Cultivating a Discovery Mindset:

A Contemplative View

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Received May 2025
Accepted for publication August 2025
Published November 2025

Abstract

This article explores the concept of discovery mindset, a way of thinking that actively seeks novelty and discovery in the everyday. Unlike bare awareness (Anālayo, 2023; Whitehead et al., 2015), which grounds awareness in present moment experiences, discovery mindset entails the active cultivation of an expectant, forward looking, and anticipatory imagination that orients to everyday situations with a trust that something new will emerge. In educational settings, teachers and students alike can benefit from actively fostering the attitude of seeking the novel, through the cultivation of slowness, suspense, serendipity, and synchronicity. The article ends with some general recommendations on how teachers can cultivate a discovery mindset and incorporate it into their curriculum.

Keywords: *holistic education, daily educational walks, meditation*

Introduction

Since 2011, I have been helping to facilitate weekly meditation sessions at University of Toronto's Multifaith Centre. During one of our recent sessions related to walking meditation, the participants were asked to meditate on the sensation of their bodies as they are walking and making each step. Miller (2014) aptly refers to walking meditation as a practice where "there is no destination", and in which "[W]e use the lifting, moving, and placing of the foot as our object of attention" (p. 44). It's amazing, in fact, how even the simplest process such as walking involves a culmination of so many "mini" processes, such as how the foot rises above the ground and softly lowers to the floor, the adjustment of the legs and feet, and how the rest of the body attempts to balance itself with each shift in the body's weight. All these processes seem to take shape unconsciously, without the need for a controlling, agentic mind to oversee it. Through what seems like the force of grace, we are allowed to step back and simply observe the process unfolding before our eyes.

Walking has often been considered a form of *tacit knowing* (Bergheim, 2019; Gascoigne & Thornton, 2013; Polyani, 1966) or felt knowledge that takes place at the proprioceptive level, without conscious knowing "how" or precise instructions on techniques. Learning to walk is an improvisation; it enlists many basic motor movements that engage all the body's instinctive

balancing strategies, in much the same way that improvisers combine numerous skills to form "a unique creation of the present moment" (Coste et al., 2019, p.1). Furthermore, mindful walking can enlist an individual's unique style and creativity, especially "if the individual mindfully shapes the form, pace, and style of the walk to express a specific thought, feeling, or moment." (Horváth et al., 2025, p.3). The act of walking has been recently tied to deep forms of reflective learning and critical engagement with social and natural spaces (Friedman et al., 2025; Lasczik et al., 2023). Walking meditation, like other forms of mindful activity, can also constitute a form of experiential learning which refashions the present moment into a source of continual reinvention and discovery.

When we take something as seemingly simple as the ability to walk for granted, we often fail to see that it's a kind of "everyday miracle" or even an act of grace (Brown, 2019), which did not have to happen, yet has happened anyway. One way to reinforce the miraculous nature of walking is to treat walking as a spiritual pilgrimage or a physical journey that reflects inner transformation (Sørensen & Høgh-Olesen, 2022) or which symbolizes our connection to the earth and land (Brown, 1989). Yet another way of seeing the miraculous in walking is to reflect on the earth upon which we walk as a sacred ground. Notes Zen Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh: "[W]e can train ourselves to walk with reverence. Wherever we walk, whether it's the railway station or the supermarket, we are walking on the earth and so we are in a holy sanctuary. If we remember to walk like that, we can be nourished and find solidity with each step" (Hanh, 2024, para 2). By rendering the present moment into a significant event that warrants our care and value, we raise our attention to meet the action with a sense of reverence and awe (Keltner, 2023; Rud & Garrison, 2012). This approach tends to be *additive,* in the sense that it uses an idea of the sacred to elevate present moments, thereby enhancing our sense of meaning and significance to the acts themselves.

Another way of transforming our attitude and appreciation is through a more *subtractive* or "stripped-down" approach. Rather than couching an experience in terms of sacredness, reverence or gratitude, we can learn to simply observe the experience as is, without the mediating forces of concepts, thoughts, or ideas. Walking meditation is being viewed in recent years as a prime example of practicing *bare awareness* (Anālayo, 2023; Whitehead et al., 2015), a process whereby we use the sensory attention to walking as an anchor against wandering or distracting thoughts, thus avoiding the tendency to conceptually elaborate on the flow of thoughts or fixate on their content. Kabat-Zinn (2005) observes how "[T]he challenge in mindful walking is to keep mind and body together in the present moment with just what is happening" (p.271). The "just what is happening" is a crucial element of all practices that use bare awareness as their base. By limiting the extent of our engagement to the present moment and a particular field of sensory experience, we learn to distinguish what is happening in the here and now from what is only registering in our thoughts or imagination.

What's often missing from accounts of bare awareness in mindfulness research and literature is the sense that every step can be seen as a completely new discovery that yields fresh insights. According to this approach, when a person performing walking meditation feels each step, they can connect with them as though each step were a new discovery that they are seeing and feeling for the first time. To bring full awareness to each action in this way is to completely open up to the joys of being present, as well as to discover something new in even the most seemingly commonplace or mundane of acts. But there is much more at stake to the sense of

discovery than simply the joyful feeling of just being in the here and now, with its accompanying sense of the miraculous nature of existence. In his bestselling book about hiking through old pathways in the British Isles, Robert MacFarlane (2013) suggests that walking is a radically co-creative act of discovery. He suggests that forging new walking paths entails a consensual decision to sustain usable paths in the face of overgrown vegetation, inclement weather, or other obstacles:

> Paths are consensual, too, because without common care and common practice they disappear: overgrown by vegetation, ploughed up or built over (though they may persist in the memorious substance of land law). Like sea channels that require regular dredging to stay open, paths *need* walking. (p.17)

As my own students have reflected numerous times, walking meditation involves more than just attending to the senses. It also entails actively cultivating a fresh perspective that sees each step as a process that involves slowing down to discover a new process; becoming more open and attuned to the accidental or contingent qualities of the walking experience (such as new sounds or sights); inviting a sense of suspense and anticipation at what comes next in the experience; and finally, learning to connect new pathways to existing ones, thereby allowing for new intersections of divergent ideas. These characteristics of walking meditation constitute an attitude of discovery (Noordeweir & Dijk, 2020), that is coupled with a willingness to reinvent the old, by forging new paths or finding new creative connections with existing knowledge.

In this article, I will explore the concept of *discovery mindset*, a term I coined in my recently published book *A Pedagogy of Surprise* (Brown, 2025) to describe the state of mind that is primed to discover new things in all situations, even the most mundane. The term "discovery mindset" was inspired by the work of Carol Dweck (2006), whose pioneering efforts on growth mindset have paved the way to studies on the impact of adjusting our mindsets on performance, attitude and behavior. Throughout my doctoral research study on the impacts of gratitude visualization on teachers' assessments of their students' writing (Brown, 2022), I have come to recognize how teachers were able to find new discoveries in their students' writing, through the simple decision to metaphorically reframe student writing as a gift rather than as an obligation or a responsibility.

One intriguing puzzle that continues to mystify me in educational research is the role that mindset can play in stimulating a search for what we don't know, have not seen, or have not yet fully experienced. Many studies have pointed to how bare awareness, or the "non-reactive noticing of thoughts" (Whitehead et al., 2015, p.563), can lead to a clearer mind-state that allows us to see thoughts without being emotionally swept away by their content (Anālayo, 2019; Lutz et al., 2015). One pitfall to emphasizing bare attention or awareness, however, is that it can overlook the role that anticipating future or unfolding surprises (Brown, 2025) can play in priming the individual to look for new discoveries. In this article, I will explore the importance of discovery in education and how the concepts of "being present" and "bare awareness" can be supplemented with an attitude of expecting something novel in each situation. This article will also attempt to describe discovery phenomenologically, using walking meditation as just one of many examples.

Discovery Mindset in Education

The notion of discovery as applied to education has equal parts promises and perils. While educators such as Dewey (1938), Montessori (1967) and Steiner (1995) have suggested facilitating learning environments most conducive

to experiential-based discovery, more recent Indigenous scholars such as Cajete (1994) and ahtone (2020) paint a nuanced picture which situates discovery in a balance between honoring the past and making room for novelty. Leddy and Miller (2024) further caution that discovery carries with it some colonial legacies and implications that tie discovery to concepts such as ownership and hegemony. This section navigates the educational applications of discovery to arrive at a balanced understanding of how a discovery mindset could honor the wisdom of individuals in communities of learning.

Discovery has played a key role in education, thanks to John Dewey (Dewey & McDermott, 1981) and Maria Montessori (1967) whose work on experience and its role in education have given rise to discovery and inquiry-based learning. Dewey notes how

> [A] primary responsibility of educators is that they not only be aware of the general principle of the shaping of actual experience by environing conditions, but that they also recognize in the concrete what surroundings are conducive to having experiences that lead to growth (Dewey, 1938, p.35).

Dewey's emphasis on conducive environments for growth shifts the process of learning away from abstract principles and toward learning that proceeds according to the learner's development, unique contexts, and unfolding experience.

While discovery has formed a cornerstone for these pioneer thinkers, many studies confirm that children arrive in this world already equipped with the desire and inclination to discover novelty in their environments. Research on child development has confirmed children's voracious capacity to ask questions (Murray, 2022), anticipate future gains from acquiring the resulting information (Liquin & Lombrozo, 2020), and actively inquire into their environments to close uncertainty gaps (Schulz & Bonawitz, 2007) or solve problems (Chouinard et al., 2007). These studies suggest that teachers need not instill discovery within their students, since the sense of discovery is already a strong proclivity that is built into children's exploration of the world. Moreso, fostering a sense of discovery might be as simple as allowing questions to be entertained (even if they cannot be easily answered or confirmed) and delighting in the questions more than the answers. Sadly, the ability to openly question and even risk *not knowing the answer* often gets shadowed by the desire to be proven right in a debate. Noting the differences between these two approaches to knowledge seeking, Lara Hope Schwartz (2024) remarks how "being a scholar (and, I would argue, an engaged member of society) requires us to try to love the questions and learn to live in a state of curious uncertainty" (p.11).

The desire to discover is not drilled into young minds; rather, it is invited into the world through a spirit of playful inquiry and observation. Montessori (1967), for instance, has theorized that when children are provided with the proper facilitating environments for exploration, they are able to learn and explore according to their unique stages of development. Montessori evokes a cosmic sense of awe and even destiny when describing a child's entry into the world. By implication, Montessori education stresses placing the teacher in the position of an observer who is marvelling at the unique place of the child in the universe. According to Montessori, children come from an unfolding cosmic story and are meant to participate in one of its many chapters, as learners, knowers and creators. In one inspiring passage of her classic work *The Child in the Family*, Montessori (1970) remarks:

> The process by which the human personality is formed is the hidden work of incarnation. The helpless infant is an enigma. The only

> thing we know about him is that he could be anything but nobody knows what he will be or what he will do. His helpless body contains the most complex mechanism of any living creature, but it is distinctly his own. Man belongs to himself, and his special will furthers the work of incarnation. Musicians, singers, artists, athletes, tyrants, heroes, criminals, saints—all are born in the same way, but each carries within him the enigma of his own special development that motivates his unique activity in the world (pp.32-33).

By highlighting the mysterious and revealed character and soul of children, Montessori frames an opportunity for teachers to cultivate awe and wonder. Rather than coming to the classroom equipped with a one-size-fits-all notion of a child's identity and development, teachers can bring into the classroom a sense of discovery as they participate in the unfolding mystery of each child.

Waldorf Education, founded by Rudolf Steiner (Steiner, 1995), has similarly described the classroom as a place full of souls that are at different stages of development, maturity, and growth, with very different lessons to learn based on very unique paths. Waldorf education stresses how the outward behavior of a learner is only a superficial manifestation of a soul's ongoing journey. In the spirit of honoring the mystery of a child's journey through life and school, Steiner remarks, "[W]e cannot solve the riddle of the child because we have no idea about what is in the child from the life before birth" (pp.22-23). Both Montessori and Steiner emphasize how learning is not a uniform process and requires the nurturance of a sense of unfolding learning via discovery, both in teachers and students.

Indigenous thinkers have also stressed the mutual, *co-discovering* nature of learning that takes place between individuals and within communities (Battiste, 2013; Wiebe et al., 2017). Learning is not a package that is administered from teacher to students, but is, more so, the sharing of wisdom that occurs across various areas of being, and relies on the novelty of deeply situated places, people, and contexts (Cajete, 1994). Indigenous pedagogies emphasize the role of art and storytelling in establishing both tradition and continuity across generations. Notes heather ahtone, "[T]he arts are a critical vehicle in the construction of knowledge, that through their hands artists create a shared vision for how all of us imagine ourselves as cultural people, now and in the future" (ahtone, 2020, p. 52). This quote skilfully reflects a way of knowing that respects the past while finding new ways of adapting arts to the present situation. Such a method is open to fresh experimentation while honoring the traditions from which they arise.

Discovery also has its dark side. As Leddy and Miller (2024) have noted, discovery can be used to justify a mentality of colonization, especially if it privileges one group of people as "discoverers" or "knowers" to whom discovery becomes a status or a marker of power. Of particular concern was the historical idea of "*terra nullius*" or "the idea that the new world was a vast and unoccupied place, because since the native inhabitants were not Christian, they could not be human" (p.26). For the process of discovery to be a decolonizing one, there needs to be a sense of not using discovery to polarize or foster the right to claim ownership over one's discoveries. In fact, it can be easy for even children or young students to equate discovery with a kind of ownership or sovereignty over a resource or idea (Kanngiesser & Hood, 2014; Shaw et al., 2012), as when we claim a discovery as *ours* or as being the *first* to learn or discover something. Learning about how scientific theories such as evolution play out historically and are based on cultural understandings (Ahmed, 2019), can help learners realize that discoveries often don't happen simply

within one person's isolated consciousness, but are developed over a long span of time across different thinkers and communities. When discoveries are ossified or turned into textbook lessons, they are often treated dogmatically or as fixed views that fall within "common sense". Thus, one challenge in education is to keep the notion of discovery itself fresh, by adopting a questioning approach that looks deeply into the structures and unfolding of our experiences.

This section has explored some of the historical trends in discovery-based education, with a sense of how discovery mindset can foster mystery and novelty while acknowledging the interconnected nature of learning communities. Having a discovery mindset need not feed into a cult of individualism, such as when learners try to take credit for their discoveries. Instead, discovery can open learners' awareness to the vastness of what we don't know (Keltner 2023) or have yet to fully understand.

Is Discovery Mindset the Same as Bare Awareness?

"Bare awareness" is often used in contemporary mindfulness research, to refer to a kind of present-moment attention, which is divested of the emotional and conceptual baggage of the past and future. Chems-Maarif et al. (2025) refer to bare awareness as "a basic human capacity that any individual can access by focusing on moment-to-moment experiences, instead of dwelling on past memories and future prospects. In essence, present-centered awareness works to counteract cognitive elaborations on what manifests itself in experience" (p. 8). Bare awareness is sometimes equated with a moment-to-moment freshness (Nyanaponika, 1986), which can encourage creative insight and openness to experience (Kaufman & Gregoire 2015), instead of relying on habitual responses based on previous experiences.

While the term "bare awareness" has often been used in conjunction with an attitude that encourages discovery, I suggest that bare awareness is often insufficient in fostering a sense of discovery. Simply allowing things to be with a clear-minded awareness of what is happening may certainly foster an accepting and peaceful attitude. However, what is missing is the sense of not knowing what will happen next and thus preparing for change—seeing transformation happening and enjoying the sense of change and discovery. Teachers who are practicing bare awareness may not have any sense of looking forward to something new or even priming themselves to make creative connections and leaps given the present moment experience. For this reason, I suggest that fostering discovery mindset entails more than simply bare awareness of any given situation. What makes discovery mindset different from bare awareness is that it is more attuned to the transformative aspect of unfolding happenings, as well as the ability to synthesize elements of the present moment in infinite possibilities. A discovery mindset expects synergies and actively prepares for connections between diverse aspects of an issue (Goldstein, 2021; Grossmann et al., 2020) rather than simply observing immediate cause and effect situations. In doing so, discovery mindset can prime individuals for integrative complexity, which is "the capacity and desire to recognize new patterns and find links among seemingly unrelated pieces of information" (Kaufman & Gregoire, 2015, p.95).

Cultivating a discovery mindset is one way of actively seeking discoveries in the everyday moments of the classroom, fostering a more complex and experiential knowledge, and finding creative connections between new subject areas. The following sections will explore a holistic approach to discovery, which teachers and their students can both adopt in their classrooms.

Linking Discovery and Embodiment

One of the most crucial ways to foster discovery is through greater attention to embodiment. Miller (2014) has suggested that intuition is rooted in one's experience of the body, as "the body or the flesh reacts instinctively to a situation. For example, muscle tension can indicate stress in a person's life" (p. 25). Through our bodies, we are continually experiencing new insights, rather than being stuck in habitual thinking, concepts, or narratives. Furthermore, when we are in touch with our felt sensations of the body, each experience turns out to be uniquely different from the previous. The sense of embodiment can foster a sense of discovery through being present with the body as it is. However, it can also be fostered through metaphors and guided imagery, which will be discussed in the sections that follow.

Presence

Presence is a central part of how teacher and student authentically relate in classrooms, even in virtual learning settings (Brown & Zhang, 2024). Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) describe presence in the classroom as "a state of alert awareness, receptivity and connectedness to the mental, emotional and physical workings of both the individual and the group in the context of their learning environments and the ability to respond with a considered and compassionate best next step" (p.266). This definition stresses how being present requires a constant sense of discovery that is rooted in moment-to-moment being, rather than in prior knowledge or skills. It also stresses the proactive and heartfelt, care-based aspect of presence.

Presence in the classroom requires a relaxing into the body. Only by embracing the body as it truly is (rather than how we would like it to be), can we re-set tension and reduce physical suffering of the body. Thich Nhat Hanh (2007) has recommended guided body scan as a way to rediscover a kind of innate sense of appreciation for the subtle joys of inhabiting a body:

> When the fully conscious mind recognizes a part of the body and embraces it with the energy of mindfulness, that part of the body is finally allowed to relax and release its tension. This is why smiling is such a good way to help your body relax. Your first smiles in the womb were completely relaxed smiles. There are hundreds of muscles in your face, and when you get angry or fearful, they get very tense. But if you know to breathe in and to be aware of them and to breathe out and smile to them, you can help these muscles release the tension. With one in-breath and out-breath, your face can transform. One smile can bring a miracle. (Hanh, 2007, p.85)

Embodiment also creates a sense of presence and focus, which is needed to discover novel interpretations of otherwise ordinary situations. In her classic book *Mindfulness*, Langer (2014) describes the negative impacts of letting our minds go on autopilot through habitual "single-minded self-image" (p.46-47), and how not practicing mindful awareness can even reduce the amount of sensory inputs we receive from the external world and are able to turn into new information or ideas. Not practicing mindful awareness has also been linked to fight or flight stress reactions that can place people in a reactive mode (Brach, 2019), as well as compulsive behaviours such as addiction (Brazier, 2003).

To tap into everyday discoveries requires a sense of relaxed and open-minded presence that is not attached to habitual thinking or routines. To foster discovery, teachers may need to set an example by not imposing an idea or an interpretation on a situation, opting instead to allow for curiosity and multiple forms of learning.

Metaphor

Studies suggest that metaphors can help students creatively embody an abstract concept, by comparing it with something we feel or sense. Metaphorical learning (Sanders & Sanders, 1983) is one way that teachers can challenge students to creatively adapt new ways of knowing, by comparing an idea with a concrete object. The writings of Lakoff and Johnson (2003) suggest that metaphors are ways of making an idea come to life and are deeply embedded in our mental images and language. Creative metaphors have often been used in classrooms to allow students to truly sense, feel, and explore an otherwise abstract idea, by comparing the abstract idea with something that is more concrete or visible in daily life. Miller (2019) sites one example of comparing the workings of kidneys to "a fuel filter in that both screen out certain molecules" (p. 104). Comparing kidneys to fuel pumps, or historical revolutions to volcanoes can help students extend their creative capacities to understand, by proposing an analogy that requires some deeper analysis of similarities and differences. Metaphors have also been paired with visualizations, with the aim of immersing students in a rendering of what it's like to be, to give an example, a virus travelling in the human body (Sanders & Sanders, 1983).

Visualization

Visualizations allow for more sensory, visceral and direct experiences that can even evoke a sense of empathy (Vendl & Fröschl, 2023). In literature classes, perspective writing exercises can encourage readers to shift narrative voice, which can foster empathy (Waldow & Matravers, 2018). To know a character is to try to feel what the character is doing, by writing from that character's perspective. This way of re-envisioning the character's quest and ordeals can be a way to discover the unique circumstances the character is under and choices they need to make. Through visualization, students are better able to imagine fresh scenarios that put them in the driver's seat of learning and decision making (Eberhard, 2023), thereby o making new discoveries from that character's point of view.

The 4 Rs of Discovery Mindset

To carry this discussion back into the classroom, how can teachers facilitate discovery while providing a supportive framework for students to voice their ideas and form realistic theories about their studies? Fostering a sense of creative speculation is one way to energize students to start thinking about present dilemmas using a broader palette of projecting the present into the future. A classroom unit dealing with future worlds and speculative fiction (Marozzo et al., 2024), would certainly require scaffolding, as teachers develop ways to extend students' lifeworlds into the worlds and stories of science fiction.

But what are the more common everyday traits that can make for discovery? In the sections below, I will explore what I call the "4 S's" of a discovery mindset: slowness, serendipity, suspense, and synchronicity. I will describe these elements below.

Slowness

Recent pedagogies have called for a greater sense of slowness (Honoré, 2004). Miller (2019) describes slow education as "a form of holistic education" that "is opposed to the mechanical product orientation of standards-level school reform" (p. 59). Slowness can sometimes receive negative connotations, as when it is associated with "sloth" or even slackness, not meeting expected targets, or even procrastination. However, pedagogies of slowness (and the accompanying slowness movement) emphasize being able to deepen knowledge through a more

immersive and savoring experience that engages multiple senses. In their discussion of the similarities between slowness and Indigenous pedagogies, Leddy and Miller (2024) note how,

> [S]low, as we have come to understand various slow movements, are not merely the opposite to fast. Slow involves a way of being in the world, one that is thoughtful, engaged, located, relational, and reflective; it is praxis. One cannot simply theorize about slow. In order to truly understand slow, one must do and be in a *slow* way (p.68).

The authors associate slowness with the ability to amble and peruse without a precise intention or goal, as in the "old-fashioned library *shelf-search* when seeking a needed book yields to thumbing through others on the shelf by authors not previously known" (p. 68). Slowing down to appreciate the unexpected can allow our learning interests to branch out into new or never-before pursued paths, which wouldn't otherwise be discovered simply through an online "keyword" search or even an AI guided inquiry. Perhaps more importantly, moreover, slowness allows more senses to be engaged in a thoughtful and creative pursuit, which can divert from a familiar learning target, as well as enrich it through the process of discovery (Rink, 2025; Trezise et al., 2025). Through the senses, we are no longer putting the concept in front of the experience but are allowing ourselves to receive the experience in its totality. In some cases, if we trust that the unfolding moment has its own aspects and lessons to teach, we can slowly let go of the search for instant answers, opting instead for gradual immersion and connection with the various subjects we study and pursue. Far from diverting the path to knowledge, slow movement can water seeds for future learning and allow learners to more wholeheartedly attend to what's happening in the moment.

Slowness can be fostered in classrooms when students are given far less to do, look at and check, and more to see, feel and explore. Many of the participants in the weekly meditation group I facilitate sometimes will check their cellphones during the breaks for alerts, new messages, and communications, between meditation sittings. We at times fear that we are missing something if we are away from cellphones and messaging for a long time, which causes us to take in a lot of information daily. By shifting toward a more open situation that does not require instant "responding" or "follow up", students can return to a more natural sense of time that is not hitched to accomplishing things by a certain deadline, even when those tasks are hastily performed due to overwhelming stress and responsibilities. Teachers in turn can also slow down their own pace to allow for a more nuanced appreciation of students' presence, thereby becoming more attuned to all the students' effort, not just those mandated within curriculum and rubrics. In this way, teachers create more time and space for themselves and their students to discover something new in even seemingly simple acts like listening to a friend, summarizing or explaining an idea to a group, building a class project, or even mindfully moving in the classroom. These moments of slowness can open the doors to a more holistic way of looking at the world that celebrates spontaneous new discoveries while maintaining a joyful appreciation of the present task we are doing, without becoming fixated on the result. Such a way of thinking fosters both resilience in the face of multiple demands, and a sense of wanting to discover what's new, instead of dreading a challenging roadblock that marks "failure" when not overcome by a certain fixed time.

Serendipity

Serendipity is another key quality which underlies a sense of discovery in the world. In his book *The*

View from Serendip (Clarke, 1983), science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke quotes the Oxford Dictionary as crediting Horace Walpole with inventing the term:

> According to the Oxford English Dictionary, Walpole told one of his numerous correspondents that *'he had formed it upon the title of the fairy-tale making discoveries, by accident and sagacity, of things they were not in quest of'.* (Clarke, 1983, p.13)

Serendipity can thus be described as a "happy accident", or a discovery that comes happenstance from seemingly nowhere. Some may view serendipity as the way in which the universe somehow unfolds, as if by "magic", in a special way that accords with a person's deepest sense of purpose. Many popular songs have from time to time expressed the idea that things happen for special reasons that are meant to be or are the result of fate. These ideas express similar notions that even when events or situations seem accidental, there is some single thread of meaning that connects the events together, in much the same way that the pieces of a puzzle, however chaotic, manage to fit well together once it is clear exactly how they were meant to fit. While some might reject a hard belief in fate or "destiny", what emerges from serendipity is the sense of deep interconnection that allows us as individuals to feel that we are continually being gifted, even when situations don't initially feel like gifts at all. The key, here, is that gifts depend on other gifts to confer eventual unexpected benefits.

Educators can use the power of serendipity to skilfully encourage students to think differently about the choices they make. For example, students can be randomly assigned a topic to discuss with their peers and find ways to metaphorically relate the topic to another subject area. By learning to approach new subjects with an open mindset, students learn not to compartmentalize some subject areas such as math or history, but can, instead, focus on similarities between them. Another way is by teaching the students the power of "Plan B", or "not getting their first choice". When students learn to approach a less desirable option as though it were optimally the best, their feelings of resentment or regret can turn into joy and gratitude. This turns the notion of "optimal choice" on its head by suggesting that there is no "terrible" choice but in fact it really depends on our attitude and sense of commitment, which comes from a willingness to accept accidental or non-planned situations.

Serendipity has many educational potentials. Firstly, teachers and students alike can tap into the power of the accidental, to cultivate curiosity and lean into an ability to accept surprises, no matter how unpleasant or unexpected they are. Secondly, teachers can skillfully use intrigue, mystery, or the unexpected to nurture students' willingness to try things that are unknown to them. Another interesting aspect of incorporating serendipity in the classroom, is that students may need space and room to explore things they may not necessarily be successful at or even have a natural affinity with, for the sake of cultivating their tastes or trying something new. This possibility entails that students should not be penalized for taking a route that might yield less certain results or findings, or that may not necessarily lead to a long-term commitment to a subject. In some cases, students should be allowed to experiment with learning and engaging things that they may not wholeheartedly embrace, without having to commit an entire semester to learning them, let alone embarking on a whole career.

Sadly, today's education system in North America may not be the most ideal place, at times, to explore or be curious. Enroll in any university and you will find the terms "major", "minor" or "double major". Even prior to their 20s, students

are subject to numerous forms of streaming which are, from the outset, intended to classify students according to their skills and abilities. By the time students reach their second or third year as undergraduates, they are often in a position where they must choose an area of focus or specialization, which in turn feeds into the pressure to know exactly what they want to do when they're in university or beyond. There is an air of certainty about this that often contradicts a student's inner life, which is fraught with all kinds of turmoil, including harboring interests that seem to conflict with each other. And yet, there is something compelling about the idea that students *should* know what they want to do with the rest of their lives by a certain age or year of formal schooling. After all, some might argue, isn't the chief purpose of a college or university education, is to prepare us for lucrative jobs and to become *masters* of a given field? While this preconception may drive a person to study a particular subject in a university, students often find themselves more confused about their identity even after graduating with prestigious "majors" and "minors". Indeed, not every student who graduates with a modicum of knowledge and expertise in a given field, necessarily ends up wanting to work in the area related to their chosen subject. Times change, people realize they aren't who they thought they were when they started the major, and the realities of working life may not even accord with how we learn in schools. Reconsidering education as a journey of discovery might be one way that students feel less pressured to choose the "absolute best" major, opting instead to enjoy the unfolding surprises of education.

Particularly in recent years, it's becoming the norm for people to change their careers several times in a lifetime, often due to both personal choice and unforeseen circumstances. This current trend challenges the mentality that students are meant to specialize in one and only one area, thereby cultivating their knowledge in that given area until it becomes their lifetime career. In fact, we are now living in a time of ceaseless economic change, in which the "hot job" of one generation is bound to seem obsolete or quaint in the next (Freddi, 2018; Rodriguez-Bustelo et al., 2020). Gone are the days when a person is bound to one trade or profession by virtue of their birth or family name. With this in mind, are secondary and post-secondary institutions open to the idea of allowing students to experiment with different social and professional identities, rather than being forced to choose one at an early age? Such a revised way of looking at curriculum might entertain more possibilities of serendipity and surprise as the creative forces that guide people toward things that resonate with their affinities and callings.

Suspense

Suspense forms an integral part of discovery mindset. When we receive a gift and are bracing ourselves to discover just what exactly we are about to receive, we cultivate attitudes of anticipation, not knowing, and even guessing what the gift is going to be. Students who come into classrooms with answers or facts memorized, are unable to tap into the suspenseful possibilities that go with not knowing the correct answer in advance and even having to make an estimated guess. To cultivate suspense, students can be given opportunities to analyse information that contains missing elements or even be left with a cliffhanger story that they are unable to solve or figure out until the next future installment. Miller (2018) has reflected on times when television episodes would end on cliffhangers that required students to stay tuned for the next episode to find the answer. Not giving away an ending encourages students to make educated guesses on the future answer as well as embrace the possibility that there is no single certain "answer" after all.

Suspense can also refer to a cultivated attitude of not knowing what will happen next, while simultaneously bracing for change and uncertainty. When teachers are following their own habits in the process of assessing their students, they tend to lose the element of suspense as they come to predict exactly how their student will answer a question. This especially becomes the case when teachers are marking and grading multiple papers with similar answers. When teachers expect similar answers from their students, they tend to become imprisoned to their habits rather than cultivating a willingness to find novelty in their students' work. To counteract this approach, teachers need to cultivate the attitude that they will in fact find something new in their student's work, even if it doesn't appear that they will get a novel response from students. This requires a discovery mindset.

Suspense need not take place randomly or by accident. In fact, it can happen when teachers make a conscious choice to honor their student's efforts, even in cases when the effort didn't exactly accord with the rubric or general assignment expectations. As my doctoral study on gratitude visualizations prior to writing assessment suggest (Brown, 2022), teachers can adopt a sense of trust in the sincerity of their student's efforts when they are able to mentally reframe student writing as a gift, as opposed to a mandatory assignment that is submitted merely for the sake of a grade. Through a conscious reframing of student writing as a "gift" rather than as an obligation from the student, teachers can learn to appreciate and value elements of the student's uniqueness and originality in approaching the assignment. Students sometimes can inadvertently surprise the teacher when they deviate from an assignment's requirements, even to the point where they submit something more interesting than the expected assignment, or their submission adds a new slant to the rubric. Finally, by reframing student writing a gift, teachers start to guess what the gifting part of the assignment might be—that is, what aspects of the assignment truly feel like a gift. Even when they cannot directly tap into the student's mind to glean their actual intentions or mind-states while writing the assignment, the teachers are more likely to project meaningful intentions into the students' efforts when they willfully reframe the written assignment as a kind of gift with good intentions. This study suggests the importance of reimagining the intent and connection with the student rather than simply assuming that students are submitting assignments for the sake of a grade or to pass a course. While such *extrinsic* motivations are bound to be present in any student, being able to see more intrinsic motivations (such as desire, sincere effort) can help teachers to rediscover something new or unique in their students' writing and voice.

Finally, suspense is important because it underscores the importance of the unknown as a stimulant to learn and even cultivate a sense of wonder in classrooms. In his book about grace, philosopher Hunter Brown (2019) identifies ways in which reasoning rubs up against seemingly unanswerable questions, such as "[W]hy there is something rather than nothing" (p. 13). While an instrumental form of rationality might reject such kinds of questions as unscientific (or just plain unanswerable), entertaining these questions in the classroom can remind students that they live in a remarkable world that could just as well *not* have existed, yet exists anyway. Writing about wisdom in education, Sean Steel (2014) describes how, in his own classroom discussions, a sense of deep mystery hangs over the subject matter, or how "the poet's words necessarily fail to encapsulate their objects, how the lover Romeo can never truly say enough about his love for his beloved Juliet" (p. 221). This kind of sense of awe or wonder can leave students in perpetual suspense of what the world has to offer next, while instilling a joyful approach to learning that

stresses the unending nature of questioning life and inquiring into its mysteries. By honoring a sense of mystery or "the unknown" in classrooms, teachers can instill within their students an attitude of not insisting on having answers, as well as a tolerance for some unsolved mysteries in life. This can also translate into greater tolerance for complexity, especially in the realization that no amount of knowledge completely exhausts a given subject.

Synchronicity

Synchronicity refers to the confluence of seemingly different and not causally related ideas that seem to reflect off each other in parallel. Referencing the work of psychologist Carl Jung, Jean Shinoda Bolen (1979) describes synchronicity as "an actual connecting principle that manifests itself through meaningful coincidences. There are no rational explanations for these situations in which a person has a thought, dream, or inner psychological state that coincides with an event" (p. 6). Synchronicity can sometimes involve bringing together fields that are different, thereby bridging the seeming divide between different subject areas that are treated as compartments. David Orr (1991) has suggested that so many schools treat subjects as discreet entities rather than as interrelated to each other. Instead of thinking in terms of subject mastery, he advocates the idea of making personal development the central aspect of learning. Synchronicity is one way of expressing parallel ideas. When a student or teacher can make an unexpected connection between two different subjects in school, they are demonstrating the power of synchronicity, in suggesting that many things happen at the same time and place for special reasons that suggest a greater order in the universe, which lies beyond mere cause and effect relationships.

When students connect different subject areas to their soul, they discover unexpected parallels and twists. Even the process of randomly selecting a book from a library can shed light on new ways of seeing what we thought were originally familiar ideas. By cultivating an understanding of synchronicity, students can construct narratives which play on parallels between the everyday and the inner spirit, noting what recurring themes or objects might symbolize in everyday life. An example of cultivating synchronicity in action would be nature walks, where students learn to connect with the unpredictable and uncontrollable landscape, while picking out spirit animals and connecting them to a particular life theme that they have been contemplating. Seeing an unexpected animal or hearing a bird call at just a certain time and place, invites memories and associations that can foster growth; as when spotting an owl can evoke notions of wisdom and "far seeing"; while spotting a deer might evoke a sense of peace or grace.

III How to Foster Discovery Mindset

One of the core paradoxes of "cultivating" discovery is that there is no *predictable formula* for knowing when a discovery will happen. While some might therefore conclude that discovery is random or somehow accidental, another way of looking at this is that we can become more open to possible discoveries. As I relate in my book *A Pedagogy of Surprise* (Brown, 2025), teachers and students may sometimes need to trust that they themselves can create unexpected connections and behold surprising events in even the seemingly banal, such as a routine daily walk. Below are some suggestions on how a discovery mindset can be actively cultivated in classrooms.

- *Expect newness.* By suspending the sense of "routine", our minds can find that even the most familiar experience has unfamiliar elements. Observing a stream

of water shows that each drop of water is completely different. Similarly, the sights and scenes around us are never the same from one moment to the next. By actively *bracing* for something new to discover and trusting that there is novelty in everything, we can begin to build new connections with things. *Expect novelty in the familiar* is one excellent way to invite students to rediscover their old neighborhoods and see new history and nature there.

- *Combine multiple subject areas.* Combining different subjects into one lesson plan is another way of encouraging students to discover new ways of connecting to things. What if, instead of showing how circuits are build, an electronics classroom could also explore the historical origins of radio and television using various models of circuits and how they have evolved over time? Mathematics classes could incorporate history (Chorlay et al., 2022) and even storytelling (Irmayanti et al., 2025), as students explore problem solving by "narrating" solutions or journaling them. Building new connections can help students stretch their minds to find new ways of exploring the familiar.

- *Honor uniqueness*. Teachers can learn to discover more about their students when they decide not to focus exclusively on the rubric or scoring procedure for an assignment, but can instead, allow themselves to appreciate what their students did to make the rubric *uniquely their own* and therefore not reducible to another students' assignment. Instead of seeing all the submissions of a given assignment as *comparable* to each other, teachers can learn to value the unique variations that students provide with respect to each assignment. This can help teachers cultivate a deep and rich appreciation of students themselves as individuals with special abilities and experiences that they naturally bring to the classroom. One way to empower students is through peer instruction (Knight & Brame, 2018), in which students actively take part in teaching their peers about something unique to their experience of a topic or assignment.

- *Make room for mystery.* Finally, classrooms need to provide opportunities for students to honor the mysterious. We are so used to having answers to things that we hardly acknowledge the power of mystery in inducing a sense of wonder and awe. As mentioned previously, while schools have done a fine job of teaching cause and effect, it has hardly given students the opportunity to wonder *why is there anything at all*? Simply being aware can attune us to the fact that what is unfolding before us is simply ungraspable: it is constantly changing across time. In science classes, this can be done by exploring how a phenomenon such as wind or a chemical element has been framed differently over time and across different cultures. This kind of discussion invites students to explore how our current model to explain the phenomena still has lingering questions. Eilers (2020) has devised an assignment where theology students write journal entries, where they record mysteries that they were wrestling with for that week. Eilers then recommends that students exchange journal entries. As Eilers suggests, "[I]nevitably, in these situations a student will be surprised that what seemed mysterious to someone else felt entirely unremarkable to them" (p. 28). Both

exercises can teach students that what seems commonplace to one person or taken for granted, can be mysterious to another person, time or culture. These assignments can also help students celebrate mystery instead of assuming absolute certainty about a subject area.

IV Conclusion

Although it has long been understood that discovery is an important element in the learning process, it's sometimes hard to foster a sense of discovery when education focuses on found answers or factual information in textbooks. Students need to learn that discoveries are not simply the product of accidents or inspiration but can be actively fostered when we expect discoveries everywhere, in everyday experience. What would a classroom be like if teachers themselves walked into the classroom feeling that there is something to be discovered in each and every student? When teachers foster an active sense of discovery, they can learn to trust their own ability to find new and novel experiences. In addition, they also honor the student's process of discovery, even if it requires moments of trial and error, slowing down to appreciate the unfolding of each moment, and allowing students to derail a predictable lesson plan. A discovery mindset can allow teachers to better trust the sincerity of students' efforts while enjoying the fruits of classroom learning.

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