Deep Learning and Disadvantage

A year on from the release of Fullan, Quinn & McEachen's book *New Pedagogies for Deep Learning* (2018), the Department of Education has released a paper *Deeper: from surface learning to embedded practice.* In this paper, there is an acknowledgment of the many frameworks in circulation that support the reform of public schooling away from an industrial paradigm, with a suggestion that Deep Learning may provide some conceptual continuity to these frameworks. But is this new thinking? In his book Fullan asserts that Deep Learning is not the same as Inquiry, Project-based, Experiential or Entrepreneurial learning. However, after reading the book over the holidays, the similarities overwhelm the differences. What we are talking about here is learning that takes students 'deeply' into a topic, depth over breadth or 'surface' learning as the Department labels it. In practical terms, this is like a maths teacher creating a unit of work in collaboration with students relating to an engineering challenge rather than spending one week on trigonometry, one week on algebra, one week on linear equations and so on. In this unit the skills associated with these topics are taught as necessary and relevant rather than in segmented chunks. Instead of relying on textbook exercises and tests, the learning is grounded in authentic experiences that the teacher creates through projects, excursions, incursions and online discovery. We have known for some time of the benefits of this approach to learning under its various guises. Indeed longstanding internationally respected frameworks such as the International Baccalaureate and Montessori have depth in learning at their core.

Students who engage profoundly and not superficially with topics-and indeed with transdisciplinary or interdisciplinary topics-are more likely to develop higher order thinking skills and be able to transfer and apply those skills in other contexts. Their relationships with their teacher are less dependent (Anderson et. al, 2017) and they are more likely to retain what they learn (Fullan et al.).

Teaching Deeply for Disadvantaged Students

Fullan et al. make the assertion that while all students benefit from a deeper approach to learning, students who have experienced disadvantage see particular gains. The most obvious reason for this is that if students can see a greater purpose to their learning beyond preparation for the next test, they are more likely to be motivated which is a critical factor in achievement in learning. Another reason may be that the sequence of learning is more logical, so students with attendance or engagement issues are are better able to catch up with the narrative than when topics change weekly and do not link to a broader objective. But there are risks which must be mitigated if these students are to reap the full rewards from this contemporary learning model.

A secure attachment to school requires a stable routine and safe environment where risk and exploration are supported and nurtured through trusting teacher-student relationships. Secure attachment has been directly linked to achievement (Bergin, 2009).
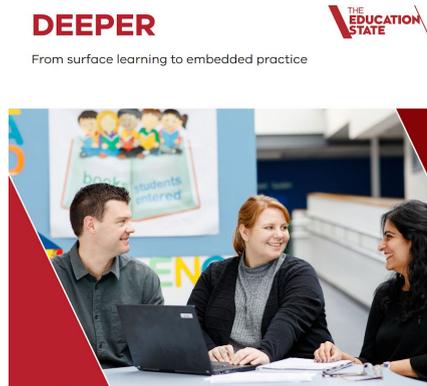
Indeed, any teacher who has worked with students who have attachment issues; who struggle to regulate their emotions and who have short attention spans, will attest that routine and predictability are key to their success. Deep Learning for these students is therefore not about open-ended tasks or student-led inquiry. Taking students through the design and inquiry cycle systematically and explicit teaching of research, organisation, collaboration and problem solving skills are indispensable components of Deep Learning. The consequences of failing to do this can be catastrophic for already anxious, or behaviourally challenged learners. Relationships can break down and be hard to repair, students may (out of a feeling of overwhelm) completely disengage, fail to go deep at all, lose trust in their teacher and diminish their self-belief and learning confidence. The risks are high, but the rewards are great. If these students feel willing to step into uncertainty knowing that their teacher is alongside them for when that overwhelmed feeling rises up, then they stand to learn more than ever before. Vygotsky somewhat boringly called this the 'zone of proximal development', in other words the perfect amount of challenge. With our most vulnerable students, striking this balance is crucial.

<u>An Example from My Practice</u>

In the Department's paper *Deeper*, schools are called to action to take their students from surface, to deep and transferable learning through increased 'collaboration, assessment for student learning, pedagogical expertise and a knowledge rich curriculum'. Last year, I worked exclusively with a group of at-risk students within a public school. Many of these students were extremely disengaged and some were at the point of giving up on themselves entirely. I decided to run a civics unit with them and pitched a number of topics that I thought would interest them. Following some discussion and eventually a vote, we landed on the topic of Law and Order. After three weeks of building general understanding of civics terminology and concepts, we chose to study the case of Dylan Voller, the young Aboriginal boy who captured the headlines a few years ago when he was assaulted while in custody. Students conducted an investigation into his case from the perspectives of victim and criminal. I arranged a visit from a local police officer and a youth lawyer and we undertook an excursion to the County and Magistrate's Court in the CBD. Students completed analysis and comparison of various media and legal sources which were differentiated according to their ability. This assignment was done online through the Classcraft platform which had students create avatars and complete stages of a 'quest' because this particular group was obsessed with gaming. Student work was then put together in a big visual display in the classroom as well as being turned into a video which was shown at assembly-much to the student's embarrassment but pride. Every student completed the assignment with one commenting 'that's the first assignment I've ever handed in'. But more importantly, sitting in a courtroom seeing people face the consequences of their actions, dispelling myths with a police officer, and having a class debate about the human rights of a young boy they could relate to are things that cannot be measured. Did every single student achieve an A+? No. But did every student show growth,

absolutely. Both academically but also in terms of those skills that sustain academic growth: high self-expectations, organisation, collaboration and independent problem solving skills.

In conclusion Deep Learning, or any other of its previous incarnations, does indeed present us with a powerful 'opportunity for all our students' (DET, 2019). Rather than getting bogged down in the differences of various frameworks, let's focus on their continuities as the Department suggests. The greatest of these continuities being the emphasis on skill development and profound learning experiences. This article has attempted to outline how continuity can contribute to a gradual but significant shift in education away from industrial rote learning models towards embedded learning for life. I have highlighted the opportunities and threats this contemporary approach has for our most vulnerable students in the hope that Deep Learning's power can be fully realised for all.

References

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