

The Abundance of Learning in Depth

Ryan Hughes,
Intermediate Teacher

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As teachers, we seek to foster lifelong learners who continue to discover, investigate, and be curious about the world around them. We want our students to have the confidence and skill sets to gain and develop new knowledge and use it in diverse and imaginative ways. When they leave our class at the end of the day or step out into the world at the end of their public education journey, we want them to have experienced and learned knowledge. We want them to know what it feels like to truly understand what they have learned and made it their own; transforming what they know into "... living knowledge." (Egan, 2010, p.214). This is our task, our calling, our purpose; to create independent, self-motivated, learners who use their experiences to create new possibilities and reimagine knowledge.

Are we meeting this goal? Are we teaching the knowledge, creating the environment or fostering the learning needed to help our students become these people? These big questions have complicated answers that span the spectrum of theories and beliefs about education. Kieran Egan, a cultural anthropologist and educationalist, believes that in our quest to create 'educated minds', we are failing. We are trying to implement competing theories and conceive a curriculum that provides a diverse breadth of experience without any deep understanding. In his book, The Educated Mind, Egan describes these competing theories of Progressivism, Traditionalism and Socialization and explains why their incompatibility is misaligning our teaching efforts, creating an environment where

we are not being successful with any of the approaches. Egan outlines his theory of Imaginative Education and makes a strong argument for a cognitive tools approach to teaching that encourages emotional engagement and promotes the development of thinking tools that will further our ability to understand and use knowledge (for more information on Imaginative Education please see Egan, 1998).

As a part of Egan's realignment of our education system, he draws attention to a significant missing dimension of our curricular framework. Throughout a child's formal public education, they will have the opportunity to learn a wide spectrum of knowledge that represents some of the most amazing and wonderful human experiences. Upon completing school, they will/should have an extensive breadth of knowledge. Unfortunately, there seems to be a disconnect between what a child should know and what they can recall. In their educational experience, they seem to have not really learned anything in depth. (Egan, 2010)

Learning in Depth (LiD) is a program designed by Kieran Egan that seeks to give children the opportunity to become deeply knowledgeable about a topic. This program creates an environment within our current school system where children can learn to experience the joy and the humility that comes from learning deeply. It strives to have children experience knowledge of a topic from as an expert, changing their school experience and emotionally engaging them in an unforced learning environment. During a ceremony on the first day of kindergarten, children are invited to randomly receive a topic that will provide the focal point of their LiD experience. These topics are specifically selected to provide an expansive breadth and depth of knowledge. Each topic must have multidisciplinary studies within. For

example, the topic of trees can be studied through biology, ecology, literature, art, poetry, politics and geography. A child could spend the first year learning about the many types and species of trees, learning about how and where they grow. Afterwards they could investigate the environmental impact from tree loss or tree inspired poetry. The opportunity for students to find their own place within the topic needs to be diverse; virtually unending. As students study and learn about the topic, they build and grow a portfolio that reflects personal understanding. The topics must also have the potential for deep detailed learning. For example, if investigating how trees grow, a child could learn about plant anatomy, following their investigation into the detailed study of tree DNA. The nature of each topic needs to give students the ability to choose their own interests within the topic and have enough materials to sustain their investigation for the 13 years of their formal education experience. This structure of topics that have breadth of access and depth of detail, are crucial to sustain learners for multiple years of study. Situated in an environment free from teacher direction, students can follow their own interests and embody the knowledge they learn. Ultimately LiD will "... transform children's relationship and understanding of knowledge." (Egan, 2010, p.21) It gives them a place to discover the joys of learning, separate from the coercive nature of school and allows for continual inquiry throughout their entire public school journey (Egan, 2010).

LiD, is not assessed, assigned or forced upon students. The teacher's task is to help create an environment where, during a single hour a week, children have time to work independently on their topics. LiD reimagines the role of the teacher to be

the set designer and learning-encourager. He or she provides an environment with access to resources and conducive to independent study. Teachers are the portfolio supervisors, meeting with students regularly to guide and encourage progress. They might give small workshops on certain skills like asking good questions, or teaching students how to trace pictures. Teachers might demonstrate some ideas they have for their own topic, sharing with the class opportunities that children might investigate. The intention is to allow students to take ownership of their portfolios, to possess their topics. Students need to see this program as different from the typical 'game' of school, void of assignments, evaluations and due dates. Below is the story of a teacher who redefined her role and relationship with her students during Learning in Depth time.

The classroom was meticulous. Student's desks laid out in single file rows, lined up from the front of the class to the back. The bulletin boards arranged with student work, expertly, evenly proportioned with big letters describing the assignment. At the front of the classroom, exactly in the center, a podium sat, where she would deliver her lessons to the students. Her whiteboards spotlessly clean, with the date in the top right corner and the 'Shape of the Day' on the left. As the bell rang, the thirty grade seven students funneled into the room and found their seats, sitting quietly, waiting for their teacher to walk down the center aisle and take a spot at the podium in the front of the class. Everything was scheduled, clean and organized.

On this particular day beneath announcements on the Shape of the Day, was LiD. Their teacher, in her skirt and blouse, carefully ironed and her hair tied tight in a bun, was reading announcements to her class. From her perch behind the podium, she read reminders for the week and reviewed the upcoming day. After all of the required messages had been read, she

asked her students to take out their LiD folders. To anyone unfamiliar with her class or LiD, the next transformation might seem bizarre. To her students it was a common occurrence on Tuesday after announcements. While they were busy retrieving their materials, their teacher had put her hair in a ponytail, pulled a hoody zip-up sweater over her blouse and sat down at an empty desk, pulled around to haphazardly face her students.

“You know when you are in the car driving somewhere, and something comes on the radio that is so interesting, when you get to your destination, you have to sit and finish listening before you can get out of the car?” she begins. “Well last night, I heard this apiarist (bee expert), talking about bees dying by the millions from pesticides and Asian Mites. When I finally got in through the door, I had to write down what I heard so I didn’t forget. I also added Asian Mites and pesticides to Copper Roses nemeses (Copper Rose is the name of her bee superhero). The new word that I added to my list is apiarist and I added a note to my portfolio to watch a TED talk by a guy named ... Anand Varma. Did anyone else find something new since we last had LiD?” A number of students share what they found with the class. The tone was calm, relaxed and collegial.

“Today, I am going to talk about collecting good questions at the back table. If you are interested join me there in 5 minutes. Plus, I would love to meet with some of you and find out how things are going. You know that the library and open area are available for working. Please try to be respectful of your classmates and have a great block.” The students, portfolios in hand, shuffled around the room, some staying in their desks, some setting up in the classroom and others moving to the back table, eager to discuss ‘collecting good questions.’”

This story describes a real teacher. During Learning in Depth, there is a shift in the rhythms of the classroom that start with her. Her normal teaching style is to directly instruct her students, assigning homework with criteria, checklists, and strict due dates. Her students know her expectations and she pushes them to be

hard working and successful. She is an amazing teacher who is organized, considerate and her students' benefit from her deliberate, structured learning environment. When her class has their Learning in Depth hour, her role changes from director to encourager. She becomes a fellow learner and checks in with her students to see if they need guidance. She brings in examples of her topic in the context of day-to-day life and shares her own learning experiences with the class. She leads by example, modelling the process of inquiry. This story shows a teacher who has found her place within Learning in Depth.

For many teachers, LiD presents some misalignments with their current beliefs about education. It has met with great applause and objection. In hundreds of schools around the world, teachers and whole schools have incorporated Learning in Depth into their regular schedule. Many foreign school districts have seen Egan's vision and put the time, energy and money to implement it into their education system (IERG, 2014). In North America, there have been some objections to the plausibility of the program and concerns about whether it would actually realize the claimed benefits of lifelong learning. In his book, Learning in Depth: A simple innovation that can transform schooling, Egan spends time highlighting possible objections and responding to their points of concern. Below, I will outline a few concerns and explain how Egan has responded.

Objection 1: Students will soon become bored with their topics.

In this objection, Objector 1 exerts that children have short attention spans, and, with limited support, they will surely become bored and disinterested in their topics. Egan responds by saying that we all tend to have short attention spans, though we

seem to be better at focusing on tasks that we are emotionally engaged in. He goes on to explain how boredom is the result of ignorance and part of this program is to expose students to knowledge that will make them less ignorant and therefore eliminate boredom. Egan articulates two important presuppositions of Learning in Depth.

All my experiences of education suggest that boredom is a symptom of inadequate knowledge or ignorance. The more you know about something, the more interesting it becomes (“Everything is wonderful” ...is the underlying slogan that has been attached to this proposal.) The person without the intellectual resources deep knowledge can provide is much more likely to be bored. (Egan, 2010, p.33)

First, boredom is the result of ignorance or lack of knowledge. He sees emotional engagement as being the requirement to true learning and learning of knowledge to be the cure to ignorance and boredom. Secondly, Everything is wonderful. Every topic is connected and interesting, we just need to find our wonder within it. LiD “... is indeed, based on the belief...that learning about the world around us is intrinsically interesting to everyone.” (Egan, 2010, p.34) The impetus for LiD is that Egan is frustrated with the lack of engagement in schools and the depthless curriculum. “The common boredom and children’s lack of energy to learn is not due to the fact that they behave that way in the face of challenging topics, but rather that’s what the current superficial curriculum does to them.” (Egan, 2010, p.35) Egan thinks that Objector 1’s beliefs about boredom are misguided. Boredom is the result of ignorance and lack of understanding. The more you know the more interesting knowledge becomes. LiD creates interest that magnifies with prolonged

study. Therefore, the long-term nature of this program results in increased interest not boredom.

Objection 2: The arbitrariness is absurd. Student Choice is important in such a scheme.

Objector 2 argues that children should be given choice in the selection of their topics. This premise is largely grounded in the progressive theory of John Dewey, where he believes that choice is critical to successful learning (Dewey, 1897). In my own experiences, this belief is considered 'common sense' and 'best practice' in schools today. Egan responds by again stating that "The underlying principle that guides the arbitrariness [of the topic selection] is that everything is interesting; and the more you know, the more the imagination can play with knowledge and drive to deeper meaning and understanding." (Egan, 2010, p.38) He also considers that we rarely give children choice in school and allowing them to choose their own topic does not fulfill our duty as teachers to expand our students interests and understandings. (Egan, 2010) In a way, LiD actually allows for more choice than most other activities because once students have their topics, they can choose how and what they would like to learn within the breadth of their topic. In a typical classroom program, the curriculum is predetermined by the Ministry of Education, the School District and school. Considerations are rarely given to student interests or experience. LiD allows students to find the wonder in a topic they might not have selected themselves. Allowing them to develop the ability to navigate future predetermined curriculum with the drive to find their own place within knowledge. The way in

which topics are allocated is not a requirement of LiD, however, the process can create scenarios that are contrary to LiD principles. Egan contemplates how choice might affect children's ability to persevere when they struggle. Objector 2 is applying a generalized perspective about the importance of choice. Through LiD, Egan is trying to maintain the independence and ownership that choice encourages. While still preserving the opportunity for students to experience the wonder of everything and to gain the confidence that perseverance and wisdom allow.

Objection 3: The students will drop out or revolt against it.

Objector 3 is more specifically referring to the adolescents that she believes will revolt or abandon their topic in their rebellion years. She says, "Threats and bribery – in the mild forms we use these in school systems – may keep them at it for their early years, but for most students it will become irksome and be seen as drudgery..." (Egan, 2010, p. 45) By believing that the only way to motivate children to learn is by coercion, Objector 3 is contradicting the foundational theories of Learning in Depth and giving more evidence for the need of a program like LiD. Egan's hope is that if students have been learning about their topic for 9 years, with multiple teachers, through cognitive changes and independent of teacher requirements, by the time they reach adolescence their topic will be as close as a good friend and may prove to be where students go to escape from the coerciveness of the school system. By arguing that the 'game' of school would cause students to revolt against and unmarked project, this Objector has actually given more reason for LiD to be

implemented within the school system. Crucial to LiD's success is the way in which teachers create and foster the environment where the virtues of LiD can prosper.

As teachers, we revel in the moments when our students are full of curiosity and an unrelenting need to learn and discover something. The students who seem to leave our classrooms still glowing from something they learned that day and returning the next day having researched to find more answers and connections to their intense desire to understand. The moment seems to radiate with possibility, an abundance of knowledge. This is the enthusiasm, motivation and energy that Learning in Depth seeks to cultivate.

In his book Curriculum of Abundance, David Jardine explains this euphoric moment of blissful learning as the abundance of discovery and knowledge.

To come to an understanding of the rich places, the rich topographies, the rich topics that have been entrusted to teachers and students in our schools (those that are listed in such orderly dull, unimaginative fashion in our curriculum guides for various subject areas and grade levels), we must venture into such places and risk being transformed, risk changing, risk learning more than we might have originally anticipated or hoped or desired or planned for. We – students and teachers alike – risk becoming educated. (Jardine, 2003, p.3)

To perceive our curriculum as being abundant, allows us to uninhibitedly embrace the unknown and be curious about the world. It allows us to be lifelong learners, striving to embrace new ideas and become obsessively engaged in knowledge.

Unfortunately, abundance is not the adjective we often use to describe the learning that takes place in our classrooms on a daily basis. Jardine describes Ivan Illich's work (1971) as speaking;

... eloquently of how the institutionalization of education in the 20th century insinuated into students and educators alike the idea that knowledge was a scarce commodity and therefore that the shape of education must be one of competition for its resources. Moreover, access to this limited resource is itself limited to the very institution that imagined its scarcity in the first place: schools, as places that have come to emulate images of the market economy. (Jardine, 2003, p.3)

Jardine goes on to explain how the 'market economy' of education has created a 'regime of scarcity' that seeks to mold curriculum into forms that can be predicted, assessed, monitored, consumed, dispensed and accumulated. "This is how a scarce resource appears in a market economy." (Jardin, 2003, p.4). Knowledge becomes "...striped of its abundance, unmonitorable, uncontrollable relations, possibilities and unguarded appearances. It becomes reduced to its manageable and monitorable surface features. Under this regime, to understand the Pythagorean theorem means to memorize its formula and be able to correctly apply it to mathematical problems on demand in an examination." (Jardin, 2003, p.4) The richness of Pythagoras, his history, discovery of the theorem and secret society is lost becomes reduced to a mathematical formula memorized to do well on a test. The abundance stripped away. "Once knowledge is understood as a scarce commodity to be consumed, satisfaction of the desire to consume is not only not sought, it is not desirable. Once we concede, willingly or otherwise, to education understood under the regime of scarcity, the desire for more must be maintained if the ravenous sway of scarcity is to be maintained."(Jardine, 2003, p.5) The regime of scarcity makes students apathetic towards learning. The act of learning in school becomes the act of converting successful participation into marks that are further

converted into opportunities for social status. Those students that are good at the game buy into it because they are successful. Those students who are not good at the game become bitter and refuse to participate. People define themselves based on their success within the regime and learning without compensation (marks/credit) becomes a waste of time. In other words children described by Objector 3 as needing coercion, deadlines and the threat of marks to engage in learning have already been educated into the regime and lost their ability to see, and appreciate the abundance of experience and understanding.

I believe that Learning in Depth is an attempt to renew the abundance of knowledge and experience. The topics are selected for their breadth and depth abundance qualities. The threats and bribery that reduce abundance to the limitations of scarcity are eliminated and students are encouraged to find their own connections and interests within the topic. The enduring principal that persists throughout Learning in Depth that ‘everything is wonderful’ is the same as saying that everything is abundant. People who have a difficult time accepting whether LiD will work may be stuck in the regime of scarcity and find it difficult to place LiD within that regime. It does not fit because it seeks to reinvigorate the abundance of learning. Although Egan does not use the terms ‘regime of scarcity’ and abundance, he describes these ideas when discussing the potential for LiD to create new learning opportunities for students.

We have created an educational system in which nearly all formal learning is forced in some way. Nearly all formal learning is subject to assessment, because we tend to assume that students need to be “motivated” to learn. That is, we have created a system in which the kind of easy, “natural” learning of the streets and fields that John Dewey wanted to see

brought into schools is not generally expected to happen. Our system is based on the belief that we cannot give students a choice about whether they should learn, say, algebra or not, because we fear the results, and it is clearly believed that to “motivate” them to learn algebra we need to assess them and allot benefits in school and in life in proportion to how well they manage. The LiD program is based on the belief that students’ learning when unassessed and uncoerced will likely produce results quite different from what we consider inevitable in our current schools. These likely different results are a product of removing the program from the commitment of the schools to produce required learning for various social purposes and from the consequent need to assess students to help determine their future social roles and jobs. (Egan, 2010, p.171)

Egan’s rationale for insisting LiD be implemented without assessment and coercion seeks to give students a chance to be the keen learners they are everywhere else in their lives. As a teacher, if I am going to create an environment where the abundance of knowledge can be truly allowed to cultivate, the constricting elements of the ‘regime of scarcity’ must not be present. I cannot be commanding, requiring or directing. My role needs to change. I believe this is where teachers struggle to implement and assess the success of LiD. Unless we can recognize our presuppositions about motivation in school and assume a role that contributes to the abundance of knowledge and experience, we are not actually doing LiD. In my experiences, teachers wish for their students to become the lifelong learners and embrace the abundance of learning, but continue to enlist the restrictive leveraging tactics that make short term shallow gains. When the belief in the abundance of knowledge is not commonly held and LiD can be disregarded as unrealistic in today’s schools, we fail to instill the qualities of lifelong learning in our students.

Previously, I described a teacher who generally teaches within the regime of scarcity. When she begins Learning in Depth, her demeanor changes, her physical appearance changes and her position changes. She moves from directing the class to participating in the discussion. She becomes a support team, helping to guide the willing and encourage the ones who still need to find their way. She seeks to embody the abundance of her topic as a leader from within and uses the celebration of curiosity and investigation to highlight the momentum towards discovery of experience and knowledge. As teachers, LiD provides us with the opportunity to shed the heavy weight of 'market economy' structures within our system. It gives our students a chance to see and experience knowledge, learning and school without the imposing, deflating risk of being judged and evaluated. Our system, our market economy of learning is producing children that understand how to do school but not how to learn and understand knowledge. Teachers who have told me that LiD will not work within the structures of our current system need to reflect on the whether our current system is working for our students. Passion, independence, generosity and understanding from within are all characteristics of good learners that have embraced the wonder and abundance knowledge. If this is what we seek as committed educators, an hour a week and adjustment of our role will help our student experience school in abundance.

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