

## Would You Know Deeper Learning If You Saw It?

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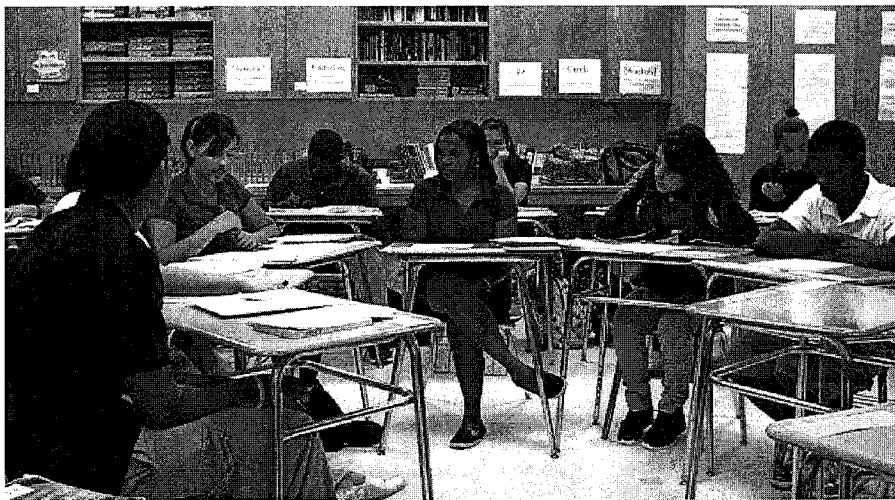
It's not as easy as you might think. Teachers have many tools at their disposal that can facilitate deeper learning--long-term projects, hands-on activities, and, often, new technologies. You'll often find deeper learning in that context, but not always. You also may find deeper learning in the context of a more traditional classroom environment. In the end, it's not about any particular tool or "shiny object." It's about the fundamental daily instructional choices teachers make to challenge, engage, and empower their students.

So how do you know if it's deeper learning? Step inside the classroom and look for students who are challenged by their texts and tasks and teachers who are driven by asking the right questions, not giving the right answers. Look for students doing the talking and the thinking, engaged with the material and each other. Look for students taking charge of their progress and reflecting on their learning.

With the right set of instructional choices, students take control of their learning. Take a look at this [video](#) where students in Julia St. Martin's tenth-grade English class at the Springfield Renaissance School in Springfield, Massachusetts are discussing Macbeth. Many an English teacher can relate to this scene. What's different is that students actually run the lesson themselves. What do we see if we look more closely at the instructional choices St. Martin makes to ensure that her students are learning deeply?

### Deeper instruction that challenges students

In the video we see students wrestling with the themes in Macbeth--not unusual in high school English classes. What's different in this case is that they're talking to each other. They are steering the ship, constructing meaning, citing evidence from the text, and supporting each other in doing so. As St. Martin reflects, "I spoke for about 5 minutes and kids facilitated and moved through the lesson for 65 minutes."



Challenge is at the heart of deeper instruction. Grappling with new ideas and problems will productively challenge students when they have enough background knowledge to feel anchored, enough scaffolding to feel supported, and enough time and intellectual freedom to wrestle with complex ideas that stimulate their thinking. A productive challenge stretches students and this stretch leads to new learning.

### Deeper instruction that engages students

Collaborative grappling with compelling problems, tasks, or themes in literature, as we see in the Socratic seminar featured in the video, strengthens students' connections to the content and allows them to engage in deeper thinking than they would on their own. When students are engaged in their learning, they drive themselves deeper because they have a "need to know" and are buoyed by the collaborative efforts of their peers.

Engagement is not a gimmick; it doesn't require shiny objects (e.g., technology) to make it happen. The simple act of turning desks into circles so that students talk to each other about important topics--while their teacher takes a back seat--can go a long way. And setting up discussion protocols like this is something that any teacher can do, whether in the midst of an in-depth project that she has designed and honed over her many years of experience, or in her first year as a teacher following the district curriculum.

### Deeper instruction that empowers students with tools for learning

What are the tools for learning that are empowering St Martin's students to become self-directed learners? Turning what might be a lecture in

another setting into a student-run Socratic seminar is one instructional choice a teacher can make to give her students tools for learning. These students are leading an evidence-based discussion about a complex text. They are grappling with universal themes in literature. They are tackling open-ended questions for which there may not be one right answer. They are developing their own conceptual understanding, and building accountability and responsibility for learning.

In the video you see students taking notes not on the content, but on the quality of their peers' contributions to the discussion. One student says: "Quotes, quotes, quotes--they emphasize your point and you guys were all using them." They debrief the learning experience together so that they can all become better learners. They believe that learning comes with effort.

Too often, we consciously or unconsciously underestimate the capacity of students. The students in St. Martin's classroom are not handpicked. They are "regular" students in an urban public district school--a school that promotes deeper learning and where every single graduate is accepted to college every year. You can see these same students learning the skills they need to participate in a Socratic seminar in this **video**, shot six months earlier. Their growth from October to May emphasizes that the skills they need to learn deeply are taught, practiced, and reinforced daily. Invariably, students rise to the occasion.

Key to deeper learning is helping students become self-directed learners with strong habits of scholarship. Learning how to learn is the brass ring of K-12 education.

We hope that more classrooms in America begin to embrace more opportunities for students to engage in long-term projects that serve a real purpose, where they can use their learning to improve their communities and the world. We hope that the very idea and structure of traditional classrooms is questioned and that we begin to structure schools so that students are the creators of original content, not just consumers of it. In the meantime, what's holding us back from focusing on deeper learning *daily*--in the tasks, expectations, and responsibilities given to our students?

**Categories:** Qualities of deeper learning

**Tags:** engagement Socratic seminars students