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The Role of Teacher in LiD

“It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge.”

Albert Einstein

I hope this paper will accomplish two things, a deeper understanding of Learning in Depth (LiD) and the role we adults play in it. And if by sharing LiD experiences the life of educators is eased and benefited, then the journey will be totally worthwhile.

And before I start sharing the LiD experiences, I believe it is imperative to understand the basic core principles of the LiD program, as these directly affect the function of LiD and teachers, in ways that may seem counter-intuitive to the manner most programs in schools are managed.

Core principals of LiD are:

- Teachers create a portfolio and or artifacts box for each student
- LiD is an add-on program of approximately one hour a week
- Each student will receive one topic for their school career
- LiD is a long-term project. The results are realized over time.
- All topics meet a set criteria that allows for the depth and breadth of study
- In the beginning each student will receive a topic that is randomly picked
- LiD is not taught, marked or graded
- It is up to the student to ‘drive’ their topic and they are responsible for their time and work

“Experience is a hard teacher because she gives the test first, the lesson afterward.”

Vernon Law

When I first started LiD in 2008 there wasn't a LiD book yet. I had heard Dr. Egan talk about LiD and I was intrigued, so much so, that using just the principals written above, I created what I thought a functioning LiD program would look like. Through weeks of planning, organizing and enrolling staff and administration I enthusiastically implemented LiD into my early primary, multi-aged class.

I discovered in the first month that LiD was a lot of work! The preparation of materials (portfolios, magazines, books, etc.) for LiD was time consuming but nothing too onerous. I was overwhelmed by the huge demand of my students for my time. They struggled with being independent, self-directed and patient. The students looked to me to tell them what to do. I found my LiD classes chaotic, loud, unfocussed and more importantly, I seemed to be doing most of the work! LiD was exhausting and frustrating because, as soon as I helped one student,

three more appeared. I was enthusiastically excited about teaching my students to build a relationship with knowledge, only to find out they were dependent on me. Was it lack of skills, tools, understanding or teacher support? So, I enrolled the Librarian to join us during LiD to be an extra pair of helping hands. She was a great help and it soon became obvious that although the children received help quicker and the behavior issues mellowed, they still remained dependent on a lot of teacher time.

I was at a crossroad. Why weren't my students more independent and self-directed? How do I get my students to be independent, self-directed LiD people? Hadn't I prepared enough, done enough? Was I overly ambitious, moving too fast? What was LiD achieving? Did LiD really require more teacher help than regular class? What was I missing?

After a lot of thought I realized I was too close to the situation and I just couldn't see the proverbial forest for the trees? In a thicket and at a loss, I sought out help from colleagues. I shared my frustration around my students' lack of independence and self-directedness. What I received was a quote of Albert Einstein's, his definition of insanity.

"Insanity... doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."

Ah, I realized, here I was teaching LiD like a math or language arts class, which it is not. I went back to reread the LiD principles which started me on the question of how does a teacher 'manage' LiD? I remembered Kieran Egan talking about how the topics belonged to the students and that teachers were not meant to teach LiD. In fact, if LiD was successful, teachers could be marking while the students worked. I was so busy leading LiD; my students following me around or goofing off while they were waiting for my next lead. I barely had a moment to myself, let alone marking papers! It became obvious to me that I was 'teaching' LiD. I held unrealistic expectations for my students to become independent learners just because I gave them some materials, an hour a week, and encouragement to go forth and learn.

"The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires." — William Arthur Ward.

So, I made it my goal to have such wildly self-directed students that I could mark papers. In order to achieve my goal of teacher independence, I had to give up orchestrating the agenda, directing and setting the pace. When implementing LiD I had missed a very important aspect of any successful venture, the relationship between the people involved; the students, the parents and the administrators.

I changed my context, the 'I' became a 'we' and the focus was on topics, while I managed the environment, not the children. As a class, we gathered together and started LiD each week in a group and we discussed what LiD was all about and that soon they would probably know a lot more about their topic than anyone else in the room and they would probably be teaching us. How exciting is that: twenty-four experts sharing their knowledge and understanding?

Some of the most interesting discussions I ever participated in were with my class, of 5- 8-year-olds.

We discussed;

- What is knowledge and how do we know when & what we know?
- What is funny... funny – ha-ha or funny strange?

- What is a question? Why do we have them?
- What constitutes a good question?
- How can we show our thinking / knowing?
- Is there an end to knowing and what does thinking deeply mean?
- What is an expert and how do you know one when you meet them?
- What do we do when learning gets hard?
- Do our topics connect to each other and if so how?
- What does a good partner or team look, feel and sound like?

We took turns leading the weekly LiD time by sharing things we had discovered or created. Students would share what they were working on for LiD time and off they would go, or at least most of them would.

“Understanding is an adventure and, like any adventure, it always involves some risk.” Hans-Georg Gadamer (1983)

Not to paint too idealistic a picture of our LiD class, we had our challenges. Like any class we had students with special needs; ESL, behavioral, psychological, physical and intellectual. Once the more self-directed students went off to their studies, I helped those who needed individual attention. Below are just a few examples of students with special needs and their LiD journeys.

Sarah, who was diagnosed with OCD and anxiety disorder, waited for encouragement and clarification of what was expected of her before she would even contemplate starting anything. Throughout the month I encouraged Sarah to join two keenly independent students whom I asked to include Sarah. The two girls knew Sarah was shy and they were only too willing to help her out. By the end of the month Sarah joined in LiD without any further assistance from me.

Francis was a neat individual who struggled with learning to read and making friends in his previous class. I met Francis in October of his grade two year when he joined my class. His parents decided to put Francis in a new environment. I realized quickly he was a highly intelligent kid who had a passion for airplanes. He and his dad spent hours discussing, drawing, making and watching videos about WWI and WWII warplanes. Francis was always keen to share his passion, as he knew so much about planes, which puzzled the rest of the children in the class. They stared at Francis incomprehensively, usually ignored him or walking away. Francis stopped sharing his airplane passion and only when I asked how his project was going, would he smile and enthusiastically tell me what he was learning and creating at home. When we started LiD I hoped it would help everyone learn to be passionate about something. When everyone had a topic of their own, Francis’ life in class began to change. He learned to read and within 8 months was at grade level. Francis was no longer the odd one, as students began to develop pride and ownership of their LiD topics, they too were enthusiastic, interested learners; eager to share what they knew. Francis found many friends and became one of many. As for Francis, what he cosmically picked from the topics bag was The Solar System. He had no difficulty connecting his passion of planes with his LiD topic.

Nathan was a six-year-old mover and shaker (in other words a runner and an escape artist) who had difficulty focusing for longer than 5 minutes, even though he often had a TA supporting him. Nathan could not read, write or play independently. He was not popular with the children

because he sought attention and could be mean. So, Nathan often sat next to me, which seemed to help him remain calm for short periods. One LiD library class Nathan got up and started circling the library, pulling books and then putting them back. He wasn't disturbing or disruptive and after several rounds he pulled a book and walked over to one of the older boys who was working quietly. As I watched Nathan approaching Charles, who had his own severe anger issues, I started to move towards them, anticipating trouble. Ten steps away I heard Nathan ask Charles, "Can you use this book?" Surprisingly to me, Charles responded with a smile, "Yes, thank you." Charles took the book on **Bears**, his topic, and continued his work while Nathan smiled and went back to the bookshelves looking for more books. Nathan did not often get positive feedback for his behavior. By the end of the year he knew the library organizational structure really well and in particular, where all the class topics were housed. Nathan found a way, which he could move, be helpful and that made him feel good about himself. And along the way, he also learned how to trace and name several kinds of **Bugs**; his topic. Now talk about a cosmic topic choice!

LiD time settled into a comfortable routine with small groups or individuals setting forth their personal directions for their time. LiD was a perfect place for collaboration where we discovered how topics intersected and how our knowing develops. One of our class sayings that was often used during LiD, "It's not what you think you know, it's what you know you know."

As the months passed we developed into a community of learners and everyone had something to contribute. Use of LiD time was up to the individuals involved, that is, as long as they did not interfere or distract others from their LiD time. My students learned to ask questions, help each other and in time became self-directed to some degree or another.

As for me, my LiD job description changed. I put away my expectations, my need for speed (my need for results) and became, literally, the guide at the side of the room. I became a question asker, an active listener, an encourager and a knowledge-sharing cheerleader. Some of the ways I did this was by setting up student-teacher conference times so students could talk about their topics with me, and ask questions or request anything they needed from me. I also set up small group discussions about how a library functions, how to trace pictures in books (rather than cut them out to keep in their portfolio), how to skim reading materials and how might topics connect to each other. I offered up challenges around connecting their topic to what we were learning in class that particular week, i.e. geometry – What shapes are in your topic, poetry – Write an acrostic poem for your topic, art – What colours are in your topic, music – What music is part of your topic? Some students took on the challenges while others centered their time on drawing, creating and writing in anticipation for what they would present to the class.

During one LiD class in the Library, our Vice Principal walked through and stopped to look around. He found me marking and asked me what was happening that my young students were so focused and intent on what they were doing. It really impressed him that the children were so self-motivated. I looked proudly at my class and realized how right he was. We talked quietly in my corner and I told him it was our weekly LiD class (which I raved on about in the staff room), he looked around once more and said, that if his grade 7 class could be half as interested in their projects, he would be very interested in knowing more about LiD and we set up a meeting to discuss it.

After a year of LiD I found I often sat at the side of the library marking spelling tests, conferencing or taking notes for my LiD journal. This became my treasured student one to one and observation time. I learned what skills and tools the students had developed, those tools/skills they were working on and what tools/skills they needed to acquire. I was able to focus my teaching during regular class time to specific students needing specific skill and tool development. LiD was a huge gift for me not only to observe my students but also to see their abilities as learners develop and mature.

Overall I learned that we all did better when I stopped “driving the bus”, relaxed and spent time being an interested participant, enthusiastic encourager or quiet observer. By asking questions, showing interest and being enthusiastically encouraging, LiD quickly became a favorite time for students and myself. LiD was easily the most stimulating and interesting part of our week. It even occasionally eked out recess time as our favorite part of school.

In our second LiD year Stephanie, a grade 6/7 teacher at our school implemented LiD, with my help. Her LiD implementation was less harrowing and stressful than mine as I was able to point out what the role of teacher looked like and, she watched while I introduced her students to the possibilities of LiD. Once the program parameters of time and routine of LiD were set and their LiD oath and ceremony completed, her class rose brilliantly to the challenges of LiD. Stephanie was also the first teacher I know of that took on a topic along with her students. At the beginning of each LiD class everyone would do a pair-share about something they had learned about their topic. As Stephanie had a topic, she also modeled (very enthusiastically) what she had discovered. The students were to present their topics to the class three times during the year but this had to be changed to twice a year when the first set of presentations, which were to be approximately 2-3 minutes in length, ended up averaging 15 minutes each. After the first three presentations some students asked for more time to prepare, while Stephanie had to end up putting on time limits. The presentations surpassed our wildest imaginings.

In the following school year it was Stephanie’s new students who had heard about LiD from the previous class that asked and pleaded to have LiD be part of their schedule. It was so gratifying for me to witness how LiD changed school for so many people, including the teachers. And yes, Stephanie implemented LiD for the second year. She once told me she could hear me in her head saying, “Back Off! Stay out of their way.” Did I really say that?

As one teacher, Andrea said after implementing LiD in her grade 5-6 class, “This is why I got into teaching!”

Over the five years I was at the school 80% of the teachers (Kindergarten – 7) joined in bringing LiD to life in their classes and to the community through two LiD Symposiums. It was my dream that the community be part of LiD and that one day our school would lead the way in a symposium. The symposiums we had were both huge displays of LiD work that took over the gym for one afternoon a year. The grade 6 students organized and ran meetings and sharing sessions with all grade groups of similar topics meeting. Families, administration and all the school were invited to come and see posters, books, art, computer-generated work; while hearing presentations and participating in LiD based experiments.

Once Kieran Egan's book, *Learning in Depth*, was in my hands I devoured it and found I was on the right road in my ever-developing LiD practice. His book brought clarity to my of fuzzy edges LiD and a definitive description of my role as a teacher of LiD. He first describes teachers' role...

"Initially students will likely need significant help from the teacher charged to guide development of their portfolios. But as time goes by, students' knowledge of their topic will exceed that of the teacher, and they will become increasingly autonomous in the way they continue their studies-some students might obviously be expected to become more independent earlier in their studies than others. Teachers will continue to monitor the portfolio's development, and can counsel students and respond to their questions about new dimensions of their topic that they might explore." (*Learning in Depth*, Kieran Egan, Chicago Press, 2010, page 25)

After Mary's' first year of LiD in grade two, she met with me to asked if she could change her topic TREES. She articulately explained to me that she knew pretty much everything about trees and that she wanted a different topic. Mildly showing surprise, I asked her what she did want to study and she quickly replied, animals. I asked her, "Aren't there animals that live in trees?" Mary smiled, nodded and off she went, already listing off animals she knew of that lived in trees.

My interaction with Mary helped me see how 'we just don't know what we don't know' and having regular counsel sessions with students can help them open up possible new avenues of research, stimulate imagination and diversification of ideas not previously available to them. On page 137 Kieran Egan states,

"The teacher can constantly raise questions that may encourage students to develop further pieces of knowledge, even if initially the knowledge is only very general and imprecise."

Developing autonomy takes time, a skilled teacher and from my experience, lots of support. On page 26 of *Learning in Depth*, Kieran emphasizes...

"A further distinctive feature of this project is that students will work alone for much of the time. They will meet with their supervising teacher, with older students who may be working on the same topic, with parent volunteers, with college student volunteers, with school teacher-librarians, and with friends."

Having 24 five to eight year olds, I can attest that independence can be achieved. As I stated earlier, once I stopped teaching LiD, slowed down any expectations that I held around 'end results' and started encouraging and engaging my students in conversation, the atmosphere during LiD began to settle. And when I stood back to observe and mark, my students rose to working together or with their older buddy.

By the forth year of LiD I spent most of my time note-taking, marking and observing. The days I didn't have marking I will admit I got rather lonely. On one such day I enviously watched my

children fully engaged in a myriad of activities. One student started walking towards me and I thought, that I was going to become involved with some cool plan, or project or maybe it would be a stimulating question we could seek out the answer to together. I was smiling with anticipation. Jason looked at me and said, "Could you please get a book off the top shelf for me?" I got up, took the book down and not being needed for anything else, I returned to my place.

The question I am most often asked by teachers regarding LiD is, "How do you do it?" The 'it' being not only the schema of implementing LiD, but the schema of how the adult is to **BE**, to lead LiD. It is a program that requires little direct teaching, no marking and a slowing down of doing things. I ended up writing a sign by my chair that encouraged me... "They are the masters of their LiD, they drive their own portfolios which are theirs for life. Encourage, Council, Listen, Question and Back Off."

Throughout *Learning in Depth*, Kieran Egan refers to teachers as supervisors, portfolio supervisor, supervising teacher, or project supervisor. He goes so far as to ask on page 165 whether one teacher remain the portfolio supervisor for "... as long as possible, or should it be the job of the classroom teacher and change each year?"

Dictionary.com defines supervisor: "A supervisor is a person who supervises activities or people, especially workers or students."

British Dictionary defines supervisor as, "a tutor supervising the work, esp. research work, of a student"

It is interesting to note that supervisor is derived from the Medieval Latin word, *supervidere*, meaning to oversee, inspect.

As a LiD teacher I supervise LiD by setting up a place for them to be safe to be independent, cooperative, responsible and inquisitive. Within this space there is lots of time; time to share what they know and time to present their discoveries to others on a regular basis. I do this by being enthusiastically encouraging, which sometimes requires me to stand back quietly, trusting myself to allow my students to risk, to create, and yes, to fail so they develop their own relationship with knowing and knowledge. In this safe LiD environment failures, successes, and risks, are all part of everyone's path, including their teacher; remember me, driving the bus crazily down the wrong road.

Armed with my 5 years of implementing LiD in my class and 7 years of assisting other teachers and administrators to implement LiD, I have discovered it is not as easy as I originally thought to bring LiD to life in a class or school. There are a few perspective shifts that need to be made by the people involved if LiD is to be wildly successful. Below I have included some of the main perspective shifts teachers, administrators, parents and students have experienced and why they initially believed LiD couldn't, wouldn't or hasn't happened. In many of the cases cited, these perspective shifts, helped people to move past and not only implement LiD but to embrace it enthusiastically.

1. Interpretations happen! Implementing the core principles of LiD does not always bring the same results. Why you may ask?

Adult Voices ... “We read the book. We don’t need help implementing LiD.”

At one school the intermediate teachers agreed to do LiD and believed they had enough of an understanding to implement the program. They held LiD class at the same time each week and although the students liked it, halfway through the year there was a slump in student interest. On visiting the school during their LiD time I observed students with heads bent over books, computers or papers. The rooms were quiet with little or no conversation. In one class the teacher, arms folded, stood by the door and shushed students or asked them where they were going. He was supervising.

I went up to students and asked them what their topic was and to tell me something marvelous about it. I was thrilled to find someone with my topic and with a little encouragement; an exciting conversation ensued with other students joining in. We shared what we found so interesting, funny, awful, etc. about our topics. I asked students what their passions were and how their passion fit, or not, with their topic. I was impressed with the creative endeavors I saw around the school and told them so. And lastly, I asked what they liked about LiD. Answers: “My time. My pace. No comparisons, It’s mine!”

Talking with the staff at break time, they could see an immediate change in their students, once encouragement, interest and sharing were added to the LiD time. The teachers may have followed the LiD parameters; however; they had not fully embraced how important their role in LiD was and YES... they could participate in their student’s learning journey.

“Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.” - Helen Keller

Once the staff started participating in LiD, through conferencing with their students, asking questions and setting aside times for student presentations and sharing, LiD developed a more vibrant community life.

“The presentation is an opportunity for students to share the results of their work and receive feedback on it from their peers and from others, including parents, teachers, and older and younger students. ... A basic aim of the program is to give students confidence through knowing something, and that confidence will be enlarged if we encourage development of other skills as they learn.” (Learning in Depth, Kieran Egan, Chicago Press, 2010,pg. 168-169)

The art of teaching is the art of assisting discovery. Mark Van Doren

2. Not all teachers think alike. We all have filters, philosophies, presuppositions and habits we operate under, that influence how we perceive the world. We all have our own perspective.

“Everything we see is a shadow cast by that which we do not see.” Martin Luther King Jr.

Adult Voices ... “I have always taught this way and it works just fine, so why would I do anything different.” “My students’ parents are not interested in what we do in school. They tell me it is my job to teach their children, not theirs. Won’t LiD put my students at a disadvantage

from students who have parent involvement?” “My principal doesn’t want me to do LiD. We are doing our own in-depth learning.” “I’ve taught a long time and I am always keen to try new ideas.”

The most common example of ‘perspective’ I have heard from teachers, administrators and parents (of which I too was a shining member) is... *Students ought to choose their own topics.*

When teachers stated their belief that students should choose their topic and it is what stood in their way of implementing LiD, I negotiated with them. I told teachers to have the student choose 5 topics and then the teacher would pick the final one so no one has the same topic. To be honest that was how I got myself around my own philosophical reasoning, that if students have a choice, they would buy into the program. From experience having done topic distribution several different ways, including having high school students choose their own topic, randomized picks works the best. In the myriad of classes I have visited one thing students have taught me is that over time, all topics are wonderful in one way or another (funny, awe inspiring, fulfilling, interesting)... once you know something about them. This is a core belief of LiD. Knowledge is knowledge, no matter what topic it may stem from and all knowledge, sooner or later, intersects.

I encourage reading pages 36 -42 of Learning in Depth for many more interesting points addressing topic choice.

I was invited into a grade four class by the teacher to help her implement LiD program. Everyone was very excited about LiD and all started with great enthusiasm. Over the next 3 months the teacher complained that many of his students became less enthusiastic and some students even were requesting new topics because the topics they received are no longer interesting. The teacher was concerned that, although he was still very enthusiastic, encouraging and continually offering up lots of ideas; some of his students were producing less. There was a lot of support offered up by other LiD teachers, along with encouragement to keep going, which he did; however, in the end, LiD did not meet the teachers’ expectations. In one of my classes I had a five-year-old girl who enjoyed starting things but rarely finished. At home, Jenny would be keen to help mommy bake but she never stayed throughout the process, preferring to go off to start another project. Talking with her mom, I too shared the same experience in class and was putting into place some structures that made completion of tasks desirable for Jenny. Excuses were made for her by citing her age, her inquisitiveness or her bubbly personality. In the end, time was the answer decided on by the parents. By the time Jenny was in grade four, there was little change and although no one wanted to indulge her lack of focus, Jenny’s need for immediate gratification ruled.

Teachers are trained to be result orientated, to help out through suggestions and to keep the learning bus moving! And there are a large number of teachers that rely on student ‘buy in’ to bring about cooperation and results. Looking back at that particular class, LiD became just another subject, like math or poetry and since it was an add on program, the teacher relied heavily on student buy in and swayed to pressures for new and different and ‘spectacular’.

The tenet, the non-negotiable aspect of LiD is its long term; it has no end, therefore there is no haste or external demands put upon students. LiD requires teachers to step back so students can take ownership of their topic (no matter how unexciting it might be for the moment).

You can get help from teachers, but you are going to have to learn a lot by yourself, sitting alone in a room.

Dr. Seuss

One student in another grade 5/6 class sat back after I explained the tenets of LiD, raised his hand and stated, "Then I don't have to do anything!" A few laughs, and giggles went through the room. My response... "Right. No one can make you learn. I certainly can't and neither can your teacher. Learning is totally up to you and LiD is an opportunity for you to have your own time, to show what you know, what you learn."

We all have dreams. But in order to make dreams come into reality, it takes an awful lot of determination, dedication, self-discipline, and effort. Jesse Owens

3. The principle of Scarcity and Abundance. I hear it all the time from teachers, administrators and parents: *Students are **too!** ... Too young, too old, too advanced, too ill prepared, too badly behaved, too (fill in the blank) to do LiD.* "I haven't got the time." "There are too many curricular demands." "I need marks." "If I start LiD this year, what will happen if no one carries it on?" "If everyone isn't doing LiD, then it would be fruitless for me to start." "I can't do LiD because my teachers won't go for it." "I don't have materials, computers, books, (again, fill in the blank) ."

Linda,

David Jardine wrote an article where he discusses the abundance of knowledge and how our system is modeled after economic structures that create a 'regime of scarcity' that limits the true nature of learning and knowledge. I believe that LiD is trying to install the idea of abundance into the school system. As teachers we are so wrapped up in our role within this 'regime of scarcity' that it is difficult to imagine how this role might be different when knowledge is perceived as wonderful and abundant.

Ryan

NOTE: See Ryan Hughes complete paper, The Abundance of Learning in Depth. It certainly deserves our attention.

Conclusion

"The adventure of life is to learn. The purpose of life is to grow. The nature of life is to change. The challenge of life is to overcome. The essence of life is to care. The opportunity of life is to serve. The secret of life is to dare. The spice of life is to befriend. The beauty of life is to give."

William Arthur Ward

LiD may not be able to solve all educational problems and meet every need. It is simply a one-hour a week, add on program that is available to schools to help everyone, including teachers, administrators, parents and families to enhance their personal relationship with knowing and knowledge over a long period of time.

The role of a LiD teacher steps outside the usual teacher product-driven practices, to one of being a counsel /supervisor, encourager, questioner and, observer. LiD not only offers students a relationship with knowledge, it offers teachers another way to develop practices that expand their knowledge.

“This proposal for a new element of the curriculum is based on the belief that learning something in depth will add an important dimension to each person’s education. It is further based on the principle that the more one knows about anything, the more interesting it becomes. (Learning in Depth, Kieran Egan, Chicago Press, 2010 pg. 216)