

## How to Deliver Deeper Learning During the Coronavirus Shutdown

By [Rick Hess](#) on [April 2, 2020 9:00 AM](#)

*As families, educators, and community leaders wrestle with COVID-19, we'll be trying to bring conversations to readers that will be helpful in confronting the challenge.*

Harvard's **Jal Mehta** is the prize-winning author of *In Search of Deeper Learning*. Perhaps his more important qualification for today's topic, he's struggling at home with his kids like so many of us. I wanted to get Jal's take on how parents and teachers can cultivate deeper learning while scrambling to deal with worksheets, video connections, and the travails of sheltering in place. Here's what he had to say.

**Rick:** You've just written a book on deeper learning in schools. How can we get at that deeper learning with kids spending so much time parked in front of computers doing distance education these days?

**Jal:** From a deeper-learning perspective, the worst thing to do would be to just take the same kind of worksheets students do in school and move them online. Intrinsic motivation matters more in the online space, and thus there is more of a premium on finding tasks which engage students' interests and curiosities. Meanwhile, students have significantly more open time, which is well-suited to project-based learning or challenge-based learning, where students work in a more focused way to produce a product or explore an interesting question. For older kids, COVID-19 can be a lens through which you can learn math, politics, public health, human behavior, and much more.

**Rick:** With so many parents trying to teach kids from their kitchen tables, do you have any thoughts on how to get that connection or spark in this new environment?

**Jal:** A lot of the most powerful learning we saw in our research was apprenticeship learning. Apprenticeship learning feels less like school; there is a real reason that someone would want to do the task, the mentor likes to engage in the activity themselves, and they are sharing it with another person who wants to learn it. If parents have a skill or passion—like graphic design, chess, cooking, basketball, or computer programming—this would be a good time to invite their children into learning how to do it.

You also want to look for models of real people doing whatever the thing is. In my house, we've watched Mo Willems draw pigeons and plot out stories, which gives a good sense of the process that real writers use. You could do the same with almost any domain—moving back and forth between watching experts do it and trying it yourself.

**Rick:** How do you know deeper learning when you've got it?

**Jal:** This is aspirational, but you know you've got it when the kids are asking to do it when you are not requiring them to do so.

**Rick:** Any habits or tricks of the trade that parents should be aware of?

**Jal:** Start with your kids' questions. Pick a topic about which they have some interest (and you have some interest!) and then have them make a list of questions that they have. We picked evolution. Their questions were things like: What came before monkeys? What was the first animal in the chain? Why did dinosaurs get wiped out when smaller animals survived? After you've got a topic, help them research that question, and, at the end of the week, have them share what they've learned with a friend.

**Rick:** What are you doing with your kids?

**Jal:** My school-age boys are 6 and 9. We make a schedule each day and put it up. They can do iPad from when they wake up (7:30) until we start at 9. We start with math—sudoku, kakuro, multiplying and dividing fractions (for the older one), and exponential growth in the context of the coronavirus. Then there is reading—Harry Potter for the older, Arthur books for the younger. Then writing and art—the older one is writing a story, which is a nice change from the nonfiction writing they are doing in school, and the younger is making a book of illustrations, mostly of Mo Willems' characters. In the afternoon, there is usually some outside play (badminton, basketball, baseball), some violin practice with their Mom while I work, and some exploration time, where they get to pick the topic and lead the learning. Evenings are games and movies. There is usually some brother squabbling time—both planned and unplanned.

We've had ups and downs. The lowlight was when the 6-year-old dumped out an entire box of Cheerios in protest one hour into our first day. The highlight was when I asked him to name the school at the end of the week, and he named it "Happy School."

**Rick:** You've thought a lot about what the best teachers do. What are one or two things a go-it-alone parent should keep in mind or try to emulate?

**Jal:** Great teachers are really interested in the world and interested in the minds of their students, and they find ways to connect the two. So pick something in that Venn diagram space of what you are interested in and what your kids are interested in and explore it together.

Also remember that almost anything can be an opportunity for learning. Read an article or a blog and talk about it. Watch a movie and discuss it. Rock out to D-Nice and explain what turntables are. School makes us think that some subjects and some times are for learning, and others are not. But much of our most powerful and deepest learning—from infancy forward—comes in informal time, about anything and everything. Rather than trying to re-create school—and its

attendant boredom and disengagement—at home, live life and use the questions it raises to create chances to learn.

**Rick:** Any last thoughts?

**Jal:** This is a tough time for everyone. Do what works for you. If you need to work and have them watch "Frozen 2" for the thousandth time, so be it. If it stresses you out to have a schedule, don't have one. Ultimately, you want them to look back at this period and see it as a chance to spend some happy time with you and to do some learning that they could not have done in school.