Practice-Based Article

Cultivating the Power of Curiosity in Professional Practice

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ABSTRACT

Curiosity is the drive to seek information and explore ideas and perspectives in order to learn something new. It is fundamentally tied to how people make sense and draw meaning from the world and may be viewed as a knowledge network-building process. There is increasing acknowledgement that being curious can bring significant advantages, particularly in jobs characterised by high demands for learning. Cultivating curiosity helps foster open environments that inspire new ideas, innovations, efficiencies and adaptive behaviours. We can enable this by providing sufficient novelty and complexity in our systems and teaching, and by building deeper connections with stakeholders. This article briefly examines how and why we should cultivate this trait in our work and workplaces.

KEYWORDS

curiosity, connections, networks, skills, professional

BACKGROUND

Curiosity is a central human motivation that encourages us to explore new situations. It stems from an intrinsic drive for acquiring new knowledge and experiences that can motivate exploratory behaviour (Celik et al., 2016). This enables us to challenge the status quo, to build intellectual and creative capacities and strengthen social relationships (Kashdan, Goodman, et al., 2020).

Some people have high trait curiosity, so are naturally curious, but everyone can be curious in particular situations (state curiosity) (Birenbaum et al., 2024). In every case two judgements need to happen, a person has to recognise that an event is interesting and warrants attention, and they must believe they can cope with any distress that may arise during exploration, that is, they have sufficient stress tolerance (Kashdan, Goodman, et al., 2020). This means that when cultivating curiosity, we must consider how to introduce enough stimuli to pique interest but not so much that it becomes overwhelming.

There are differences in the way researchers conceptualise curiosity and its components (Birenbaum et al., 2024; Jach et al., 2024; Kidd & Hayden, 2015; Roberts et al., 2022). Several types have been identified as particularly relevant to those in the library and information sector (Deitering & Gascho Rempel, 2017).

Perceptual curiosity is sparked by the drive to experience the world through our senses (Kidd & Hayden, 2015). It's why the visual, auditory and tactile nature of resources such as library websites, search platforms

and physical spaces are key to successful interactions. These interfaces are tied to perceptions of quality and can inspire or inhibit use (Liu et al., 2023). To spark perceptual curiosity, we must include intriguing elements that attract attention, so they capture the interest of potential users.

Epistemic curiosity is the desire to obtain new knowledge (Lievens et al., 2022). It is commonly described as having two states (Kashdan, Disabato, et al., 2020; Litman, 2012). The first, joyous exploration (or intellectual interest) is about seeking knowledge simply for the joy and interest in discovery. It's associated with a broad love of learning and the pleasure felt when seeking new information and experiences. The second state, deprivation sensitivity (or information deprivation), is a compulsion to acquire information to resolve an information gap, to reduce uncertainty and alleviate the frustration of not knowing. It's associated with taking a deep dive into understanding something and developing expertise. These two motivating reactions, feelings of pleasure or relief, explain why we invest time and effort obtaining knowledge without apparent immediate rewards (Junça-Silva & Silva, 2021).

Social (intrapersonal and interpersonal) curiosity is the desire to know more about our own and other people's behaviours, thoughts and perspectives. Intrapersonal self-reflection enables us to continually learn from our decisions and interpersonal observation and communication is one of the most effective ways to acquire new information (Kashdan, Disabato, et al., 2020). These interactions can be overt, where social information is gathered openly, directly and with empathy or it can be covert, where details about people are gathered in indirect, secretive ways. The latter is associated with gossiping and prying so has negative connotations. 'Openness to people's ideas', where there is active seeking and appreciation of diverse views, is a facet of social curiosity used in workplace studies (Kashdan, Goodman, et al., 2020).

Understanding the perceptual, epistemic and social nature of curiosity enables us to identify wide ranging opportunities to stimulate and promote it. Yet there are other ways of describing the concept that may appeal. It is not just about personal acquisition, it's about seeing knowledge as a network of interconnections, with curiosity as the practice of building that network.

In 2022, Zurn and Bassett published their book (Zurn & Bassett, 2022), Curious Minds: The Power of Connection, and have shared some of the core ideas online (Zurn & Bassett, 2023). They see curiosity as connecting ideas into networks of knowledge as well as connecting people both to knowledge and to each other. Curiosity is everywhere and in each of us. We are simply curious about different things and in different ways. The authors identify three styles of curiosity: the butterfly (also often referred to as the busybody), who welcomes all kinds of information and creates loose knowledge networks; the hunter, who purposely hunts down secrets or discoveries, creating tight networks; and the dancer, who takes leaps of imagination, creating loopy knowledge networks. Each of the three common styles (the open butterfly, the focused hunter, and the creative dancer) are ways that we navigate information-seeking. We can be one or all in different contexts and times, so must consider how our workplace and social environments support these diverse styles in ourselves and others.

Cultivating curiosity in our library and information services

The most popular theory about the function of curiosity is that it motivates learning (Kidd & Hayden, 2015). It is also believed that curiosity can help us focus our attention on information that is neither too complex nor too simple, but a 'Goldilocks' amount of information that is conducive to learning (Zhou et al., 2024). Most research on libraries and curiosity describes how we might encourage it in our user services. Many

enquiries we receive stem from the need to answer a specific answer or assignment rather than from curiosity, as such, and we need to respect that quick results may be the primary focus. But there will be opportunities where we can inspire further learning and creativity.

In 2022, Roberts and colleagues explored the connection between curiosity and feelings of joy in information seeking in a large academic institution. Themes that arose in their interviews included excitement in discovering the resources of a large academic library; interest in ideas; curiosity inspired through hands-on learning experiences or initiated by connecting topics with personal values and relevance to life or career. Sadly, 'no student directly related librarians to the support of their curiosity' (Roberts et al., 2022, p.624). If we want to have a role here, we need to talk about what works. This is about going beyond teaching techniques, it's how we can promote the joy and potential rewards of openly, yet safely, exploring information sources for a lifetime of discovery.

Librarians have proposed several methods to encourage curiosity in library instruction, such as emphasising broad inquiry over process, asking questions that nudge or stimulate questions, shifting our focus from finding sources to learning about, and browsing outside journal literature for context (Arp et al., 2004; Chant, 2017; Deitering & Gascho Rempel, 2017; Roberts et al., 2022; Yu, 2017). Another key recommendation is having learning activities that connect students to human experience, such as guest speakers, documentaries or discussions, that may inspire students by showing how others connect to their topic at an emotional level (Deitering & Gascho Rempel, 2017). This makes sense in the light of engaging social curiosity, where we learn from linking in with others.

Cultivating curiosity therefore requires fostering of an open, non-judgemental environment that encourages free topic choice, questioning, an exploratory state of mind, and a highly interactive and collaborative learning approach (Arp et al., 2004). In recent years, library and information professionals have made advances in our teaching and instruction methods. Success in teaching is often measured by how easily someone can find the 'correct' answer, but useful indicators of our long-term impact could include if they learned something unexpected that they will follow up and if they feel inspired to apply our lessons to other contexts.

By engaging our own curiosity (including asking 'why' questions) and contextualising queries, we gain a greater understanding of stakeholder needs, which can be used to devise creative and effective responses. As a profession we must become integral parts of our stakeholders' networks and be seen to provide unique, additional value. In this way we can be a significant, recognised point of contact and source of inspiration for lifelong learning.

Cultivating curiosity in our professional lives and workplaces

There is a significant amount of literature on the value of having highly curious people and stimulating curiosity in the workplace (Birenbaum et al., 2024; Spencer Smith, 2023; Wells, 2023). In recent years the business world has promoted curiosity as a 'superpower', interwoven into crucial organisational tasks and professional values, and needed for learning, change, innovation, entrepreneurship, social relationships, competitive advantage and effective leadership (Gino, 2018; Lievens et al., 2022).

The M-Workplace Curiosity Scale has been used to examine how scores on four workplace curiosity dimensions could predict adaptive outcomes of workers (Junça-Silva & Silva, 2021; Kashdan, Goodman, et al., 2020). Those who got high scores for joyous exploration were associated with divergent thinking, creative ideas and stamina, and adaptability to acquire resources that transform ideas into action. Deprivation sensitivity was associated with self-direction and seeking demanding tasks, leading to greater competence. High scores on openness to people's ideas and stress tolerance were consistently the two

strongest predictors of healthy work-related outcomes including wellbeing at work and high frequency of innovative behaviours. The authors concluded that curiosity is an important antecedent of seeking new knowledge, motivation to learn, idea generation, organisational commitment, innovation and creativity, productivity and job crafting (Kashdan, Goodman, et al., 2020). It is not surprising, therefore, that curiosity has become a cornerstone of leadership and an important variable for the prediction of work-related behaviour and affective states in the modern workplace (Barber, 2023; Junça-Silva & Silva, 2021; Mussel, 2013). Numerous reasons why curious people contribute significant benefits at work has been identified (Table 1).

Table 1. Attributes and benefits of curious workers

Curious people:	Resulting benefits:
• automatically assess the nature and quality of information • question assumptions and how things could be improved • see problems as challenges to be solved rather than setbacks • apply a vast and varied knowledge base to decisions • actively explore different perspectives and creative solutions • are flexible and responsive to trends, diverse situations and change • hone problem-solving skills and easily adapt to uncertain external conditions and pressures through repeated practice	enhanced problem solving, adaptability and innovation
• use self-reflection and feedback to gain better understanding of performance and impacts • learn from every opportunity to enhance informed decisions • foster resilience and the ability to manage stress • boost morale and prevent stagnation by seeing possibilities and trying new approaches • use the spirit of inquiry to enhance other workplace competencies (such as coaching and negotiation) • open possibilities by building increasingly compressible and flexible mental representations of the world	professional growth and greater self-awareness
• have a genuine interest in the views of others and ask more questions • foster a culture of collaboration and trust in and across organizations • garner mutual respect and understanding to improve teamwork and create a more cohesive and supportive work environment • are appropriately responsive to diverse views and personalities, reducing potential conflict • maximise the diverse talents of colleagues • engage in broad, active stakeholder networks	development of deeper connections and stronger, meaningful relationships

Sources: Barber, 2023; Flaws, 2024; Kashdan, Goodman, et al., 2020; Lydon-Staley et al., 2020.

People tend to have positive experiences when performing activities that fit their behavioural tendencies, so curious people are satisfied and perform better if they can engage their inquisitive nature (Junça-Silva & Silva, 2021). On its own, curiosity may not lead to professional success, as shared motivational and environmental factors must also be cultivated (Birenbaum et al., 2024; Fernández-Aráoz et al., 2018). And although some managers may fear it as a challenge to authority or distraction from defined goals, the most effective leaders look for ways to nurture curiosity.

Rachel Wells (Wells, 2023) provides a useful list of six practices that promote curious behaviours: relinquish control, jettison judgement, expect surprises, gag the 'fix it' reflex (take time to engage and learn before fixing), embrace ignorance and woo the cue (be alert for signals and cues that require exploration). There are numerous other proposals for ways to cultivate curiosity in the workplace (Flaws, 2024; Spencer Smith, 2023; Wells, 2023).

Meet problems and opportunities with creative solutions: we should challenge the status quo by considering why and how we engage in current practices, and to identify inefficiencies and potential improvements. We should foster an environment that enables everyone to feel safe asking questions, try new things and suggest areas for change. This may include, for example, instigating ideation (brainstorming) sessions into process workflows.

Create adaptive and stimulating personal and professional frameworks: leaders can promote a learning mindset by emphasizing learning goals (developing skills and competencies) rather than focusing only on performance targets. We can all demonstrate intellectual humility (acknowledging that we always have more to learn) in practice and adopt a continuous, lifelong learning approach. Engage in self-reflection. Ask for regular feedback and hold project debriefs. Acknowledge and view mistakes or apparently negative outcomes as learning opportunities. Importantly, we must share what we discover.

Connect with each other in meaningful ways: we can seek diverse perspectives using open and clarifying questions to gain a deeper understanding of what we hear. Focus on listening actively, thoughtfully and with empathy so others feel heard and respected. Engaging in this social curiosity means we are more likely to collaborate within and across disciplines, are less likely to be subject to our own biases and make fewer decision-making errors.

Curiosity has been described as an ongoing sequence of seeking, engaging and conquering that ultimately leads to higher levels of competence (Mussel, 2013). It is no wonder that there is increasing interest in employing people with this trait and in maximising opportunities for everyone to apply it in our workplaces.

LIMITATIONS

This article provides a brief, simplified and largely uncritical overview of curiosity. The concept is more complex than presented as it likely reflects a constellation of cognitive and emotional processes, motives and traits with different weights and styles in individuals (Jach et al., 2024). Aspects that may negatively affect the workplace such as covert curiosity, the potential additional time and effort required or lack of focus on tasks are not addressed. The purpose of the article is simply to spark curiosity, leading to further exploration of the subject.

CONCLUSION

Being effective in our work requires us to care about our service users, collections, resources, value and impact, so it's interesting to note that the Latin word 'curiosus' is associated with being careful and attentive as well as inquisitive. Combining care with an active respectful, inquisitiveness means that curiosity is a powerful attribute that has the capacity to enable significant change.

Even when service users are motivated primarily by external goals, we can look for opportunities to spark curiosity by helping them engage more deeply with their subject, contextualising and connecting it to relevant ideas, sources and people. By framing our conversations to stimulate inquiry, and sharing our

experience and expertise, we are more likely to be seen as a valuable resource for future engagement and become an integral part of our stakeholders' networks. A first step may be to identify potential connection points and ensure that we maximise those interactions.

In our professional roles, we can also foster reflection as a habit of mind, nurture a passion for learning and build personal connections. In a practical sense, understanding the nature and components of curiosity allows us to talk about its benefits and the value that it brings to our work. Being curious gives us access to a wealth of knowledge and skills that are vital to a modern workplace. We can frame the conversation and speak about these advantages in job interviews, performance reviews and library advocacy work.

Throughout the literature there is emphasis on curiosity as a connective force that allows us to weave together thoughts and understandings, people, and communities (Zurn & Bassett, 2023). Essentially curiosity can be viewed as a 'self-directed, purposeful walk across the vast landscape of knowledge' (Patankar et al., 2023, p.3). Let us consider how to make the most of the journey, and who we can bring with us on the way.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT:

The author has no known conflicts of interests to declare.

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