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Why Ask Why?


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Why Ask Why?

*Research is formalized curiosity.
It is poking and prying with a purpose.*

— Zora Neale Hurston

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In the spring of 2018, librarians at the University of Kentucky discussed a curious article, which set a yearlong program in motion. Anne-Marie Deitering and Hannah Gascho Rempel’s “Sparkling Curiosity: Librarians’ Role in Encouraging Exploration” promotes strategies for instructors and librarians to help students overcome barriers to engaging in “open-minded, exploratory” research, especially given the two-pronged challenge of the “highly prescribed” nature of many assignments and their grounding in disciplinary norms with which students are usually entirely unfamiliar. To compound the problem, instructional librarians often have only one opportunity to teach library research skills to an individual student or class. This “one-shot” session is designed to introduce new students to the library skills needed to write their first college-level research paper. Deitering and Rempel’s strategies exploit a student’s natural curiosity in ways that could improve student learning *and* the quality of student research projects. They note the uninspired and all-too-typical freshman research topics such as concussions in the NFL or body image and the media, which often result in uninteresting writing (for the student as well as the instructor) and, more importantly, problems that

are difficult for students to research properly, with nuance. The practical tips include small language changes in assignments, which can boost a student's curiosity and engagement. For example, asking students to choose a topic they're passionate about can instill anxiety. Does this mean they already should understand the topic thoroughly? If passion is defined as curiosity as opposed to mastery, our students may experience less hurdles.

The power of curiosity to improve a student's educational experience sparked interest among the librarians who joined in the discussion that day. We reflected on some practices in higher education that almost seem designed to *thwart* curiosity. Overly-structured assignments with predetermined outcomes, an emphasis on assessment, and large class sizes can all be at odds with practices that would allow students to indulge their curiosity. Beyond our *ad hoc* group, we thought, this topic could become an important campus-wide conversation. We approached others in the library system and decided to launch a yearlong program as a way to raise awareness of the importance of curiosity for education and student success. Within a few weeks, we had mapped out a number of activities including a social media campaign, drop-in exploration events, exhibits, and a campus event featuring a curiosity fair and structured discussions. Being librarians, we also created a book club.

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What better book to kick-start our club than Ian Leslie's *Curious: The Desire to Know and Why Your Future Depends on It* (Basic Books, 2014). Based in London, journalist and author Ian Leslie weaves a narrative from historical record, psychological concepts, and scientific understanding. *Curious* is divided into three parts: how curiosity works and makes us uniquely human; the decline of curiosity; and suggestions for building and maintaining curiosity. To be sure, *Curious* is a book of provocations about the changing nature of curiosity and what can be done to nurture it, which would stoke the fires of discussion among the most stagnant and passive of book clubs.

"How Curiosity Works," addresses diversive, epistemic, and empathetic types of curiosity. Diversive curiosity is motivated by an "impulsive" and "irresistible" desire for new information, a meandering type of exploration lacking in direction or a more meaningful purpose (5). Epistemic curiosity requires more cognitive effort and is a "directed attempt to build understanding" (11). It is this rigor that creates those light bulb moments. And, finally, empathetic curiosity is an earnest desire to know what *others* are thinking (23).

"The Curiosity Divide" begins with a broad historical view of humankind throughout the ages and the role of curiosity in human behavior. Leslie divides the human timeline into three parts: the ancient world through the Middle Ages, when curiosity was viewed as incendiary and punishable; the Renaissance through the Second World War, the "age of questions" when curiosity fueled major

scientific developments; and 1945 through the present day, which Leslie names the “age of answers” (63, 69). He argues that this recent history has seen a marked decline in curiosity as a result of the dramatic increase and ubiquity of information. People are less likely to want to take time to learn about a subject when Google can provide a quick answer later. “We tend to assume that learning things easily is the same as learning them well,” Leslie explains (54).

In “Staying Curious,” Leslie provides several ways to maintain and build our curiosity, including ways to “stay foolish” (be comfortable asking questions), advice to “question your teaspoons” (ask questions about seemingly ordinary things), and tips for “turning puzzles into mysteries” (not all questions have answers and that’s okay). The point of these creatively dubbed strategies is to develop a habit of mind that supports curiosity. For any book club or individual, *Curious* certainly fulfills its purpose, which is to provoke the reader to think more critically about the role and importance of curiosity in our lives and to consider ways to increase and maintain it. Our book club enjoyed a spirited, stimulating discussion.

It bears emphasizing that the book club allowed colleagues from various disciplines and departments across campus to engage in a capacious discussion of big ideas. Arguably, meeting away from campus for scholarly discussion over dinner and drinks felt like a rare indulgence in academia. But participating in events like this may be some of the most important work that we can do as a university community, particularly as we reflect on how we nurture curiosity in our professional lives. The promise of lively interaction and conversation on a topic of mutual interest that has broad implications for higher education was certainly part of the allure that drew all of us to the book discussion. We each brought new and different background knowledge and experiences to our reading of the book. All of this brings to mind Leslie’s description of one of Leonardo da Vinci’s to-do lists. Many of the items involved consultations with others, leading to Leslie’s assessment that da Vinci’s curiosity led him to be “highly sociable” (17). Curiosity led us to be sociable, too.

*Good research begins
with a good question.*

As can be expected, the discussion covered a lot of territory. One unresolved question was whether curiosity is more a product of nature or nurture. In other words, are some people naturally more curious than others, or can curiosity be taught? Leslie reviews the research of Sophie von Stumm, who discovered that, equivalent to intelligence and conscientiousness, intellectual curiosity has just as much of an effect on student success. Von Stumm, in fact, refers to curiosity as the third pillar of academic performance (82).

Another provocative question involved the role of information technology in either satisfying or stunting curiosity. Does technology provide additional opportunities to satisfy curiosity, or does it serve as a restless substitute for being at peace with unanswered questions, which has until very

recently been a non-negotiable state of the human condition? Is it a given that curiosity requires our engaged, sustained attention? Does curiosity writ large suffer when we flit from topic to topic online? Perhaps even more importantly, do opportunities for curiosity to arise in the first place diminish in such an environment? The notion of ever-present distractibility in our daily lives was a thread that ran through our discussion.¹

Leslie describes how curiosity advances from questions, which are best rooted in basic knowledge of a topic. One of the roles of higher education is to instill in students a desire to learn through research. Realizing that not all students have the same foundational knowledge, where do we begin? How much foundational knowledge do our students need before we can presume that they are ready to engage with research? More importantly, if the speed and ubiquity of information technologies has led us to be satisfied with quick answers, how can we expect students to be enticed by the idea of research as a journey in which a question leads to more questions?²

Allowing students to express creativity, think critically, and indulge curiosity is important, but it does not mean that teaching content is not. Leslie underlines the importance of background knowledge, or what he refers to as “building the database” (148). Just because facts are easier to look up in the age of Google doesn’t mean it isn’t useful for students to learn them. Fact-based learning “matters because facts stored in long-term memory are not islands unto themselves; they join up with other facts to form associative networks of understanding” (121). Facts also feed a student’s curiosity. In order to develop innovative thinkers, educational programs should cultivate critical thinking skills (including curiosity) *and* continue to teach basic information. A breadth of foundational knowledge in long term memory allows room for working memory to pursue epistemic curiosity.

Leslie urges us to resist the “illusion of assuming that all questions have definite answers” (50). The ability to ponder inspires enduring curiosity. Good research begins with a good question. Asking a question in the first place can be a courageous act, signaling that an individual’s thoughts are important and worth noticing. Such behavior does not come naturally or easily. If an individual grows up without the experience of regularly asking questions or feeling valued or powerful enough to ask questions in the first place, is that person’s ability to be curious forever thwarted? For those who view curiosity as a universal condition, it can be surprising to learn about the relationship between socioeconomic status and question-asking, which is the foundation on which curiosity is built. Research shows that children from upper- and middle-class households are encouraged to ask more questions than their working-class counterparts (90). However, this correlation between class and curiosity leaves ample room for discussion due to the complex ways that power and authority play out across socioeconomic status.

Our reading and discussion of *Curious* was an inspiring, cross-disciplinary social event of a type that happens all too infrequently on the college campus today. We were able to share ideas about a topic

that was relevant to each of us in our varied professional roles, bringing us together as individuals who are concerned about the future of higher education. We agreed that, at the very least, an awareness of the role of curiosity in higher education can and should inform our work as educators. Ultimately, *Curious* left us with more questions than answers, but maybe that's the point.

NOTES

1. And yet, some instructors are exploring innovative ways to incorporate technology in the classroom, resulting in increased student engagement. For example, see “The Apparition of these Screens in the Crowd” in *Greater Faculties*, vol. 1, 2017, uknowledge.uky.edu/greaterfaculties/vol1/iss1/8/.
2. For a challenge to content-based STEM education, see Karen Cangialosi, “But You Can’t Do That in a STEM Course!” in *Hybrid Pedagogy*, 26 June 2018, hybridpedagogy.org/do-in-a-stem-course/.

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