Book Review

Learning in Depth: A Simple Innovation That Can Transform Schooling

Kieran Egan
London, Ontario: The Althouse Press, 2010

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The Learning in Depth project, or LiD, is a recent attempt by Kieran Egan to address a widespread educational problem by way of a simple classroom-based project. Students suffer from a breadth of what can only loosely (and very generously) be called knowledge and a lack of depth of knowledge. The basic premise of the project that addresses the problem is: students will receive a topic from a pre-selected list that they will research in-depth to develop some expertise in something, and along the way develop skills, habits, and dispositions that only learning in depth can provide. While students can begin the project at any point, the intention is that students will receive their topics in their first year of school and continue developing expertise in this area throughout their K-12 years.

As with Egan's other book, *Getting it Wrong From the Beginning: Our Progressivist Inheritance from Herbert Spencer, John Dewey, and Jean Piaget* (2002), *Learning in Depth* begins by framing the educational problem that he aims to solve, "'The kids these days' know nothing" (p. 1). Unlike *Getting it Wrong*, however, the problem is briefly and succinctly described, and the majority of the book is dedicated to the practicalities of implementing the solution. Egan's major concern is that students are not learning anything in the regular curriculum that they find valuable or relevant enough to remember; thus, they are not truly learning anything.

Egan's premise is that the breadth of topics in public school curricula is taught at the expense of the depth required for critical thinking to truly occur. He frames this argument in terms of how society defines an educated person and posits that this is an essential component of learning that is not being reached in schools. An educated person must have both depth and breadth of knowledge. Egan goes on to argue that the depth of knowledge that one accumulates on one topic spans far beyond that one topic, providing access to the nature of knowledge itself. "With regard to the knowledge we learn in breadth, we rely always on the expertise of others; when learning in depth, we develop our own expertise. It is assumed that learning *something* in depth carries over to a better understanding of all our other, 'breadth,' knowledge." (p. 6, emphasis in original). Although LiD is an addition to rather than a replacement for the regular curriculum that is primarily student-driven and takes up minimal class time, it appears to offer benefits in every aspect of a child's learning.

This approach brings to mind everyone's favourite educational catch-term: critical thinking. From kindergarten to postsecondary education, many educators hear the argument that content is secondary and what students really need to learn are critical thinking skills that they will then

be able to apply to any content that they come across. Although he does not use the term critical thinking, the types of abilities that LiD can foster are those that can be generally associated with critical thinking: self-directed learning and problem-solving and making discoveries and testing hypotheses. In Egan's project, content is the vehicle for the development of not only skills but also habits and dispositions that an educated person must possess. Content is, therefore, not secondary but essential to the learning process.

What does LiD offer that other schools' programs do not? LiD moves beyond these types of critical thinking skills such as problem-solving and self-directed learning to develop habits of mind and dispositions that come from fostering a love of learning that "utilitarian" (p. 10) curricula cannot coerce from students the way it does test answers and assignments. An understanding of the nature of knowledge, the ability to distinguish between knowledge and belief, a stimulated imagination, a strong sense of self, and humility in the face of the vast body of knowledge that exists are all benefits of learning in depth. The depth to which one must investigate a topic to develop habits of mind and dispositions towards learning is not commonly achieved in the public school system.

Is building a body of knowledge about a particular topic over years of inquiry the only way to foster these dispositions? It almost certainly is not. Is it an approach that will serve students well in the public school system, enriching their experience, developing their confidence, and allowing us to do our best as educators, rather than simply managing the students until they meet the minimum competencies to leave school? It almost certainly is. *Learning in Depth* fills a need that teachers have neither the time nor the resources to accommodate within the regular classroom schedule. As an add-on to the regular curriculum, it takes the very best of student-driven work and has the potential to benefit students in realms far beyond their individual topics.

The book suggests that LiD is radical, yet simple, with a minimally problematic implementation process. It is clearly not a new idea, since the belief that the educated person requires both breadth and depth of knowledge, as Egan points out, is one that has been explored by educators in Western thought for at least a few thousand years. Egan cites Plato as well as Peters and Hirst (1970) and Gardner (1999) on the benefits of in-depth learning. The 1964 Events and Opinions section of *The Clearing House* cites Edgar Dale's argument, which is very similar to Egan's, "We do not prepare our students for life-long education; we prepare them for graduation from high school and college" (p. 93). Dale argues, like Egan, that students must learn something in depth to develop a love of learning, an intrinsic motivation to learn, and an understanding of where they fit in the bigger picture of learning and knowledge. In his book, *Motivating Students to Learn*, Brophy (2004), argues that learning something in depth allows students to make connections between their different areas of knowledge, as well as to big ideas. Brophy also specifically notes that fostering students' imaginations and sense of wonder are key benefits of learning in depth.

What distinguishes Egan's version of this idea from others is that he has not only identified the problem, he has also developed and implemented a solution. However, what makes *Learning in Depth* unique is that Egan devotes the longest chapter of the book to addressing problems and objections to the project. This makes the book not only an interesting read for educational theorists, but also a practical one for administrators and classroom teachers looking to give the program a try.

Why *not* LiD? Chapter 3, *Objection and Responses*, addresses the potential problems that might arise, such as the objection that students might get bored or want to change their topic,

the concern that LiD is only for high-achieving students, or the apprehension that organizing the project will be difficult. Egan addresses these from a realistic perspective, rather than dismissing them. One of LiD's strongest assets is that it credits students' abilities and curiosity, rather than taking the attitude that students will not want to learn if teachers do not bribe or force them to. Egan suggests that LiD is suitable for all learners and can, in fact, help in areas where school seems to be falling short in supporting student learning. His argument may not be convincing enough for some, but the purported benefits of LiD certainly appear to far outweigh the possibility that students might get bored.

The issue of the project being properly managed so that students don't get bored or teachers overwhelmed is one that bears greater attention on a practical level. While *Learning in Depth* is one of Egan's more practical books, similar in style to *Teaching as Storytelling* (1986), it is not an implementation guide. Although Chapter 6, *Building the Portfolio*, provides sound guidelines for beginning the project, the book does not go so far as to support the reality of starting the LiD project in a classroom where a teacher already has a full plate meeting the needs of non-readers, students with diverse learning needs, and individualized education plans. It might be argued that this is a non-prescriptive approach that provides individual schools the opportunity to tailor the project to their needs. In this sense, Egan is perhaps too anecdotal for what a classroom teacher would be looking for to get started. The book offers an introduction to the project and a framework for implementation that requires specific guidelines beyond what the book offers. Egan refers to the LiD website and a support materials kit as additional sources of support.

Becoming an expert requires more than simply accumulating a vast body of knowledge. Curiosity and wonder are key components to develop expertise because they motivate the learner to move beyond his or her comfort zone. There are elements of fearlessness, willingness to make mistakes, and willingness to explore the unknown that characterize students in a classroom where they are imaginatively engaged. Within Egan's LiD approach, students are provided with a jumping off point from which to engage in learning that they want to engage in, with few limits or barriers to where they might go.

Perhaps the cleverest thing *Learning in Depth* accomplishes is that it introduces readers to Egan's theory of cognition and learning on which his imaginative education work is based. If the LiD approach convinces the reader that fostering a learner's sense of wonder is necessary to develop the kinds of understanding that are lacking in current curricular approaches, then the reader is primed to further explore Egan's approach to teaching and learning based on engaging students' imaginations, which he briefly introduces in Chapter 5, *Some Operating Principles and Examples*. Overall, *Learning in Depth* draws readers to the edge of what they think they know, and gives them the framework for stepping into a new realm of possibilities in the classroom.

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