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What Is Your Why? A First-Day In-Class Activity

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Like many people, I have days when the simple act of getting out of bed feels daunting, let alone going to campus, lecturing, meeting with students, attending faculty meetings, grading papers, and so on. These challenging days are often amplified by an internal dialogue questioning why I feel this way, despite recognizing the sacrifices my parents made to get me here, understanding that I should be grateful for my job, and acknowledging that others may be facing more arduous circumstances. While all these points are valid, they do little to alleviate my feeling of being marooned in the wasteland of existential doubt, questioning whether anything truly matters.

So, what do I do on such days? I am learning the art of self-compassion. What seems to also help me is if I step outside myself and gently guide my thoughts toward my initial motivations for entering the teaching profession and working with students. Reminding myself of my why and shifting my focus from the grand and at times overwhelming aim of societal transformation to the more tangible, immediate journey of education can and often does provide a comforting perspective. This shift enables me to recenter, reenergize, and approach my responsibilities with renewed purpose and even enthusiasm. I began to notice that a more effective and logical approach to managing these difficult days is to engage in a form of reflective self-talk that reaffirms my commitment to my students and emphasizes the importance of the journey.

Reflecting on my own experience, I wondered and began to think of my students—How do they handle such days? After talking with several of my current and former students, and to empower my students to appreciate their educational journey and foster a sense of community within the classroom, I designed the following activity, which I use on the first day of class. The activity not only encourages students to identify and articulate the driving force behind their decision to seek an education and enroll in my course but also promotes self-reflection and the reassessment of personal objectives. The activity is also designed to foster a sense of community in that the students share their personal motivations and learn about their peers' driving force. Below, I will walk you through the activity.

Step 1: Introducing the activity to your students

On the first day of class, after you've welcomed your students, invite them to do the following: Think about and write down on a piece of paper why they decided to take your course. (3 minutes)

Pair up with a classmate and, to the extent they're comfortable doing so, share their responses after they've introduced themselves to each other. (10 minutes)

Let them know that you will now show them a video by Michael Jr. called "[Know Your Why](#)."^[1] Tell them to pay attention to how they feel and what thoughts or ideas come to them as they watch the video.

After showing the video, ask your students to revisit the first question above.

Ask them how their understanding of their purpose for taking this class or getting an education changed after they watched the video. (2 minutes)

Ask them to pair up with the same classmate and share how and why the video influenced their perception of their why. (8 minutes)

Invite students to report either to the entire class or in small groups about how their answers changed. (5 minutes)

Finally, share with your students the purpose of the activity: to impart to them that *engagement*, *motivation*, and a *clear sense of purpose* are interconnected aspects of our personal development and play an indispensable role in learning. If you want, share with them definitions, such as these:

Engagement is the degree to which you're fully involved in, committed to, and enthusiastic about your work or activity. It's influenced by both motivation and a clear sense of purpose.

Motivation is the internal or external drive that fuels one's desire to achieve a goal or undertake a task.

A clear sense of purpose, by contrast, is understanding why you're doing what you're doing. It's the deeper reason, or big picture, behind your actions. When I have a clear purpose, I am more likely to be committed to my goals because they have meaning to me.

The take-home message for your students could be along these lines: When you're motivated toward a goal that aligns with your purpose, you become engaged. This engagement, in turn, feeds back into motivation because you start to see progress toward fulfilling your purpose, creating a positive feedback loop.

Step 2: Reflections

Ask your students to reflect on what steps they will take to ensure that their why continues to guide their educational journey.

For yourself, consider these questions:

How did your students' responses change after they watched the video?

Were your students able to clearly articulate their sense of purpose? If not, how might you help them do so?

How did the sharing and exchange of feedback shape the classroom dynamics?

I've done this activity for a couple of years in various biology courses. It's always a success and gets students thinking and talking about things that matter deeply to them. I refer to their whys throughout the semester, trying to schedule moments for students to reflect on them in light of what they've learned so far. I have found this activity to act as an anchor for students as it can continuously guide and influence their educational journey. I share with them that I, too, engage with this activity regularly and that whenever I encounter challenges or need to make important decisions, I remind myself to think back to my why.

The activity not only has the potential to support students' immediate learning but also equips them with a powerful tool for lifelong learning. In that sense, this activity can be a powerful tool to combat student disengagement and apathy.

Finally, a few important considerations:

Stress to students the importance of listening and learning from each other's experiences and perspectives. As part of the activity, I encourage students to share how their cultural backgrounds influence their why if they feel comfortable doing so.

Explain that everyone's why is personal and unique, and this activity is not about comparison or judgment. In this sense, I find it helpful to share my own why first, modeling a nonjudgmental and open attitude. I also share with them that my why has evolved over my career, showcasing the fluid nature of our motivations and purposes.

Have a backup plan in case of technical difficulties that prevent you from showing the video. An instructor-led discussion or a short reading could serve as an alternative.

For online courses, you could have students type out their initial why in a private message to you or post it in an anonymous forum. For sharing, consider using breakout rooms in videoconferencing platforms so students can discuss their responses in small groups. To ensure that everyone gets the chance to share, you might assign each participant a specific order or time to speak.

* * *

I would like to thank my colleagues Dr. Carolyn Sandoval ^[2], who first introduced me to the "Know Your Why" video, and Dr. Michael Reder ^[3], who provided feedback on the initial iteration of the activity.

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URLs in this post:

[1] Know Your Why: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ytFB8TrkTo&t=5s>

[2] Dr. Carolyn Sandoval: <https://commons.ucsd.edu/who/team/carolyn-sandoval.html>

[3] Dr. Michael Reder: <https://www.conncoll.edu/directories/faculty-profiles/michael-reder/>

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