

Fathoming Depth

Envisioning Deep Education

Paul Freedman

Deep education involves probing the depths of the material, rather than only skimming its surface.

I go down.
Rung after rung
I go down...
I came to explore...
The thing I came for:
The wreck and not the story of the wreck
The thing itself and not the myth
This is the place and I am here
We circle silently
About the wreck
We dive into the hold
I am she: I am he
We are. I am, you are.
— Adrienne Rich

We are a culture of surfers. We cruise across surfaces, channel surfing, surfing the internet, crossing vast terrains without ever, or at best rarely, scratching many of these surfaces. Whether this tendency is cause or effect, I am not sure but schooling seems to either reflect this cultural tendency or may be the very training ground where we become acculturated to the game of surfing. We teachers are obsessed with surfaces, how much ground can we cover, before handing our charges off to the next intrepid leader who will continue on the quest. Faster, faster, further, further.

The word *surface*, closely related etymologically to the word *superficial*, is defined, partly, as the extreme outer boundary or layer where an object meets the world around it. As a teacher I am not interested in surfaces. Yes, edges and boundaries can be interesting places, places where two beings (the knower and the known, for example) may initially meet, but can we engage even more deeply, from the depths of one being to the depths of another? Is it possible that the encounter with one's learning can be a richer experience than it typically is in school settings? Can the interiority of one's self reach towards a deeper



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aspect or essence of the living subject? How deep can we dig? What if the educational mission were not about covering subject areas. (The metaphor of covering, is another interesting one — in covering something we shield it from light and illumination. To cover a plant, for example, results in stressing it's capacity to sustain its own life.) What if education were not about brushing past surfaces with the least possible effect on either knower or known, but rather exploring and exposing the "hidden wholeness" (Palmer 2004) of ourselves with the vastness and complexity of our study, with the goal of emerging from the encounter transformed? What would be the implications of such a shift on the contemporary practice of education?

I live on an island in North Puget Sound and I am often struck by the attitude of tourists who arrive here each spring. They are driven to cross the water and gaze over it without ever getting wet. They cross surfaces and report by cell phone to friends back home that they have seen the beautiful ocean, thinking that they *know* it. But with our limited access to the top, almost insignificant layers of the sea, we know nothing of its wonders, its diversity, its power, its fragility, grace, and wholeness, even if we were to devote a lifetime to its study.

Similarly, in schools as we guide our students over the "waters" of Algebra 1, Civics, and Language Arts, are we guiding them to *know* these subjects, their complexity and depth, or rather do we just surf across them? I would like to heretically urge us all to try to cover *less* territory and dive deeply into the particularities and complexities of our studies. Let us embrace a single poem and explore it with passion, openness, and wonder. As William Blake wrote, let us "see the world in a grain of sand." I truly believe that it is only by studying the microcosm that the universal may be revealed.

Martin Buber wrote at length about what he called the Ich–Du or I–Thou encounter:

It is a relationship that stresses the mutual, holistic existence of two beings. It is a concrete encounter, because these beings meet one another in their authentic existence, without any qualification or objectification of one another. In an I–Thou encounter, infinity and universality are

made actual (rather than being merely concepts). (Kramer 2004, 39)

Real education can be conceived of as a series of such I–Thou encounters, aiming towards transcendence and transformation. This is my goal in my classroom.

Jiddu Krishnamurti (2001, 65–65) once wrote: "Let us go into it deeply together. Not I see it and you don't see it, or you see it and I don't see it. But we both go into it. Deeply. Together." This is such a simple and powerful image that reflects a transformative vision of education for depth.

After ten years of living on an island, I finally, with the encouragement of my teenage son, purchased a small used sailboat. Together we have been looking at our first nautical charts as we try to navigate through the waters of our new hobby. Bodies of water on these charts are covered with numbers, depth of water, measured not in feet but fathoms. The fathom seems such an odd and esoteric unit of measure, as well as a word with several meanings. It turns out that the origins of the word fathom are from an Old English word meaning "to embrace." A fathom was the distance a man could reach out and thus embrace some other object (later standardized as a length of six feet.) "Fathom" also means to understand, as in "I can't fathom what you mean by that," which is related to knowing or embracing a subject. Education should be an embrace from the depths of one's experience.

On my literal and simultaneously metaphoric island, I helped found a small independent school for kids ranging in age from age 3–12 called Salmonberry School. Over a decade of teaching and working to realize a humane and inspiring child-centered model of education, I have gradually evolved a personal pedagogy, which at various times I have often called "holistic." But when I now reflect on what truly differentiates my practice in the classroom most from a mainstream approach, it is this quest for both *embrace* and *depth*.

I was in a meeting with a school principal last week and experienced a most surreal moment. We were surrounded by so much that was familiar — new math books, school furniture, the language of the educational profession — but something was not quite right. When the principal said, "we're really all after the same goals, aren't we?" it reminded me of

the planet, Camazots in *A Wrinkle in Time*, where everything is so normal, it's somehow freakish and not right. "No!" I want to scream, "we are not after the same goals at all!"

So what is "deep education?" What would it look like if depth were a real goal in our work with learners? I believe it would include an emphasis on Bloom's higher level thinking skills as a starting point. However, in many ways I believe that, in addition to "higher-level thinking," deep education must also include lower-level feeling, experiencing, and knowing "lower level" in the sense that it is at the very heart of this form of education. A deep education would also at times include a sense of celebration and at other times a sense of despair. It would include laughter as well as tears.

Deep education would involve cognitive knowing, but it would apply this knowledge to both a very personal sense of self, one acquired through experience and reflection, *and* to an insight into the universal. Cognitive knowing would be a window to connect to the cosmos. Like eating an artichoke, as depth educators we would patiently and diligently peel off the outer prickly leaves of living subjects as we move towards the tender and tasty heart, and in so doing we would also become ourselves.

Deep education would have much to learn from the deep ecology movement from the 1970s: Arne Naess coined the term "deep ecology" and first developed its theoretical underpinnings. Naess was critical of the limitations of ecological science. He recognized that the field's scientific and scientistic orientation prevented ecologists from articulating a moral and spiritual basis for their work, or adopting a position on how people should live. To have such a moral and ethical stance, Naess believed we must also pursue ecological wisdom. Deep ecology seeks to develop ecological wisdom by focusing on deep *experience*, deep *questioning* and deep *commitment*. These three aspects of deep ecology constitute an interconnected system. Together, these three aspects of deep ecology create what Naess would call an *ecosophy*: an evolving but consistent philosophy of being, thinking, and acting in the world that embodies ecological wisdom and harmony. Similarly deep education would also be about deep *questioning* and deep *commitment* rooted in deep *experience*. Like deep

ecology, it would also be about being and acting as well as thinking and feeling; it would be more interested in the goal of wisdom than knowledge. And like deep ecology, deep education would have a strong ethical and moral point of view. It would not only see the accumulation and unbiased analysis of facts as the primary educational goal, but would also encourage and nurture the capacity for right ways of being and acting.

What conditions might support deep education? To begin with, it seems clear that deep education requires a much higher comfort level with time and space, and a far greater emphasis on beauty and reverence. Learning experiences must be integrated and integral, cross-disciplinary and expansive. The curriculum must include the study of self, including self-exploration, self-knowledge and self-reflection. But a deep education would not be wholly about self, it would also require the presence of a learning community, a sense of collaboration, and a dramatic decrease in learners' sense of isolation and competition.

As I continue to immerse myself in the in-the-moment practice of teaching, as well as study and reflection, it has slowly come to me — or rather come back to me — that I have rediscovered one huge defining feature of a Salmonberry School education. We value and pursue depth. Learning is not and cannot be summarized by checklists of age-normed standards. Rather than skimming and surfing across vast surfaces, and deluding ourselves that we have seen the ocean. We dive in, deep, and explore with both purpose and abandon. We are less interested in covering curriculum, and more interested in the many ways of knowing.

Not just knowing but *knowing*, feeling meaning and relevance in one's work, and connecting intimately with one's study. This is the kind of experience that makes education worthwhile and lifelong. This is how we try to keep children's learning whole and holistic, rather than fragmented and superficial. Let us commit to evaluating the quality of a learning experience by its depth and by the authenticity of the embrace. Can we "fathom" such a vision?

I find inspiration from John Moffit's poem, "To Look at Any Thing"

To look at any thing,
 If you would know that thing,
 You must look at it long:
 To look at this green and say,
 "I have seen spring in these
 Woods," will not do — you must
 Be the thing you see:
 You must be the dark snakes of
 Stems and ferry plumes of leaves,
 You must enter in
 To the small silences between
 The leaves,
 You must take your time
 And touch the very peace
 They Issue from.

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