Mastering the use of *Curiosity*

Would you rather have your learners slouching and gazing out of the window, or wide-eyed and on the edge of their seats?

Feel your spirits sink

Imagine a couple of uncurious learners – we've all seen a few in our time. They're often slumped on their chair with an indeterminate gaze. Their every pore can shout: 'Go on then – teach me; if you must'.

Uncurious learners can be exhausting. The energy for their learning journey most often comes from you, the teacher. Now imagine a whole class full of uncurious learners – and feel your spirits sink.

Thankfully, the opposite is also true – so imagine a whole class full of learners who are on the edge of their seats desperate to know what happens next. We call this a *Meerkat Moment*. Why not try this really quick and easy exercise to see if learners' lack of curiosity is their fault or yours.

- Take out one of your typical lesson plans and a highlighter pen.
- Highlight all of your planned *Meerkat Moments*.

How many did you find? It's quite typical to find none – and yet when questioned, all teachers agree that uncurious learners are costly to teach, in terms of time, energy and performance statistics.

Curiosity is not a 'default' state. We have to make learners curious. Some teachers are naturally good at unfolding a narrative, choreographing learners' discoveries, or exciting learners to new possibilities, but most of us need a little help to really master the use of curiosity.

Reviewing your practice

Begin by reviewing one of your problematic lesson plans. You need **at least** two *Meerkat Moments* in every lesson: one at the start, and one at the end. Depending on the length of the session, you will also need one just before a break. In a great lesson, you may plan many.

Consider the opening. Do you grab your learners' attention and make them desperate to know more. Do you gradually reveal, or allow them to discover, the aims of your session in such a way that they can't wait to commit themselves to the unmissable journey? Or do you write up your aims and objectives on a flip chart so that it doesn't matter if they're late?

If your lesson openings are missable, they'll be missed.

Consider the ending. Will the lesson end with learners continuing the debate as they leave? Will they invest their own time in discovering the answers to the 'teasers' you left them with? Or will they simply leave, do their homework at some point (or not) and come back (late) to the next lesson? Wouldn't you rather have them arrive at the next lesson desperate to show you what **they'd** discovered?

Curiosity is not the 'default' state.

The Formula for Curiosity

To generate situational curiosity, make your listener aware that you know something they don't. The two components of this are:

- value and
- a vision mask

Vision mask

Help the listener realise an *acute gap* in their knowledge.

Value

The strength of the value element (the level of shock at realising the gap) will determine how engaged the learners are, and their level of proactivity in trying to remove the vision mask.

Here are some examples I use with delegates:

- Have you ever had a learner hand written work in late? Would anyone be interested in a fool-proof strategy that will mean your learners will never, ever hand their work in late again?

- Would you be interested in a self-assessment system that staff actually enjoy using – one that writes the SMARTI targets for them?

- Would anyone be interested in an induction programme that will mean you won't lose any learners over the first half-term and they'll be high-performing for the rest of the year?

Imagine a slider inside each of your learners, with zero at the bottom and 10 at the top. Your aim is for your curiosity statement/question to score 10. But this is not as straightforward as it may seem. How curious does this statement make you?

- Would you be interested in a fool-proof way of winning the lottery?

During training events, around two thirds of delegates will admit to being 10 – very curious. But the rest say they're not curious at all. This is because they're *sceptical* – they don't think there is an answer. Pitching your curiosity statements to make learners very curious, but without triggering scepticism is part of the art.

[By the way, answers to all three bulleted illustrations above can be found at www.ccqi.org.uk. Just how curious are you?]

Using the formula

Back to the opening of your lesson. What question or activity could you start with, to score 10 with all of your learners? Here's one of my favourites from an A-level psychology tutor:

> 'Did you know that your body language can give you away to the person you secretly fancy?
>
> Would anyone be interested to know how to alter your body language so that they fancy you back?'

A very different approach was taken by another tutor I observed. As the learners filed into the room, she asked them to mill around the desks and sit next to a picture they found intriguing.

These has been placed one-between-two in advance. The learners were then led to discover the aims of the lesson through a few short, engaging debates.

Challenging your planning

And finally, this from *Kaizen*.

- We become curious when we are alerted to a gap in our knowledge.
- The more surprised we are that the gap exists and the larger we realise the gap is, the more curious we become.
- We then have a desire to fill this information gap. Or to put it another way, we anticipate the pleasure we will get by finding out the answer.
- Research has shown that the more curious people are about a particular topic, the more they will pay – with time or money – to find out the answer.
- Further, the more they want to know the answer, the more likely they are to remember it.