"Do I have your attention 2"

Colin Foster considers the question of how to get students actively engaged in what they're meant to be learning about

ow often have you heard a colleague say, 'If only they were interested..." or, "If only they cared..."?

Teaching a roomful of students who want to learn is what many teachers went into the profession anticipating. Young people can bring so much creativity and intelligence and insight with them –when they want to apply it to their learning. But when they don't, the process of teaching and learning can feel like wading through treacle.

So how can we enable more students, more of the time, to *want* to learn whatever it is that they have to be taught?

Beating boredom

Anyone can get bored – it's by no means exclusively an affliction of the young. It's been rumoured that even *teachers* can occasionally experience brief moments of boredom during staff meetings and professional development sessions...

Most adults will tend to spend the majority of their working lives thinking within a relatively narrow range of topics, which they might have a reasonable chance of being genuinely interested in.

By contrast, up to the age of 16, students will be confronted daily by a bewilderingly wide array of subjects over the course of their time at school – far broader than most adults will encounter as part of the

jobs they'll do for most of their lifetime. Can we really expect all of our students to be fascinated by everything they have to study, all of the time? Is that reasonable?

young people to be

slaves to their current

interests and kept oblivious

general education is meant to

of wider possibilities. If a

involve learning 'a little about a lot', then 'a mile wide and an inch deep' may be exactly what school education should be. We want students to discover

"Things don't become interesting by being placed next to something else that is interesting"

Curriculum breadth is a interests that they've never good thing. We don't want dreamed of, and never would have asked for, had they been pigeonholed too soon into allowed to design or curate narrow areas of learning. their own curriculum. A cvnic might even

suggest that boredom is, in fact, a feature and not a bug - that the whole point of surviving school is to demonstrate that you have

learned to accept doing boring things, and that this is ideal preparation for life. For me, however. that's an extremely

depressing view of education, and its potential to change and enhance young people's lives. We should still want students to be interested in what they learn at school – but how can we achieve that?

Hooking them in

The most common strategy I'm aware of for getting students interested in what we're teaching them is to use their existing interests to hook them into a topic. It sounds like an obvious strategy, but I believe teachers can be surprised and disappointed that it often doesn't seem to work too well.

If, for example, a student likes football, and their maths teacher has to teach them about

percentages, the teacher may well scratch their head all evening, trying to figure out some way of bringing those two things together. Even if they succeed in doing so, the problem remains that what the student likes about football may be the teamwork, being outdoors, the physicality of running around and the competitive nature of the sport. None of which will be present when using percentages to analyse football statistics during a maths lesson.

Indeed, bringing up football during the lesson may simply create a distraction, prompting the learner to gaze wistfully out of the window, wishing that they were anywhere *else* but where they are.

Attempting to generate interest by piggybacking on things learners are already interested in often seems doomed to failure, because 'interest' isn't contagious. Things don't become

interesting by being placed next to something else that actually *is* interesting. On the contrary, placing them side-by-side may simply highlight for the student just how much less interesting percentages really are, compared to football.

If someone likes football, and also likes cake, then a football-themed cake might be a great idea for a birthday party. But if someone likes football but doesn't like cake, then a football-themed cake is unlikely to turn them into a cake lover. (And if someone likes cake but not football, it's doubtful that such a cake will cause them to suddenly take an interest in The Beautiful Game.)

Intrinsic interest

Attempts at combining curriculum content with pre-existing interests often seem to backfire – not to mention the fact that this often entails a considerable amount of work, given how a typical class will consist of

students with all sorts of different interests. Any time spent by the teacher on trying to make those links will only be diverting them away from digging more deeply into their subject content, and finding the *intrinsic interest* that's there.

People often assume that we're motivated to look more deeply at things that we're already interested in, which I'm sure is true, but the reverse can also apply. We can become motivated to forge interests in new areas when we look at them more deeply.

Right now, you may not be at all interested in butterflies – but if you take the time to study one for a few minutes, you'll see all kinds of fascinating structure, raising many questions while causing you to marvel at the natural world. The interest comes out of the study – not necessarily the other way round.

If this is true, then it perhaps makes more sense for teachers to use their subject expertise to enquire more closely into the things we teach, uncover

the intrinsic interest that lies beneath, and then work on communicating that, so that students can share it. This requires us to have the confidence that our subject is worthy of attention, and see it as our job not to 'make it interesting', but to avoid making it boring.

Dig deeper

If a science teacher dedicates their evening to writing a rap song about energy, the students may well enjoy their efforts the next day – but they'll be enjoying the performance, rather than the physics. Besides which, the science teacher is probably not really playing to their strengths (i.e. science) in their lesson preparation. Bolting content onto students' existing interests may just dilute their interest in those things.

Instead, we must find the internal hooks within our subjects. What makes energy fascinating in science? Why have scientists focused on it, and thought about it so much for hundreds of years? How does energy make a difference in our lives, shape the societies we live in. affect the economy? What surprises are waiting to be found when you understand more about energy? What stories are there in the history of science, in the many debates and discoveries concerning energy?

In any subject, people throughout history will have found themselves interested enough to discover and invent amazing things. The curriculum is inherently interesting. Rather than bolting on artificial sources of interest, our task is to figure out how to make this intrinsic interest apparent to our students.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR Colin Foster (@colinfoster77) is a Reader in Mathematics Education in the Department of Mathematics Education at Loughborough University, and has written many books and articles for teachers; find out ore at foster77.co.uk