

Students Want a Better Education Experience. First, Teachers Must Master Deeper Learning.

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At the beginning of this school year, I facilitated a professional development (PD) session with middle school teachers about how to use education technology tools for deeper learning. Jal Mehta and Sarah Fine, authors of the 2019 book [“In Search of Deeper Learning”](#), define deeper learning as “the understanding of not just the surface features of a subject or discipline, but the underlying structures or ideas.” Even more than that, deeper learning invokes a kind of thinking and doing that transcends subjects and disciplines, going beyond understanding a concept and investigating deeper truths about ourselves, our communities and the world.

As the Coordinator of Deeper Learning for our district, I frequently present on this topic, but I realized that explaining the concept of deeper learning was not enough for this group of teachers. Instead, I decided to try something new and share a story about one of my first experiences with deeper learning during a history course I took in college:

My stomach twisted when I saw the 9 inch by 12 inch, black-and-white picture my professor was holding. He looked over the rims of his glasses at my History 410 class gathered in one of the well-appointed reading rooms in the Thompson Library at The Ohio State University. He passed out copies of the image to each member of the class. The room went silent.

I took a closer look at the image. A white man stood at the edge of a crowd of people, sleeves rolled up and a whisper of a smile on his face, pointing towards a tree where two Black men were lynched. At that moment, I recalled that the course was titled “Introduction to Historical Thought” but when I showed up for the class, I then saw the subtitle: “Introduction to Historical

Thought: Mass Atrocities in American History.”

After looking silently at the image, our professor gave us one hour to uncover the details of what happened before and after this photo was taken. The caveat was that we could only use the resources in the library. No phones. No internet. No Google.

Based on this assignment, one could argue that my college history class transcended the surface-level exploration endemic to most lessons in school. I became a teacher, then an administrator, because I knew that students needed educational experiences that crack open what they believe to be true and expand their thinking to new horizons.

As I shared this story, I felt every teacher in the room turn their eyes toward me. If they were going to implement deeper learning in their classrooms, it was enough to just know it. They had to experience deeper learning as if they were students themselves.

A Moment in History Makes All the Difference

To further illustrate the importance of deeper learning, I dove deeper into the story I shared with teachers during my PD session, describing how my classmates and I went about uncovering details from the image that was shared:

Back in the Thompson Library, my classmates and I left the room and scattered into the stacks to uncover the truth about the photograph. It was taken August 6, 1930, when white supremacists [mobbed the local jail](#) to lynch Thomas Shipp, Abram Smith and James Cameron, who had been arrested only the night before for the robbery and murder of a local white man and the rape of his girlfriend. Shipp and Smith died at the hands of the mob, but sixteen-year-old Cameron narrowly escaped and survived to write “[A Time of Terror: A Survivor’s Story](#)”. In New York City, a teacher named [Abe Meeropol](#), haunted by the same photograph, wrote a poem called “Strange Fruit”, later recorded by [Billie Holiday](#).

When we returned to the reading room, our professor brought this experience into the context of historical thinking. During the next hour, we embarked on the work of historians – uncovering hidden details of the past, weaving oft-overlooked stories into narratives that illuminated our understanding of history, identity and culture.

I might have been able to learn this same story in a lecture or reading assignment, but the challenge of discovering the information myself within an authentic context – supported by a professor who trusted us as novice historians – imbued a feeling of mastery within me. Our inquiry not only shifted my focus from learning history to becoming a historian, but it also shifted my identity. In understanding how the

different pieces of this story fit within the context of the history, I developed the confidence to investigate, understand and question the world around me.

Understanding What Educators Deserve

Ultimately, my purpose in sharing my story with the teachers was to shift their mindset and help them rebuild the identity of the kind of teacher they want to be.

Continuing with the rest of the PD session, I asked teachers to think of a time when they experienced deeper learning as students. They sat and quietly wrote for a few minutes before sharing stories with each other, many of which were about teachers that gave them the space to explore and engage in learning on a deeper level.

When students are engaged in deeper learning, they have the opportunity to experience different identities. They are in dialogue with themselves, discovering experiences that can ignite a fire for discovery and mastery. What might be possible if we did this for our educators? While students certainly deserve to have *aha moments* when they experience mastery, so do the educators that carefully cultivate these learning environments.

An Opportunity to Master Deeper Learning

As we emerge from the shadow of the pandemic, the system has tried to squeeze more out of educators, but little has been done to restore the sense of play and exploration that comes with deeper learning. Although I had seen my students as creative and capable of this advanced style of learning, I didn't stop to consider the educators I was leading and serving. I would start meetings or training by rattling off a definition of deeper learning and explaining to teachers how they could implement it in their classrooms, however this was no different than putting another meeting on their calendar or telling them to complete another piece of paperwork.

My work needed to honor their humanity, and this realization has profoundly changed the way I think about my work and beliefs about what teachers and administrators need to create better educational experiences for students. When my approach shifted, educators were more vulnerable and open to new ideas; together, we are creating a new environment where change can take hold.

At the most basic level, mastery means knowing how to do something. When I started teaching, the focus on standardized testing led me to the misconception that mastery meant getting the right answer every single time. Admittedly, that is not enough when so many right answers are instantly available with technology. Since I was a student, this technology has become more sophisticated, evolving from basic calculators to [essay-writing chatbots](#). Deeper learning asks us to dig deeper to answer questions and make connections not [readily supplied by artificial intelligence](#) or a quick search on the internet.

To that, I ask: what are we doing to create nurturing environments for educators to feel a sense of mastery over the learning environments they create for students? Even more, how can we expand the concept of learning to focus on the journey to the right answer as much as we value the destination? In my view, the only way to create better and more transformative educational experiences for students is by giving teachers the space to master deeper learning.

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