The 5 whys

What is it?
The 5 whys is a problem solving strategy used to explore the underlying reason for a particular problem. Over a series of ‘why’ questions the questioner(s) follows a problem through to its root cause to discover the real reasons behind a problem rather than have the discussion stay focussed on superficial issues.

How does it work?
Explain to the class the rationale behind the ‘5 Whys’ process, highlighting the need to stay focussed on the central issue and keep the process moving (only one or two minutes per question). Stress that no ‘one’ pathway will satisfactorily solve every problem.

Discern the broad focus area and pose the initial ‘Why’ question to learning teams.

After each student briefly suggests an answer to the first ‘why’, the team chooses the response that meets general agreement and frames a second why question. The same process is framed for the next three questions and then the group is asked to report back to the rest of the class. See overleaf for examples.

How can it be used?
- To analyse a series of prompt questions, problems or scenarios
- To scaffold the idea of causation, and the process of unpacking problems
- To encourage critical thinking

Resources
- Prompt questions, problems or scenarios
- Whiteboard, whiteboard markers, paper for flow charts
- 5 whys template

Online: Open up Google docs or a wiki page and add 5 whys.

Other:

Why use it?
Asking ‘5 why’ questions can develop students’ problem solving abilities and their capacity to detect process issues. The 5 whys could be used to unpack real life examples of problems in practice.
The 5 whys

Problem:

Question One:

Responses:

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(Choose one response and ask the question why in order to formulate Question Two)

Question Two:

Response:

Question Three:

Response:

Question Four:

Response:

Question Five:

Response:

Recommendations:

eg.  Problem: Students are not using the student lounge as originally envisaged by the architects

   Why are students not using the student lounge?
   They prefer to go to the library
   Why do they prefer to go to the library?
   Because they can plug in their laptops at the library
   Why can’t they plug in their laptops in the student lounge?
   Because there aren’t enough power outlets
   Why aren’t there enough power outlets?
   Because they were not included in the design brief
   Why were they not included?
   Because the students were not consulted in how they might like to use the space

   Solution: Retrofit power outlets and engage students in design of student lounge/spaces in future projects.