

## A Pernicious Myth: Basics Before Deeper Learning

By Jal Mehta on January 4, 2018 1:55 PM

If there is one prevalent assumption that stands in the way of deeper learning, it is that you have to do "the basics" before you can engage in deeper learning. We see this idea in various guises. One version is the idea that deeper learning is fine for advantaged kids who come to school with significant amounts of social and cultural capital, but for students who don't get the "basics" at home they need to focus on it in school. Another version is something we frequently observe in high schools (of all stripes): a fairly prescribed course of study in grades 9-11, and then lots of interesting opportunities for seniors to make choices, take electives, and in other ways go deeper in areas that interest them. A third version is what Sarah Fine and I came to call the "Waiting for Godot" pattern: teachers would promise that the day we observed was when students were learning the "basics" that would provide the foundation for a deeper investigation that would come on a subsequent day. But we would go back, day after day, and that "deeper" moment would never arrive.

You can see the appeal of this idea. Foundations before choice. Learn the notes before you play the concerto. But while it is true that most fields have some sequential ordering of topics, it is also true that what David Perkins calls "**playing the whole game at the junior level**" has a lot of advantages. Perkins cites Little League as an example: we don't spend a year learning to throw, another to catch, another to bat; rather, we play the whole game of baseball from the beginning, just at the junior level. Playing the whole game gives young players a chance to see how the sport as a whole works, and, just as critically, it means that they get to see *why* one would want to play the sport. This engenders motivation, which is what provides the fuel to practice the parts. To return to music, even the youngest children play whole pieces of music in concerts, which is a critical part of what gives rhythm and meaning to the work.

There is also the fact that the "basics first" approach also tends to reproduce inequalities in schools. This line of thinking tends to foreground students' deficits over their assets; for disadvantaged and lower-track students, it serves to justify teaching as transmission and what Freire called the "banking model" of education. Writ large, this line of thinking is a powerful force for social reproduction--no matter how well-intentioned it is, the result in practice is that, yet again, the most privileged students are being taught how to think, whereas less advantaged students, who are often students of color, are being taught how to follow the directions of authorities. Research suggests this divide **starts as early as kindergarten**, and **continues through high school**.

In our contemporary research in high schools, the most compelling teachers we found had taken a different approach that mirrored Perkins' idea of the whole game in the academic disciplines. Rather than viewing Bloom's taxonomy as a *ladder*--recall first, analysis later--they viewed it more as a *web*, embedding basic skill building within larger arcs that asked students to make meaning and take on difficult questions from the beginning. They also tended to foreground students' assets over their deficits--for example, in English, they argued that students thinking and ability to discuss was often far ahead of their writing, and thus, while gradually building students' writing skills, they foregrounded topics for discussion that were commensurate with students' quite sophisticated knowledge and thinking.

So, then, how did they build skills? They made sensible adjustments--shortening the text they asked students to read, working through those texts paragraph by paragraph, asking for shorter writing assignments that went through more drafts--but they did not compromise their fundamental beliefs that students were capable of doing interesting and complex work. So, for example, an English teacher working in a highly disadvantaged setting assigned an eleven paragraph **Ta-Nehisi Coates essay** from the *New York Times*, about whether and under what circumstances it was acceptable to say the "N" word. The first day was spent just deconstructing the essay, paragraph by paragraph, giving students tools for how to annotate a text and infer meaning from it. The second day was a discussion, drawing both on the Coates' essay and the students' ideas about the topic. The third day was focused on form, asking students to look at the ways in which the essay had an "implied thesis," showing that real writers did not always conform to the school template of a stated thesis and then a five paragraph essay supporting that thesis. And then students were invited to craft their own essays, where they had to take a position on the question, and also think about what form would best communicate their ideas, making the same kind of authorial choices that Coates had. In so doing, the teacher invited students to make meaning on every day of the lesson, pitched it at a pace that was commensurate with their skills, took up a critical question that was meaningful to their lives, and invited them into the world of writing, closing the gap between the "school version" of essay writing and the actual world of essay writing.

Shifting from Bloom as ladder to Bloom as web is particularly critical if the goal is to re-engage learners for whom school is not working well. Over the course of our research, we came to think that for students who came with high levels of dominant cultural capital, who were willing to play the game of school to get to college, school as it currently stands is functional. Much more could happen for these students if school were remade, but the status quo works well enough to put them on a track for a middle class job. But for the rest of the students, the changes we describe above are necessary to get them engaged in their education.

For example, we once witnessed a biology teacher teaching a fairly traditional class about DNA to two different sections of kids. The lesson included some mini-lecture, some manipulables (strands that the students could use to assemble DNA), and some worksheet questions. This was an experienced teacher--he was energetic, he was very good at classroom management, and his lesson was clear and biologically accurate. And he was committed to equality: he taught exactly the same lesson to his middle-track and the low-track students. But **1/5/2018, 10:54 AM**

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What we saw between 2010 and 2017 is supported by earlier research. In Milbrey McLaughlin and Joan Talbert's book-length study of high schools published in 2001, they **reached similar conclusions**: "Nontraditional students appear to be more at home and successful as learners in classrooms where teachers connect them to subjects in new ways. The students we interviewed recognized and appreciated teachers' efforts to get to know them and to create classroom settings that encouraged academic engagement and expression of ideas. Yet nontraditional students describe most of their classes as highly structured, teacher-controlled and regimented."

Hence we would urge everyone to imagine what could happen if we gave students opportunities to play the whole game from the start. What if, in language, student trips abroad were not something that happened at the end of high school, but were a springboard at the beginning of language study to show students the value of learning another language? What if, in science, we taught students the scientific method--and the associated relevant knowledge in statistics, inference-drawing, and building on existing literature--by having them write junior versions of scientific papers rather than reading from textbooks? We already do this in sports, arts, music, and virtually every other sphere of human learning. So why in school, do we think it has to be dry basics first, and the interesting stuff only later?