

How can we teach curiosity for successful media literacy?

January 1, 2025 by [Patrick Usmar](#)

Abstract

Curiosity is not only fundamental to media literacy but also a characteristic that can be taught and nurtured.

Through a series of carefully developed practical exercises with theoretical underpinnings, this study reports that educators can cultivate curiosity in their students, empowering them to become engaged global citizens and critical thinkers. This paper includes action research-based class exercises designed and tested to foster curiosity, enhancing critical thinking and creativity for all learners (Dick, 2001; Hien, 2009).



Keywords

Interest curiosity, deprivation curiosity, audience empathy, audience reception, media interpretation, social

construction of meaning, media literacy, critical thinking, pedagogy.

Introduction

Curiosity plays a vital role in media literacy, which is increasingly essential in a world saturated with information and misinformation (Hobbs, 2021). Media literacy requires the ability to critically evaluate, interpret, and create media. Curiosity is at the heart of this process, driving individuals to question the sources of information, explore multiple perspectives, and engage in critical thinking, whereas creativity involves the ability to generate new ideas and solutions. Together, these skills enable students to navigate the complexities of the modern world, making informed decisions and solving problems in innovative ways. By combining theory and practical design-led research (praxis), this article presents practical ways educators can cultivate curiosity as a fundamental component of media literacy and lifelong learning.

The Nature of Curiosity

Curiosity is an essential and often undervalued characteristic of successful students and educators. It propels exploration and the application of critical thinking and creativity in all disciplines. At every level “curiosity, which may be the most important competency needed as a lifelong learner” (Hobbs, 2021, p.351) enables students to link their lived experience with their area of study and empower them to become engaged and highly media literate.

Deprivation Curiosity

Curiosity can be broadly categorised into two types: interest and deprivation curiosity (Zedelius, Gross, & Schooler, 2022). Many young learners struggle to nurture curiosity, particularly the kind that leads to meaningful discovery—known as interest curiosity (Zedelius, Gross, & Schooler, 2022). Instead, they experience what is known as deprivation curiosity. Deprivation curiosity is driven by the impulse to have ‘the answer’, rather like an itch to scratch, and does not tolerate ambiguity in a task (Zedelius, Gross, & Schooler, 2022). In an era where

digital media and artificial intelligence (AI) provide instant answers, learners can get confused and challenged by the misinformation, ambiguity and plethora of information to which they are now exposed (Zedelius, Gross, & Schooler, 2022). There are also challenges faced as the line between entertainment and factual content are increasingly blurred, as predicted by Postman (1985). This is more common in young people today as they are the first generation to grow up in a world of smartphone ubiquity (Twenge, 2017).



Interest Curiosity

Interest curiosity, on the other hand, is a slower, more mindful process that does not always have a strict endgame and tolerates ambiguity at a much deeper level (Zedelius, Gross, & Schooler, 2022). There has been a notable shift towards valuing this type of non-cognitive skill in education, as Peterson (2020) argues, “[s]caffolding uncertainty and other practices that instigate curiosity are an important means of increasing curiosity for learning” (p. 7). This shift highlights the critical, yet often undervalued, role of curiosity. The decline in interest curiosity can in part be attributed to several factors, including the ubiquity of digital devices and the increasing reliance on instant information. Today’s teenagers have fewer opportunities to be bored enough to allow their creativity to emerge more freely. This is not surprising given they spend more time on screens than they do sleeping, leading to a decrease in critical thinking and creativity (Buckingham, 2019; Twenge, 2017).



The Decline of Curiosity in the Digital Age

This has significant implications for teaching media literacy, as students increasingly default to deprivation curiosity, they are more likely to accept information at face value without questioning its validity or considering alternative perspectives. To counteract this trend, educators must find ways to cultivate interest curiosity, encouraging students to take their time, ask questions, and explore the complexities of the media they consume. So how do we teach curiosity?

Solutions

Given these challenges, this work focuses on enhancing the capacity of young people to be curious and to practice curiosity. One effective way to teach curiosity is through scaffolding uncertainty and other practices that provoke curiosity (Peterson, 2020). Scaffolding involves providing students with a framework or support system that encourages them to explore and engage with content in a meaningful way. This can be achieved through a variety of classroom exercises designed to stimulate curiosity and critical thinking.

This study—which includes classroom-tested practical lesson plans— considers the efficacy of fostering curiosity in promoting both critical and creative thinking and applying these understandings to multi-disciplinary teaching environments. Treating curiosity as a provocation, this paper asserts that educators must sometimes employ abstract teaching methods to stimulate abstract thinking, emphasising that encouraging curiosity is a pivotal strategy for enriching the pedagogical landscape of media literacy teaching at all levels. The first exercise is based on the idea of flexing the curiosity ‘muscle’, engaging students with a simple but engaging and thought-provoking exercise. The second exercise centres on empathising with others’ perspective in a fun, interactive, and revealing way. This work helps teach young people the fundamental principles of audience decoding (Hall, 2014).

These exercises have been developed, refined, and assessed with high school teachers, higher education students and educators. The exercises are intentionally designed to be student-centred and require no specialised equipment, ensuring inclusivity and accessibility (Buckingham, 2019). This approach is a direct way to future-proof young people’s ability to adapt their thinking to the complexities of the ever-evolving vocational, educational, and social environments (Peterson, 2020).

Activity 1: Curiosity

The first exercise should flex the curiosity ‘muscle’ in an engaging manner. The class instructions are as follows:

1. Take an interesting photo of a boring object
2. Most interesting picture wins
3. The more abstract the better ie. the aim is to make it hard to recognise the object, or tell a different story about that object
4. You have 10 minutes. You can leave the room
5. Email/post your answers (to the teacher) so we can look at them together on screen

6. You don't need creative skills for this exercise, you just need to exercise your curiosity muscle.

Results: (typical student examples)



Student reactions include (paraphrased):

I never thought of it like that

The idea came to me when I stopped thinking too hard

I didn't think I could do it

This was hard, but I felt focussed

The goal is to create a highly abstract image that challenges viewers' perceptions of everyday objects and forces the student to engage with the world anew. This exercise, which has been used successfully with media studies teachers, undergraduate and postgraduate students, helps students to experience curiosity in a tangible way, demonstrating the power of creative exploration.

Results

The consequence of this work is that students experience curiosity in a way they might not have felt before. And that curiosity is a *sensation* rather than a conscious cognitive action. It is through this *feeling* of curiosity that students can have a more meaningful, personal— and at times poignant—experience.

Experiencing curiosity this way can mean that students better remember what it is like and are better able to explore topics that have a degree of ambiguity.

Exactly the temperament needed for strong media literacy skills. This exercise is better used as a foundational thought exercise at the start of a term or semester, then it can be referred back to at times where students need to be encouraged (or reminded!) to be curious.

Adaptations:

Once established, this activity can be adapted to suit the specific requirements of media literacy or media studies teaching. For example, ask the students to find two different news reports or polarising social media commentaries, which demonstrate entirely opposite positions about the same issue. Or teachers can use different outputs to stimulate curiosity. For example, ask students to record a sound and use their imagination to ‘make up’ what that sound is. See if the other students can guess. For example, record the sound of thumping your fist on a desk, but tell people it is the sound of turbulence on an airplane. See if they can guess what the original sound was or make up a new idea. Or they could formulate interview questions (without mentioning the topic to the interviewee)—and the interviewee has to guess what the topic is. This teaches open-ended thinking and questioning and helps students make their own meanings.

Activity 2: Audience Empathy

This exercise involves the practice of empathy. Students are asked to listen to the sounds of the ocean (or a sound of the teacher’s choice) and then discuss their feelings and sensations in small groups, and report back to the whole class.

Class instructions:

1. Put away devices, laptops and any distractions.

2. In a moment I will [play the sounds of the ocean](#) for about 5 minutes (Teacher note: use whatever sound stimulus you choose here)
3. Take a deep breath, close your eyes and listen to the sounds.
4. In small groups discuss what you *felt* (rather than what you *thought*)
5. Write down at least 2-3 feelings, sensations or ideas. There are no wrong answers, only honest answers.
6. Each person, or a representative from each group, writes their words/notes, ideally on a whiteboard or other where everyone can see.

Suggestions for class discussion:

- Consider the common themes that came up eg. “calm, holiday, fun, nostalgia for holidays”
- Consider the differences eg. “agitated, scared (of the sea), bored”

Results

It's worth noting some students who have—for example—migrated from countries where they lived close to the sea, do not associate the sounds of the ocean with holiday. To them it more likely stirs up ideas of a past they had left behind, or a sensation of home. This is in stark contrast to many students who might associate the sound with holiday or relaxation. There are also students who are frightened of the sea, and so they have a completely different experience.

Example student reactions: relaxed, fearful, bored, nostalgic

- Highlight audiences' subjective reactions:
 - State of mind
 - Life experiences e.g. holidays vs. home

- Context: why/when/how they are experiencing meaning, responding to knowledge, cultural background, age, stage etc
- For creative or critical thinking work, students must take a step back and think about the wider context in an objective a way as possible

The major ‘punchline’ to all of this, is to say to the students something like, “we all listened to the same sound, yet we all had our own experience”. Emphasising this allows the students to really see how individuals might respond to the same media.

Adaptations:

Once the idea of audience empathy is established—where people can have very different points of view about the same stimulus—adaptations are possible that can directly be applied to the teaching of media literacy.

Example: Audience Reception/Decoding

- Use a different stimulus. Ask students to think how someone would respond who is not in their demographic eg.:
 - Nominate 3-4 age demographic/psychographic groups eg. 18-24 year olds in their first post-university job, 45+ main household shoppers, 70+ retired architect etc
 - Play a short radio story/Tik Tok video etc, get groups of students to interrogate how each group might react to the same media. Why?

It is worth noting this a generalised but compelling summary of student responses. At this stage, the success of this is hard to measure without further, more empirical study. It is nonetheless a valuable foundational concept to refer to as students move through the school year. Furthermore, students do not always ‘get it’ which presents a learning opportunity in itself—tolerating ambiguity. It also affords them opportunities to make meaning of theirs and others’ interpretations, helping them practice the media literacy skill of ‘making meaning’ (Gauntlett, 2018).

This exercise not only fosters curiosity but also encourages students to consider different perspectives and experiences, highlighting the subjective nature of media interpretation. By incorporating empathy into the learning process, educators can help students to develop a more nuanced understanding of media and its impact on different audiences.

Conclusion

Empathy involves the ability to understand and share the feelings of others. In the context of media literacy, empathy allows students to see beyond their own experiences and consider how different individuals and communities perceive media. This is particularly important in today's diverse and interconnected world, where media have the power to shape public opinion and influence social norms.

By incorporating empathy into media literacy education, educators can help students to develop a more critical and compassionate approach to media consumption. This involves not only analysing the content of media but also considering the broader context in which it is produced and consumed. This also starts them on the road to understanding the social construction of meaning (Burr, 1995; Kelly & Currie, 2021). For example, we can ask students to consider how different demographic groups might respond to the same media content, or how their own experiences and biases influence their interpretation of media.

Empathy also plays a key role in fostering interest curiosity, as it encourages students to explore different perspectives and engage with content on a deeper level. This is particularly important in the digital age, where students are constantly exposed to new information and ideas. By fostering empathy and curiosity as fundamental to our work, educators can help students to develop the critical thinking skills necessary for lifelong learning.

The strategies outlined in this article demonstrate that curiosity is not only a natural trait but a skill that can be nurtured. The aim here is to give students guidance of useful ways they could think, rather than *what* to think. By incorporating curiosity into the curriculum, educators can empower students to become engaged, critical thinkers, capable of navigating the complexities of the modern media landscape. In doing so, they will be better equipped to make informed decisions, solve problems creatively, and contribute to society as global citizens.

References

- Buckingham, D. (2019). *The Media Education Manifesto*. Polity Press.
- Burr, V. (1995). *An Introduction to Social Constructionism*. Routledge.
- Dick, B. (2002). Action research: action and research. Southern Cross University. Available at [<http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/aandr.html>] (<http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/aandr.html>)
- Gauntlett, D. (2018). *Making is Connecting*. Routledge.
- Hall, S. (2014). Encoding and decoding in the television discourse. In S. Hall, *CCCS selected working papers* (pp. 402-414). Routledge.
- Hien, T. (2009). Why is action research suitable for education? *VNU Journal of Science: Foreign Languages*, 25, 97-106.
- Hobbs, R. (2021). *Media Literacy in Action*. Rowman and Littlefield.
- Kelly, D., & Currie, D. H. (2021). Beyond stereotype analysis in critical media. *Gender and Education*, 33(6), 676-691. doi:10.1080/09540253.2020.1831443
- Nayak, A., & Kehily, M. (2014). Chavs, Chavettes and pramface girls: teenage mothers, marginalised young men and the management of stigma. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 17(10), 1330-1345.
- Peterson, E. G. (2020). Supporting curiosity in schools and classrooms. *Current Opinion in Behavioural Sciences* 25, 97-106.
- Postman, N. (1985). *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Viking Penguin.
- Twenge, J. M. (2017). *iGen: Why today's super-connected kids are growing up less rebellious, more tolerant, less happy, and completely unprepared for adulthood*. New York, NY: Atria.
- Zedelius, C., Gross, M., & Schooler, J. (2022). Inquisitive but not discerning: Deprivation curiosity is associated with excessive openness to inaccurate

Current Issues

- **Public Commons**
- **Media and Information Literacy: Enriching the Teacher/Librarian Dialogue**
- **The International Media Literacy Research Symposium**
- **The Human-Algorithmic Question: A Media Literacy Education Exploration**
- **Education as Storytelling and the Implications for Media Literacy**
- **Ecomedia Literacy**
- **Conference Reflections**

Archived JML Print Issues

- **Print Issues years 2018 to 2000**
- **Print Issues years 1999 to 1953**

Learn More About The Journal of Media Literacy

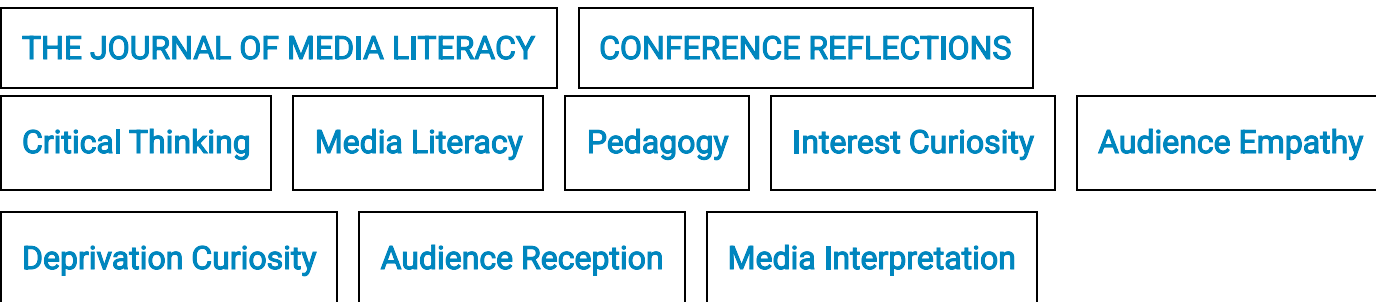
- **About the Journal of Media Literacy**
- **Our Editorial Team**
- **Our Philosophy**
- **Publication Ethics Policy**
- **Author Guidelines**
- **Get Involved**

Patrick Usmar

Auckland University of Technology



Patrick has been an educator and media professional since 1998. With a career including media planning and television production, he has moved from making media messages to researching and teaching how best to understand them. Since 2013, he has been a teaching academic at Auckland University of Technology. Patrick has a Master's degree in communications. His doctoral research focuses on how media literacy equips young individuals to understand the media and the social construction of meaning, particularly at the intersections of power and gender identity. Patrick is dedicated to enhancing media literacy skills in both adults and young people.



Leave a Reply

Write a comment...

Comment

Join Our Mailing List

International Council for Media Literacy

Formerly the National Telemedia Council

Support Media Information Literacy:



IC4ML is a 501(c)(3) based in Wisconsin, USA with members Worldwide.

Subscribe to the IC4ML Email Newsletter

Note: You will need to confirm your email address by clicking on the link sent in the confirmation email in order to be added to our list.

Powered by **EmailOctopus**

[Read Past Newsletters](#)

Search

Search the site ...

Contact Us

ICforML@gmail.com

[View Ways to Get Involved](#)

 English  Português (Portuguese (Portugal))  Español (Spanish)