

## **Why, Miss?**

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A century ago, students probably rarely questioned the rationale for performing tasks in the classroom. Those who questioned were more than likely considered rude, out of place, and undisciplined.

Some questions for the seniors among us: Did you have teachers who promoted reflection and critical thinking? What was it that enabled you to leave school with some degree of self-confidence and maturity? Did your teacher craft the lessons with you in mind? What answer did you get when you asked the teacher, “Why?”

I am now trying to get teachers-in-training to ask “why?” when they are planning their lessons. For example, when a teacher plans to teach a beginning class the alphabet in Spanish, the effectiveness of the class would be greatly increased if real uses of the alphabet are woven into the lesson. A teacher should be able to rationalise the activities of any lesson so that students' learning can be useful to their life.

For me, the “why?” issue illustrates the need to involve students in the formulation of their own understanding. When students are able to relate to tasks assigned, to understand their usefulness and purpose, it is more likely that they would remain on task and that retention would be long-term.

When learning activities are designed in this way, teachers will find that their learners would more instinctively attempt to use their own experiences and previous knowledge as they attempt to come to terms with new information and concepts. This is what in theory is known as “constructivism.”

It is with the learner in mind, therefore, that I urge teachers to flood their lessons with “context.” While some will grapple with the concept of context for a while, others will use their sense of creativity to create lessons that are truly meaningful and enjoyable for their students. Context signifies that a teacher would automatically begin a lesson with a “set induction”—that is, with some snippet that orients the class to the lesson that will be taught. It prepares the class for what is to come. On another level, context ensures that activities within the lesson have real meaning either through real-life scenarios or simulations of real life. This ensures that students do not have to wonder why they are spending time in school.

It is normal for humans in any scenario to rebel against an activity that is boring or tiresome, though there are some who do enjoy learning for learning's sake, or who are so goal-oriented that their focus is never lost. Yet, if they had the chance to choose between “boring” and “interesting,” I am sure they would choose the latter. Teachers would do well to bear in mind that though students may be physically present in their classroom, they may be absent mentally. The challenge, then, is to ensure students' engagement by asking “why?” for each objective and each activity that is outlined in any given lesson plan.

The “why?” extends even to “why would my students want to do Exercise A or Exercise B?” “Why would this exercise help my students to remember?” “Why would students want to come to my classes?” “Why would they leave my classroom in a better frame of mind than when they entered?”

As teachers reflect on the success level of their lessons—cognitively and affectively—the “why?” question remains crucial: “Why do I not feel pleased with the lesson?” “Why did today go better than yesterday?” When students ask “why?”, “Miss” or “Sir” ought to consider the question to be useful feedback for future planning for healthy, productive, meaningful, and memorable lessons.

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