

The Curiosity Practice Guide for Teachers

A Companion to the Why Edify Podcast

Why Curiosity Matters for Sustainable Teaching

Teaching is full of mysteries. Why do some lessons land and others flop? Why does one student light up when you explain it this way, but another shuts down? Why does this year feel so different from last year?

You don't have to solve all those mysteries. You just have to stay curious about them.

“The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existence... It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery each day.”

— Albert Einstein

The teachers who sustain themselves for decades are still asking questions, still learning, and still curious. The teachers who burn out fastest? They've stopped wondering.

What the Research Says: Three Benefits of Curiosity

1. Keeps You Mentally & Emotionally Young - Curious people stay engaged with the world. They're less likely to get stuck in rigid thinking. They're open to new ideas, new approaches, and new possibilities.

2. Drives Learning - When you're curious, your brain is primed to absorb new information. You're not just passively consuming—you're actively seeking, and that makes everything stick better.

3. Fosters Better Relationships - Curious people are better at relationships because curiosity makes you a better listener. It makes you more interested in other people's perspectives. It makes you less defensive and more open.

Key insight: When you're curious about why a student is acting out instead of just reacting to the behavior, you respond differently. Curiosity shifts you from judgment to wonder.

The Three Curiosity Practices

These three practices help you cultivate curiosity even when you're exhausted, overwhelmed, or burned out.

Practice 1: Ask One “I Wonder” Question Each Day

At some point in your day, pause and ask yourself: *“I wonder...”*

You don't have to answer the question right away. Just notice it. Write it down if you want. The act of wondering shifts your brain out of autopilot and into curiosity mode.

Example Wonder Questions by Grade Level

Pre-K-2nd Grade

- “I wonder why circle time went so smoothly today when yesterday it was chaos?”
- “I wonder what would happen if I changed the order of our morning routine?”
- “I wonder why Emma always chooses the block center but never the art table?”
- “I wonder what happens when I give them more choice during centers?”

3rd-8th Grade

- “I wonder why that student shut down during the math lesson?”
- “I wonder what my colleague does to keep transitions so smooth?”
- “I wonder what would happen if I let students choose their own groups for this project?”
- “I wonder why my 4th period is so different from my 2nd period when I teach the same lesson?”
- “I wonder what my quiet students are actually thinking?”

9th-12th Grade

- “I wonder why this class responds to Socratic seminar but my other class doesn’t?”
- “I wonder what would happen if I stopped grading participation and just gave feedback?”
- “I wonder what my quiet students are actually thinking during discussions?”
- “I wonder why attendance drops on Fridays?”
- “I wonder what would make this content actually relevant to their lives?”

Practice 2: Try One Small Experiment Per Week

Curiosity isn't just about asking questions—it's about testing answers.

Frame it as an experiment, not a new system you have to implement forever. Just: *"Let's see what happens if..."*

That removes pressure. You're not committing to anything. You're just curious.

General Experiment Ideas

- What if I started class with music instead of a warm-up?
- What if I moved that disruptive student closer to me instead of further away?
- What if I stopped grading homework and just gave feedback?
- What if I gave students 2 minutes of silent thinking time before discussion?
- What if I checked in with that struggling student before class instead of after?

Grade-Level Experiment Ideas

Pre-K–2nd Grade: Experiment with Physical Environment

- What if I rearranged the carpet squares?
- What if I let kids choose their spot for story time?
- What if I played instrumental music during independent work time?
- What if I changed the order of our morning routine?

3rd–8th Grade: Experiment with Routines and Structures

- What if I started with the hardest work when they're fresh instead of warming up?
- What if I let them pick their reading book instead of assigning it?
- What if I gave them 5 minutes to talk before settling into work?
- What if I taught the same lesson completely differently in my afternoon class?

9th–12th Grade: Experiment with Autonomy and Engagement

- What if I let them design the assessment?
- What if I taught standing up and walking around instead of from my desk?
- What if I started with the question instead of the content?
- What if I gave them choice in how they demonstrate learning?

Practice 3: Get Curious About Your Students

Instead of assuming you know why a student is struggling, get curious.

You don't have to fix it. You just have to wonder.

Here's what happens: When you're genuinely curious about students, they feel seen and valued. And that alone can shift the dynamic.

Curiosity Questions to Ask Students

General questions that work for any age:

- "What's hard about this for you?"
- "What would make this easier?"
- "Can you tell me more about that?"
- "Help me understand what's going on."
- "What do you need from me right now?"

Grade-Level Applications

Pre-K–2nd Grade: Get Curious About Behavior

- "I noticed you've been really quiet today. What's going on?"
- "You usually love puzzles but today you walked away. Can you tell me about that?"
- "What do you need to feel safe/happy/ready right now?"
- "Can you show me what you're thinking about?"

3rd–8th Grade: Get Curious About Learning Patterns

- "I see you shut down when we do word problems. What makes those harder than regular math?"
- "You're amazing at hands-on projects but struggle with essays. Help me understand why."
- "What would make this assignment feel more doable?"
- "When do you feel most confident in this class? When do you feel most stuck?"

9th-12th Grade: Get Curious About Engagement and Motivation

- “You used to participate a lot but lately you’ve been quiet. What changed?”
- “What would this class need to look like for you to actually care about it?”
- “What’s the hardest part of school for you right now?”
- “If you could change one thing about how we do this, what would it be?”

How This Connects to the STRONG Framework

T - Thoughts & Takeaways: Curiosity is how you extract learning from your experiences. When you stay curious, you’re constantly asking “What can I learn from this?” instead of getting stuck in frustration or judgment.

G - Gratitude & Growth: Curiosity drives growth. You can’t grow if you’re not willing to wonder. And curiosity naturally leads to gratitude because when you notice the mysteries around you, you appreciate them more.

The bottom line: Curiosity isn’t an add-on to your teaching practice. It’s the engine that keeps everything running.

Why Teachers Lose Their Curiosity

Understanding the obstacles helps you overcome them:

1. Overwhelm - When you’re drowning in tasks, curiosity feels like a luxury. You don’t have time to wonder—you just need to get through the day.

But here’s the irony: Curiosity is what keeps you from drowning in the first place. Because when you’re curious, you’re problem-solving. You’re experimenting. You’re learning what works instead of just repeating what doesn’t.

2. Defensiveness - Teaching can make you defensive. You’re constantly being evaluated by admin, parents, students, and yourself. And when you’re defensive, curiosity dies.

The truth: Curiosity requires you to be a little bit vulnerable. It requires admitting you don’t know something, and that’s scary when you feel like you’re supposed to have all the answers.

3. Burnout - When you’re burned out, everything feels pointless. Why bother wondering? Why try something new? Nothing’s going to change anyway.

The trap: The cure for burnout isn't just more rest (though rest helps). The cure is reconnecting to meaning. And curiosity is one of the fastest ways to do that.

Your Action Steps This Week

Pick ONE practice to try:

- Ask one "I wonder" question each day (Practice 1)
- Try one small experiment this week (Practice 2)
- Get genuinely curious about one student (Practice 3)

Affirmation to carry with you:

"I will activate my curiosity daily. I embrace the mysteries of life and the world around me, knowing that each new discovery enriches my life."

This guide is a companion to the Why Edify podcast episode "The Power of Curiosity for Sustainable Teaching."

For more resources and to join the conversation with other teachers practicing curiosity, visit The STRONG Teacher's Lounge.