk-taking and making mistakes. To that end, another proposed technique includes only marking correct answers on homework and quizzes to encourage students to go back and find answers they missed. Yet another sees students get bonus points when they have had marked errors but resubmit with corrected answers and then their rationale (or metacognition) for what they were thinking when they made the error and/or how they plan to remember or understand the concept going forward. What a way to encourage deep learning!

Support Questioning – All too often our classrooms and the “game” of school can encourage students (and even teachers!) to become quiet observers rather than critical thinkers. Promote classroom problem solving using “The Five Whys” problem solving technique.² The method is based on the idea that people do not fail, but rather process fail. Essentially, once a problem is identified, you ask ‘Why?’ five times to try and determine why the problem is occurring before jumping to a more superficial solution.

Prioritize Processes Of Learning – Ostroff’s closing chapter reminds us that in order to cultivate curiosity in our classrooms we must relax our own attitudes

¹<http://www.higherlowergame.com/>

²Developed by Japanese inventor Sakichi Toyoda

and self-imposed schedules and time lines and recommit to being learner-centered rather than content-driven. She notes that learning must go 'far beyond simply transferring information from teachers' heads to student's notebooks'. She closes with the recognition that "only if I am a learner myself can my students and I meet in curiosity and co-create knowledge."

After reading Ostroff's book and reflecting on my 'Higher Lower' Google Game experience I am tempted to think that it may actually have been time well wasted? Sure, I may have been distracted from my core purpose at the moment, but it did serve to remind me of the power of a curious mind and well over a week later I am still reflecting on learning – to the point that I somehow am compelled to write to you about it.

Maybe we need to adjust the old adage a bit...curiosity may have eventually killed the cat, but he was a real smarty cat with memories of nine full lives of joyful learning!

Ardith



May I Recommend:

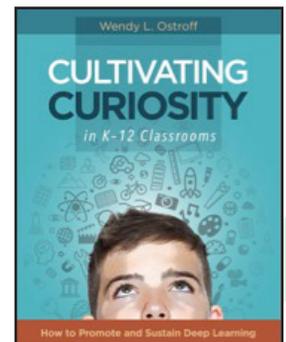
Over the summer, I stumbled upon a wonderful paper from the American Psychological Association and the Coalition for Psychology in Schools and Education. In it, they present the 'Top 20' most important that they believe to be of the greatest use to K-12 classroom teaching and learning. A treasure trove of ideas to reconfirm things you already do and also connect to some fresh ideas. I am only making one recommendation this month – it's that good!

American Psychological Association, Coalition for Psychology in Schools and Education. (2015). Washington, DC: Available online at:
www.apa.org/ed/schools/cpse/top-twenty-principles.pdf



Book Give-Away!

Congratulations to Noella Jeong of Fredericton High School who was the winner of our June Book Give Away! Our September draw is for *Cultivating Curiosity in K-12 Classrooms: How to Promote and Sustain Deep Learning* by Wendy L. Ostroff. Sound interesting? Send me an email with 'Book Draw' the subject line sometime before October 1st.



Closing Quote:

"I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious."

— Albert Einstein

"Curiosity is the very basis of education and if you tell me that curiosity killed the cat, I say only that the cat died nobly."

— Arnold Edinborough