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Final Note: Deeper Learning and the Common Core

By Guest Blogger on November 15, 2013 12:21 PM

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Note: *Jal Mehta, associate professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, is guest blogging this week.*

It has been a whirlwind blogging on Rick's site this week. Thanks to the many of you who have reached out to debate, discuss, and offer thoughts on what I've offered here.

I just wanted to offer a concluding thought about "deeper learning" and the Common Core. Along with doctoral student Sarah Fine, I have been doing a three year study of high schools that are seeking to promote instruction that pushes kids to think, and have come to the conclusion, shared by many others, that most high school classrooms are not very stimulating places. NSSE data says that 70 percent of high school students say they are bored daily, and Gates MET Study data says that only 20 percent of their sampled classrooms feature ambitious instruction.

In theory, Common Core is expected to fundamentally challenge this situation, by setting higher standards and focusing on fewer items in depth rather than more items more superficially. It's hard to know for sure until more assessment items are released, but if they do push for deeper learning, all the better. But what we have seen suggests that there will need to be a fairly **fundamental rethinking** for many teachers of what it means to teach - much more demanding tasks, giving students opportunities to grapple and room to fail, changing the role of the teacher from dispenser of knowledge to facilitator of complex investigations. And there is no set of standards and assessments that can accomplish that change single-handedly - it would require lots of time with expert teachers and coaches, opportunities to rethink and unlearn what has served one well in the past, and chances to try new practices that might at first be riskier but in the long run would serve more ambitious goals.

In theory, Common Core could be the stimulus for this kind of "thick" process - it could be the anchor around which we built a common language, quality professional development, good teacher training, and so forth. But, in practice, it is coming along at a moment in which there is limited money for additional coaching and PD, and in which the emphasis on high stakes teacher evaluation mitigates against the kind of unlearning and relearning that the Common Core stands for. In practice, it would be a kind of NCLB redux but in fast forward - students won't perform up to the standards, political pressure will mount to lower those standards, cut scores will drop, and eventually political opposition will triumph and the program will be abandoned. All of this is heightened because the Common Core came fast with lots of elite but little on the ground political support. Supporters of Common Core either need to more seriously put into place the needed ingredients to succeed, or they should expect it to be a short-lived dream.

And that's it for me - if you like what you've been reading, we're going to be starting an Ed Week blog on deeper learning in January, of which I will be a sometimes contributor. Keep an eye out for us there.

-- Jal Mehta

Categories: Guest Blog



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accountability, for the reasons you cite they were DOA.

Obviously, I focus more on incrementalism and the inner city. What if that money had been spent on supports so the inner city students could have chosen to take AP an course a year or more. I'd have paid them to attend tutoring. I'd have created pre-AP for everyone. Just a thought.

thanks for your thoughts.
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Corey Topf · 6 years ago

Well said. If students are going to learn deeply, they have to be engaged, not bored and passive. At the American School of Lima, we felt it was necessary to completely revamp our schedule for a small group of students to pilot a program called the Innovation Academy. I work with the cohort of students all day on Mondays and Thursdays and we do authentic projects for our community. The depth and the discussions about learning are awesome, and I can truly work with each student on their strengths and weaknesses. Here's our website: www.rooseveltinnovationacademy.com

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