

Lifeworthy Learning

Let's reimagine education around the topics and themes that truly matter in learners' lives.

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The universe of education is expanding. In more and more schools, new themes are claiming time and space. Educators are calling for more attention to large-scale human problems like global warming and worldwide poverty, as well as more emphasis on skills like problem solving and collaboration. Digital communications and efficient travel systems have made the world smaller today than ever before. Paradoxically, smaller in connectedness means bigger in complexity and responsibility.

Within this context of rapid change, many topics enshrined in the traditional curriculum don't seem to matter that much. These topics often appear in textbooks and pop up on exams, but it's unclear how they contribute to a thriving contemporary life. Teachers and school leaders often find themselves asking a fundamental question: *What learning really matters for today's learners?*

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In this article, I promise *not* to answer that question—at least not in the concrete form of a suggested curriculum. That’s because I don’t think there is a universal answer for every school and society in today’s diverse world. Instead, I’d like to consider how we might think about the learning that’s likely to matter in the lives our learners are likely to live.



I know from experience that some educators will ask, “How can we know for sure what knowledge and skills our learners will need?” Of course, we can’t. We’re bound to get it wrong sometimes. However, we certainly can make informed and thoughtful guesses.

I also know that some will protest, “But what can I do in practical terms? The texts, the exams, and so on . . . that’s the current reality!” True. However, many schools have taken big steps without any decrease in performance on conventional measures. And we can’t afford to stay stuck in the “current reality” if it’s not what our learners really need. So let’s explore some ways of thinking that might get us unstuck.

Learning That Matters

For several years, I’ve taken opportunities to ask dozens of adults, “As you think back on your

primary and secondary education, what learning turned out to truly matter in your life?” Every respondent acknowledges the importance of literacy and numeracy. But beyond that, some people have marvelous and unexpected responses.

For instance, one person announced, “the French Revolution.” Not a topic I would have named, but I understood better after the person offered an explanation: “Through the French Revolution, I was able to understand the generalities of world conflict—for instance, how the lack of freedom, poverty, overtaxation, weak economies, the struggle between the church and state, and social inequity have always been reasons to engage in war.”

This person’s teacher had offered a big-picture version of the French Revolution—more than the story of what happened, more even than a critical examination and alternative points of view, reaching beyond the particular historical episode to other revolutions at other times and to broad social patterns very much with us today.

Another individual reported how “understanding of energy and climate change issues . . . has not only proven useful in everything from everyday decisions about my transport and consumer choices, but also in political decisions, social interactions, and life philosophy.” Still another explained how a teacher had emphasized understanding the world through narratives, but with a critical stance: “If we do decide to believe in a narrative, we had better be ready, willing, and able to defend it. . . . While narratives have an unmistakable allure, it is crucial to *never* overlook evidence that will support a contrary position just because it is easier to maintain an original one.”

The big picture is a persistent theme in these conversations. In history, science, mathematics, literature, and other disciplines, the big-picture versions are what inform, last, and enlighten. I made up a word to characterize such learning—*lifeworthy*.

Lifeworthy learning truly matters in learners’ lives—now and for years to come. Lifeworthy learning is what we should teach. And a number of broad trends in education policy signal that educators and policymakers are beginning to move toward learning that matters (see “Six Beyonds: How the Education Universe Is Expanding” on p. 15).

Reaching for Big Understandings

The good news is that the familiar academic disciplines offer a rich harvest of big understandings. For example, numerous classics of literature are often taught in ways that help learners reflect on fundamentals of the human condition. Even as dry-sounding a topic as basic statistics and probability can inform important personal decisions in several areas.

Big understandings—and the big questions that travel with them—are abundant. But how do we know when we have one? Four earmarks stand out: *opportunity*, *insight*, *action*, and *ethics*.

Consider what the person who mentioned the French Revolution got out of learning about it. *Opportunity*? The social forces behind the French Revolution figure dominantly in current events—strongly in many parts of the world, but everywhere to some extent. *Insight*? Yes, about the workings of the social and political world. *Action*? Yes, the person made informed social and political choices by drawing from a deep understanding of the French Revolution.

Ethics? The ethics of power imbalance, corruption, and poverty were in evidence during this historical period, as they are today.

So suppose I want to evaluate whether a curriculum topic represents a big understanding. With the four earmarks in mind, can I tell a good opportunity story, persuasively sketching how the topic might come up frequently, offer insight, inform action, and provide an ethical perspective? If so, I probably have a big understanding. If not, maybe my candidate is not lifeworthy after all.

For example, let's evaluate that dry-sounding topic mentioned earlier—basic statistics and probability. Can I forecast plenty of opportunity for using a knowledge of statistics and probability throughout life? Yes, in personal choices about insurance, nutritional practices, health care, investment, business management, consumerism, gambling, and more. *Insight*? Yes, about likely payoffs and costs. *Action*? Yes, my knowledge will enable me to make smart choices. *Ethics*? At least

Six "Beyonds": How the Education Universe Is Expanding

Although curriculum continues along its traditional path in most settings, six broad trends—which I call the six "beyonds"—are beginning to influence policy at the school, district, and government levels.

- *Beyond content to 21st century skills and competencies.* A contemporary education is not just about the facts or even conceptual understanding of content; it's also about critical and creative thinking, collaboration, communication, citizenship skills, and more.

- *Beyond local to global perspectives, problems, and studies.* It's not just about one's own nation and neighboring nations. In today's world, the culture, economics, and politics of any nation might come to influence any other, and world-scale problems like global warming touch us all.

- *Beyond topics to content as material for thinking and action.* Knowledge offers a lens through which to understand past and contemporary events so that we can engage the world with more insight and impact.

- *Beyond the traditional disciplines to renewed and extended versions of the disciplines.* Current themes (ecological diversity, energy supplies, the complex character of democracy in various nations, and so on) are often in the foreground.

- *Beyond discrete disciplines to interdisciplinary topics and problems.* It's been said that every world-scale problem has an interdisciplinary character.

- *Beyond academic engagement to personal choice, significance, commitment, and passion.* In many settings, students have opportunities to pursue themes that resonate deeply for them.

sometimes, those choices will concern what's fair.

An understanding of probability, for instance, might help me develop a vivid personal sense of the impact of obesity on the increased probability of serious diseases. Opportunity to apply this knowledge occurs daily in our affluent society, offering insights about interactions in the human biological system, suggesting actions that could protect me and my loved ones, and raising ethical issues about how our culture and economy in some ways encourage bad health. Opportunity, insight, action, and ethics—a big understanding.

Taking the pulse of a topic this way gives any educator ideas about how to teach toward learning that matters.

Moving Past Niche Understandings

But here's the problem: The traditional curriculum is a messy mix of big understandings and niche understandings that have little reach beyond the

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technical particulars of the discipline. One of my favorite examples is the topic of mitosis in biology. Mitosis is the complex and central process of asexual cell division. At some point, you probably learned its several stages—interphase, prophase, metaphase, and so on. You may even have studied mitosis in a way that gets past vocabulary to understanding the intricate dynamics of the process.

Mitosis might sound promising, at least if taught for deep learning. But what happens when we test it for lifeworthy learning? Insight? Yes, fundamental insight about the functioning of living things! But action? There's not much to do about mitosis unless you specialize in biology. Ethics? Not much of an ethical perspective there. Opportunity? Mitosis simply does not come up much in the lives of most people, compared with, for example, the principles of social dynamics revealed by the French Revolution; the implications of basic statistics and probability; or indeed the import of many other ideas from biology, such as the nature of communicable diseases or the health issues and ethical questions around genetic engineering.

There is a simple but telling lesson here: A topic can be rich in insight for its discipline but still not speak strongly to the lives that most learners are likely to live. Disciplinary importance is not the same thing as learning that matters. I'm not arguing against discipline-based instruction. But if we don't think carefully about what to teach from a discipline, all too often we end up with a parade of the discipline's greatest hits without vetting them for lifeworthy learning.

Here's another example: quadratic equations. I've asked dozens of audiences the following questions: How many have studied quadratic equations? Almost everyone. How many have used a

quadratic equation in the last 10 years? Only a few. How many have used a quadratic equation in the last 10 years outside of a teaching context? Maybe one or two. In contrast, when I ask those same questions about statistics and probability, most of the hands stay up. There is a strong opportunity story for statistics and probability but not for quadratic equations, at least not as they're usually taught.

This doesn't mean that we should always abandon topics that don't have good opportunity stories. For one alternative, we can often expand the reach of the topic. The French Revolution treated simply as a historical episode without its larger lessons does not have a strong opportunity story, but a big-picture study of the French Revolution does. From time to time, people argue that one can construct a big-picture version of mitosis. I have yet to hear one that seemed convincing, but if you can, go for it!

For another alternative, we may choose to teach a topic briefly and efficiently for acquaintance knowledge rather than dropping it altogether. I don't need a deep understanding of mitosis, but it's nice to have a rough sense of the important mission mitosis accomplishes.

For a third alternative, we should always leave room for learner enthusiasm. *Some* students may be intensely curious about topics without a strong opportunity story, for instance biological matters like mitosis or mathematical matters like quadratic equations. (I was!) Education should give them ways of pursuing such passions.

Where We Could Let Go

Besides choice of topics, larger agendas influence curriculum. Three agendas familiar to anyone in education are *achievement*, *information*, and *expertise*. All have real merit, but each, pushed too far, can undermine lifeworthy learning.

The Achievement Agenda

The achievement gap between the performance of less-privileged students and that of more-privileged students is a fundamental and stubborn problem of education that deserves attention. However, sometimes it may get too much attention. Alongside the achievement gap, how about the *relevance* gap? Most likely, some of the achievement gap reflects disadvantaged students' perceptions that what they're being asked to learn

does not speak powerfully to their lives. The achievement gap should not become a “let’s solve this one first” excuse for neglecting lifeworthy learning.

The Information Agenda

A reliably alarming newspaper headline warns that students cannot find some faraway nation on a map or that they lack a fact or two about how their government works. To be sure, there are many kinds of information worth having at one’s mental fingertips. But today’s world is not the world of 50 years ago. You can find any basic information you need in a few seconds on the Internet. Facts in your head simply don’t have the premium payoff they used to have when the alternative to memory was a grope in the dictionary or a gallop to the local library.

The Expertise Agenda

The school curriculum has typically reached toward the more technical mysteries of the disciplines, often planning advanced placement courses at the end of secondary education to create a kind of “junior expertise.” Although a push for junior expertise is great for a highly able student who has a special interest, it doesn’t serve most students well. The fundamentals, robustly understood and widely applied, deliver the greatest payoff. Basic probability and statistics again offer a good example. A few foundational concepts—such as probability, standard deviations, correlations, and intelligent reading of statistical charts and graphs—provide most of the value for most learners. Yet even good students often do not learn such foundational concepts well enough to get past troubling misconceptions. We should construct the general curriculum in the disciplines for big, basic understandings, rather than for deep dives into junior expertise.

Reimagining Education for Lifeworthy Learning

To make room for education’s expanding universe, we need to put learning that matters in the foreground and move learning that matters less to the background. Of course, we should acknowledge the challenges of balancing multiple agendas and dodging niche understandings—but let’s not start with these challenges. Instead, let’s begin with the positive, reimagining education around the topics

and themes that truly matter in learners’ lives.

Think about the large or small choices you have as an educator at any level, whether you’re a head of school, department chair, or committed classroom teacher. Now apply some math:

+1. What theme or topic could I add that is not currently offered and that would incorporate big understandings (opportunity, insight, action, and ethics)?

Although a push for **expertise** is great for a highly able student who has a special interest, it doesn’t serve most students well.

× 2. What theme or topic could I expand, getting it out of its niche so that it speaks more broadly to learners’ lives?

÷ 3. What theme or topic could I shrink significantly to make room for number 1 and 2? (“Shrink” could mean eliminate, but it might also mean teach in a compact way for acquaintance knowledge.)

Notice how ÷ 3 comes at the end. That’s because it’s not a great place to begin. Any educator knows that division is harder than addition and multiplication. Let’s start by adding what’s important, figuring out along the way how to make space for it.

At the beginning of this article, I made a promise not to map out exactly what learning matters. Yes, there are many promising candidates and trends, but no single list is suited to all cultures, schools, teachers, and learners. I’ve tried to live up to that promise, focusing instead on the good questions we might ask to find our own answers.

So what’s *your* French Revolution? 

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