

In Support of Academic Wondering/Wandering

by Daisy Breneman

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Some of our best experiences of learning—really learning—are those moments when we have a burning question that must be explored NOW. And those questions are often random, spontaneous, and oddly urgent—when a spark of curiosity bursts into an uncontrollable fire.

As a kid, I was notoriously full of questions and curiosity. My aunt tells a story about a trip to the National Zoo, when I wanted every single sign about every single animal read to young me. My adult daughter, when she hears that story, grumbles that I'm still like that when I go to the zoo, or a museum, or anywhere. When I go to a concert, I might prepare by reading a biography, or three, of the musical artist; sometimes, after a hike, I'm going to become insatiably interested in learning more about a flower I saw, or the topography, or [the history of the land](#), or the company that made my [hiking boots](#).

I'm not alone. Most of us went into our line of work because we are driven by deep curiosities—needs to know and learn and explore. And, while we've been conditioned to “focus” our lines of inquiries (well, some of us—I must have missed the memo), we all can still tap into the joy of wondering and wandering in our classrooms, research, and service: learning about something as we beautifully, spontaneously head down a path of learning that we might not have expected.

Especially on collaborative projects (my favorite kind), some of my most fulfilling work has been done based on a question that came up over a round (or three) of beers, or on a walk, or in a casual conversation—or sometimes while [making a racket down the hallway](#).

Ideas are like that; they sometimes come at the funniest moments—sometimes the moments we need them the most. (The idea for this Toolbox came at 4 in the morning while I was playing [Royal Match](#) on my phone.)

[It makes me wonder](#) about what we lose when we over-structure learning, for ourselves and our students. This is not to suggest there's no value in goal-driven learning or structured learning. I get the importance, and the logistical necessity, in having such things as faculty activity plans, research agendas, learning outcomes, course schedules, [transparent assignments](#), and [clear rubrics](#), for ourselves and our students. Structure is, after all, an important part of [inclusive teaching](#).

But I also think we can strike a balance, structuring our learning and inquiry, while also making space for spontaneity—bulldozing our plans, if we feel like it sometimes. Curiosity, unsurprisingly, is [good for learning](#). We can [harness the joy](#) and [motivation](#) of just wanting to KNOW. It's like the satisfaction of scratching an itch, or stopping by Sonic for a slushie (not because we planned to, but because it's damn fun). We can teach in ways that embrace and fuel our inner curiosity. We can, as Andreas Broscheid explored in a previous Toolbox, [Teach Like a Punk](#).

Oddly enough, we can even plan for unplanned learning. Build space in your course schedule for [reflection](#) days, workshops, emergent events or issues, or just [flexibility](#) in general. TBD (to be determined or, better yet, to be discovered) is a great placeholder sometimes; sometimes it's the place itself.

Our syllabi can be what Ken Bain in *What the Best College Teachers Do* calls “promising” syllabi: ones that ask [beautiful questions](#), serve as an invitation into learning, and highlight opportunities (75). And we can keep asking big, beautiful, puzzling, powerful [questions in the classroom](#). Raise more questions than can be answered; encourage students frustrated by not finding the answers to generate more questions; praise attempts that are rooted in inquiry; and [celebrate failure](#).

Another way to [honor curiosity](#) is to give students choices and options for [engagement, representation, and action and expression in their learning](#). (For example, let students make choices about project topics and formats.) These are [universal design](#) principles to help make sure we're measuring learning in [equitable ways](#).

We also need to be willing to clear space for all the many and unexpected questions that come up during classroom conversations and activities. Ask students to generate discussion questions for the class; ask them about [muddiest points](#). (Recently, I asked students about their “WTF moments” from the readings, and, wow, did it spark a good conversation.) When we offer room for tangents and meandering, who knows where we might end up!

And give yourself the same wiggle room, in your daily schedules and agendas. Writing this Toolbox might mean nudging yoga for later, or it might mean that my students might have to wait a tiny bit longer for me to grade their projects. But this was a path I decided to wander down. The pandemic has perhaps made us more willing to make space for [spontaneity](#) and the unplanned; we are all experts in the unplanned at this point, after all, and in responding to contingencies.

Maybe this unplanned Toolbox isn't a valuable investment of time. Is that what we worry about, when we deviate from a plan or spend class time on something that wasn't on the syllabus? But how can any experience in which we learn something (planned or otherwise) *not* be a good use of time?

And maybe that's a problem too: that we talk about time using financial terms, measure our value by [our profession](#) and our productivity, and eschew self-care for [work, endless work](#). Let's just stop, and instead give ourselves time to [follow our curiosity, cultivate joy, care for each other](#), and just be human in the world.

Spring Break is here—we have many opportunities to wonder and wander! Take that impromptu walk with a friend, try that [new recipe](#), watch a [sunset](#), spend a half hour down a Google-search rabbit hole. And, I promise, ALL of those things can lead to learning, of one kind or another. The best [discoveries](#) are often the unexpected ones. Sometimes just rambling is what lets us invite, and inspire, [awe](#).

About the author: Daisy L. Breneman holds a joint appointment with University Advising and Justice Studies and is the co-coordinator of the Disability Studies Minor. She is also a CFI faculty associate in the teaching area. She can be reached at brenemdl@jmu.edu.