



GARDEN SCHOOL NEWSLETTER



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Thoughts for the week

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At the conference I attended last week with the Heads of school from New York, Connecticut and New Jersey, one of the hot topics of discussion was the idea of Design Learning. Several workshops and lecture were devoted to exploring the idea of stimulating learning within the context of unconventional or untraditional parameters. Design Learning, as it was proposed by Scottish educator, Ewan McIntosh, takes its lead from asking a series of questions before determining what is to be learned.

Traditionally, curriculum discussions around planning and executing an educational plan tend to begin with the question of *what* we should teach. However, Design Learning suggests beginning with a different question, specially asking the question *why* we teach what we do rather than *what* we teach or should teach.

At first look, this question may not appear to be useful. After all, the history of education supports the *what* matrix rather than the *why* matrix. Yet in the early years of progressive education, specifically in the works of John Dewey, the "why" question was frequently asked because of Dewey's insistence on involving children in the process of determining their educations. The progressive model empowered the learner to take control of the learning process and thereby create learning environments that were simultaneously personal and universal.

Design Learning builds upon this concept. In creating curriculum, the question *why* leads us to consider, as McIntosh put it, raising a problem rather than simply solving it. I think that the point of beginning with the "why" of learning brings the learner into a direct experience of educational purpose and meaningfulness. Traditional teachers rarely ask the *why*; students always ask the *why*. How many times will a student ask a teacher why are we studying this or that subject? The answers usually invoke ideas of necessity, practicality and tradition, all of which are valid answers to the question. Yet they really don't touch the embedded ontology of the question.

When a student or teacher asks the *why* question about learning, the pathway opened by that question brings us to the heart of education. What we decide to include in our curriculum reflects our view of what is important to our culture, our traditions and to our intellects. We often find ourselves at Garden asking the why question, which begins with the intellect and then moves to the other threads of culture and tradition.

By establishing this primacy of the 'why' of learning, we reaffirm the earliest impulses of early childhood, during which a child is working to make sense of their world, and the most frequently asked question is "why" and not "what." Asking *why* touches the fundamental core of our evolutionary penchant for knowing and learning.

Let's ask it more.