

Kids Can Learn to Love Learning, Even Over Zoom

There are ways for teachers to nurture curiosity — and they're especially important in online classes.

By Adam Grant and Allison Sweet Grant

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A 6th grader attends his virtual school lesson at home in Burtonville, Maryland. Credit...Shawn Thew/EPA, via Shutterstock

“Can independently mute and unmute himself when requested to do so.” That’s praise we never expected to see a year ago on our son’s kindergarten report card. We’re so proud.

As the new school year begins, many students are learning virtually, either by personal choice or requirement — and many parents and teachers are concerned that students

will fall behind in their knowledge. But a greater risk to our students may be that they lose their curiosity.

Whether students are in kindergarten or college, knowledge is always attainable. Teachers can and will catch kids up on their multiplication tables and periodic tables. But in school and in life, success depends less on how much we know than on how much we want to learn. One of the highest aims of education is to cultivate and sustain the intrinsic motivation to learn.

A classic [study](#) found that world-class artists, athletes, musicians and scientists typically had an early coach or teacher who made learning fun and motivated them to hone their skills. An [analysis](#) of 125 studies of nearly 200,000 students found that the more the students enjoyed learning, the better they performed from elementary school all the way to college. Students with high levels of [intellectual curiosity](#) get [better grades](#) than their peers, even after controlling for their IQ and work ethic.

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Unfortunately, remote learning can stifle curiosity. For students, it's easy to zone out. Staring at a screen all day can be exhausting. For teachers, transmitting excitement into a webcam is not a simple task: it can feel like talking into a black hole. Technical difficulties mean that key points get lost and even brief communication delays can make students [seem](#) disengaged, crushing rapport and killing timing.

Still, there are ways for teachers to nurture interest in learning — and they're especially important in online classes. Three key principles are mystery, exploration and meaning.

Curiosity begins with a mystery: a gap between what we understand and what we want to find out. Behavioral economists [argue](#) that an information gap is like an itch. We can't resist the temptation to scratch it. Information gaps can motivate us to tear through a whodunit novel, sit glued to the TV during a quiz show or stare at a crossword puzzle for hours. Great teachers approach their classes the same way: They open with a mystery and turn their students into detectives, sending them off to gather clues.

For example, if you've ever watched dolphins closely, you might have noticed that they're awake for remarkable stretches of time. A typical dolphin can stay alert and active 24 hours a day for 15 days straight. How do they do it?

Given all the challenges of going online, it's natural for teachers to focus on just getting through the material. But remote learning is perfectly suited to mystery — teachers need to find the right puzzles for students to solve.

If gaps in knowledge are the seeds of curiosity, exploration is the sunlight. Hundreds of [studies](#) with thousands of students have shown that when science, technology and math courses include active learning, students are less likely to fail and more likely to excel. A key feature of active learning is interaction. But too many online classes have students listening to one-way monologues instead of having two-way dialogues. Too

many students are sitting in front of a screen when they could be exploring out in the world.

Leaving a desk isn't just fun; it can promote a lasting desire to learn. In one [experiment](#), researchers randomly assigned thousands of students to take a museum field trip. Three weeks later, when the students wrote essays analyzing pieces of art, those who had visited the museum scored higher in critical thinking than those who did not make the trip. The museum-goers made richer observations and more creative associations. They were also more curious about views that differed from their own. And the benefits were even more pronounced for students from rural areas and high-poverty schools.

When field trips aren't possible, teachers can still take students on virtual tours and send them off to do hands-on learning projects. In the past few months, our kids have been lucky to learn from social studies teachers who challenged them to survey people about their stereotypes of the elderly, computer science teachers who invited them to design their own amusement parks, and drama teachers who had them film their own documentaries.

Meaning is the final piece of the motivation puzzle. Not every lesson will be riveting; not every class discussion will be electrifying. However, when students see the real-world consequences of what they are studying, they're more likely to stay engaged.

Psychologists [find](#) that when college students have a purpose for learning beyond the self, they spend more time on tedious math problems and less time playing video games and watching viral videos. And high schoolers get better grades in STEM courses after being randomly assigned to reflect on how the material would help them help others. That's a question every teacher can ask and answer, even over Zoom: Why does this content matter? When the answer to this question is clear, students are less likely to doze through class with one eye open.

Or, in the case of dolphins, with one side of their brains open. They can put one hemisphere of their brains to sleep and leave the other alert. That's how they stay active for two weeks straight.

The purpose of school is not just to impart knowledge; it's to instill a love of learning. In online schools and hybrid classrooms, that love doesn't have to be lost.

One good thing about virtual school is that children are building skills that will serve them well throughout their lives. Although learning how to mute and unmute himself is not something we ever thought our kindergartner would need to know, it's one of many new skills from online classes that will continue to come in handy. And for those adults who are still having trouble with that particular skill (you know who you are), he's available for online instruction.

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