



Transcript

Episode 2: What *really* matters when teaching for deep learning?



Your partner in critical, creative, and collaborative thinking

Podcast Episode 2: What *really* matters when teaching for deep learning?

Warren

Welcome to Re: thinking education, a podcast from The Critical Thinking Consortium.

Warren

To begin our podcast, I'd like to invite you to make a decision. What adjectives would you use to describe the kind of learning that you hope to lead and inspire? Would you use *quality*, *higher order* or maybe *powerful*? As you think about the word that you might select I'm reflecting on how conversations and thinking about learning seem to be shifting. It seems that there's more attention paid to distinguishing superficial learning from quality learning, and the pedagogies and approaches that support quality learning and thinking. In this, our second podcast episode, I talk with Usha James, the Executive Director of The Critical Thinking Consortium about the question, "What really matters when teaching for deep learning?" In the first part of our conversation, Usha provides practical ideas about how we might identify and distinguish deep learning from other forms of learning. Then in the second half of the conversation, we explore aspects of practice that support deep learning, and identify three principles that could be applied in any learning situation. Regardless of the adjective that you selected a moment ago, I think you'll find some practical and powerful ideas to support you as you engage in re-thinking about teaching and learning.

Warren 00:00

Hello, my name is Warren Woytuck, and welcome to the Critical Thinking Consortium's podcast. It's my pleasure to be joined by The Critical Thinking Consortium's Executive Director, Usha James. I'm really pleased that she's able to join me today. Usha and I have had many rich conversations about much in life and we're going to explore the relationship—the question, "What really matters when teaching for deep learning?" Usha, let's jump right in if you're ready. I'm really curious about your thoughts on how you would define first of all, *deep learning*. That's a phrase, a concept that's used often. Can we set the context with a quick definition?

Usha 00:46

I'm not sure I can give you a quick definition. But I'll tell you what are some of the things that I think it means, and I'm happy for my definition to be enhanced. I think that deep learning is again, another word that's often used—transformative—in the sense that if you are going to learn something deeply, it's going to make a difference to something else. It's going to make a difference to your life. It's going to make a difference to the way you operate, the way you see yourself, the way you see the world. Deep learning, I think is transformative. I've heard Steven Katz say many times, "If you've learned something, it's permanent." Deep learning is permanent. It isn't something that just sticks around until the test and then evaporates out of the top of your head as you walk out the door. It sticks. I think deep learning is transferable. So, I might learn something really well in a particular context in class. But if I've learned it deeply, it means that I can take that learning and I can apply it to some new context; otherwise, what was the point really? So I do think these are all terms that get thrown around, and they can be a bit jargony. But those are some of the things that it means to me.

Warren 02:02

When you describe it that way Usha, I started to think about one of my other favourite podcasts, in addition to this one, a conversation between people—two people who weren't involved in education at all—and they were discussing the experience of their children during the pandemic. The one person was really just describing how students diving into a topic and being able to memorize all of the countries and capitals in the world was an example of really great learning and actually saying the public schools hadn't been able to achieve that.

I wonder if you may be able to describe what we would see in students, if they were exhibiting deep learning. You mentioned transformative practice, or that they would engage in attempting to transform their worlds. Are there any other features that distinguish deep learning from what we might typically see or talk about as teachers?

Usha 02:52

It's interesting, because when you ask that question, I actually think of two possible ways to approach that answer. So, what would we see in students as they're engaging in deep learning—that's sort of like in the process—and what would we see in students if they had engaged in—if they had acquired some deep learning? Maybe I'll go at it both ways. I'll start the first way and then tell me if I should continue. But I think the question that when you say, "What would we see in students?" is parallel to the question around meaningful engagement. We use that term, again, so much—these words come up as just sort of throwaway terms or jargony terms but I think that if students are in the middle, in the midst of deep learning, we are likely to see them meaningfully engaged.

One of the things that has really helped me think about engagement, and has really resonated with the educators that I've worked with, and I know that you've worked with as well, is when the Consortium, years ago, when we started recognizing that this conversation about what is meaningful engagement could go in so many different directions. Some teachers thought about engagement and thought the kids aren't handing their work in. Well, that's not connected to deep learning, and other people are thinking meaningful engagement is the kids are right in the midst and caught up in their work. There were very different conceptions of what engagement was. What's really helped me is the Consortium's conception of a taxonomy or a hierarchy of different levels of engagement. When I think through that, it helps me think about, "What would it look like? What would we see from students?" At the very lowest level—I wouldn't even call it real engagement—but at the very lowest level, we think of engagement as compliance, and I just don't think it's worthwhile to target our efforts at that low level of mere compliance. Compliance is not going to get us deep learning. Compliance I can only get to from reward and punishment. In a taxonomy of engagement, that is the absolute lowest level. I don't think it looks like compliance.

Warren

Thank you for connecting the engagement with the deep learning. It's not something that I have heard in many conversations and I like that you're building those two together. Usha, I wonder if you could tell me a little bit more about the teacher's role, then, in supporting deep learning. What does it look like? And perhaps what does it not look like?

Usha 05:20

I think that's such an important question, because the teacher's role has been a bit up for grabs in recent years. As we go down this path of inquiry—and some people have meant that to mean discovery—it feels like the idea of teacher as "guide on the side" not "sage on the stage" and all of those phrases, I think the idea of what is the teacher's role has become confusing. And I just want to be really clear—I think the teacher's role is critical, it's crucial in student learning. I really don't believe that we can simply follow students and leave them to their own devices to learn.

Now, I want to say something here, too, though. The brain is always learning. Kids are going to be learning something all the time. The question is, what are they learning? How are they learning it? Is it deep learning? Is it fruitful learning? So, I think the teacher's role is multifold. I mean, the teacher's role at the outset is to, in some ways, determine or prioritize is maybe a better word. I think that the pandemic has really, again, shone a spotlight on the need to prioritize. The teacher's role at the very beginning is to prioritize—what is the learning that is important that needs to happen? And that I think is so key, and how do you determine what learning needs to happen? I think too often we've become accountable to the curriculum, and we say, "Well, I need to teach what's in the curriculum, I need to teach what's in the textbook." But really, our accountability should be to the students and to their futures.

How do we become accountable to their futures? By thinking about what do I prioritize about what learning needs to happen? So as a teacher, how do I make that decision? I need to understand my students. I need to understand the most crucial competencies they have, and the ones they need to develop. I need to look to the community. I need to look to my discipline. I need to think about what's important for the future that we want. And then, I have no doubt when I've done that pre-work, I'm going to be able to find those important competencies—most of them, maybe not all of them—in the curriculum. So I would say, what's the teacher's role? There are multiple roles. But I would say that's the first one—prioritize.

Warren 07:44

Yeah, it seems like you're suggesting it's the prioritization of a mindset that sets the stage and it's an inquiry mindset about your students, about your role connected to that, and about the learning as well. I wonder if we could play with, so keeping that in mind, and that there are some mindsets that I need to have as a teacher to do that really, really well. If you were working with me as a teacher who was curious about this, and you see that I'm engaging in those mindsets, then, but I might be focused in on the day to day strategies.

So if I came to you and asked, "Well, I think that I have this mindset. I've established this and continue to think about my students. Are there particular strategies that you think that I should pay attention to?" So that's part one, and I'm going to ask a follow up piece? Are there strategies that I might use with great intentions of promoting deep learning, but don't necessarily live up to the promise that they're sometimes positioned that way but they don't work? So again, are there things that you would recommend that you pay attention to, and then things maybe you want me to watch out for because they're encouraged often, but don't always work to encourage deep learning?

Usha 08:49

I think if you talked about the mindset a little bit and the mindset being to deeply know your learners, and I think deeply knowing your learners is not something that just happens once in a year. It's not like I'm going to pass out my little feedback form or biography sheet in the first week and that's how I know my learners.

Warren 09:11

Yeah.

Usha 09:11

Knowing your learners. having that mindset means that I am learning my students. I like to think about any opportunity in instruction and assessment is an opportunity to learn my students. I am the learner of my students. I want to make sure that whatever strategies I'm selecting, I'm selecting them intentionally because they're going to help me learn my students. They're going to help me to learn about them. They're going to help me learn for them. They're going to help me learn with them. That idea of the mindset being—if we want students to learn deeply, we have to know them. We have to know them deeply. Of course, that means we have to know their background, their circumstances, what they like to do on the weekends, but we have to know how they learn. In order for that to happen, we need to make all of our strategies need to make their thinking visible. So again, it's a piece of jargon—let's make their thinking visible—but I think we have to talk about it in depth for a minute, is what does it mean to make student thinking visible? And what type of thinking do we want to make visible?

Warren 10:17

I was just going to say that many years ago, I think that John Hattie popularized that phrase, right? That make the thinking visible. But I've certainly noticed that it's a phrase that we can use, but what is the connection then to my practice in the classroom?

Usha 10:30

Right, exactly. Here, at the Consortium, we're really focused on critical thinking, creative thinking, collaborative thinking. How do I make a student's critical thinking visible? Fundamental to that is by inviting them to think early. We want to invite them to think early in the learning process. And so strategies I might use have to do with launching the learning right at the beginning of the process, at the beginning of the lesson, at the beginning of the unit, at the beginning of the year, with an invitation to make a judgment, make a reasoned judgment about the curriculum, about the world that we're living in. To make a decision, and ensure that that decision has multiple plausible options as responses. That's at the heart of everything that we work with at the Consortium is—can we make sure that our invitations for students to think require them to make a decision for which there are multiple plausible options?

Now, when we do that at the beginning of a learning process, or a chunk of learning, there are lots of different strategies we can use. I can ask students to gauge their assessment of something on a continuum from, you know, minus two to plus two, and I can ask them to put their "x" on the line. I can ask them to stand up and move to a corner of the room using four corners. There are lots of tried and true strategies to make thinking visible, but they could be not very fruitful to your question, if the

question I'm asking students actually doesn't ask them to make a reasoned judgment, for which there are multiple plausible options.

Warren 12:10

Right, maybe just want to pause there, because it's one thing you just surfaced was the relationship between the deep learning and my question about the strategies and your thoughts connected back to the conversation that you had with Garfield Gini-Newman about assessment. And it's interesting that we see those pieces weaving together, that they're not discrete items, that I can just consider deep learning and not think about assessment. So I like that you're connecting those pieces.

Usha 12:36

Yeah, and Warren I think if I can just add to that, I think that when we talk about making student thinking visible—and let's circle right back to knowing your students deeply—if I'm going to learn my students, then I want to use a strategy where they are going to make a reasoned judgement, talk a little bit about it before they necessarily know a lot of the content, right. So we make sure that there's an entry point for all students to make that thinking visible, whether it's through talking, or whether it's through putting an "x" on a line, or whether it's through moving images about, but once I make their thinking visible, I want to learn them. And that means, Garfield said in our last podcast, that to assess is to sit beside and I want to watch. I want to observe. I want to keenly listen to what's happening for the purposes of deeply understanding what my students' strengths are, and perhaps what areas they might need to develop. That's how I learn my students every day. I assess, I learn them every day, and then I can intervene with what is going to best move them forward. We're only going to get deep learning, as you said, making those connections. Deep learning is intrinsically connected to really good ongoing assessment, which is intrinsically connected to making students' critical thinking visible, so that we can see, hear, and observe.

Warren 14:02

Thank you for that. I wonder if you could, maybe we could go back to what you just started a moment ago, where you were talking about "four corners" and some other strategies that you thought probably, again, could be used with great intentions, but don't necessarily encourage deep learning. Are there some tips that you would offer to me that would guide my own assessment of my practice, so that I might be looking at things that I do in my instructional repertoire? How do I know whether or not I'm changing my practice to encourage deep learning to play that role that you've spoken about? I guess, especially focused on that strategy piece.

Usha 14:36

I think when you say changing my practice, I wonder whether we think about examining or inquiring into our practice, and also maybe just even small tweaks. I'll give you a couple of examples, okay? So for example, let's take a common practice like a placemat activity. So, here's an instructional strategy lots of teachers have used. So, we're going to take a piece of chart paper, we're going to put a circle in the middle, we're going to divide the rest of the chart paper into four, we're going to put kids around that piece of chart paper so each kid has a section. I can use that strategy in ways that have nothing to do with inviting thinking and are unlikely to lead to deep learning, or I can use it in ways that are highly likely to invite thinking. So, for example, I could say to kids, "Brainstorm in your section. What are all the

ways we could possibly do 'x'?" Or, "What are all the things you would like to have in a vacation?" Or, "What are all the things that make a meal healthy? Brainstorm in your section." And then I could say, "Go around the circle and share what you have in your section and in the middle of the placemat, put all the things that you have in common." That's one way to use a placemat that actually doesn't invite any critical thinking. It was a place to gather some thoughts that the kids already had, and doesn't move them beyond that.

Instead, I might give them an invitation to make a judgement. So, in your section of the placemat, I might start by saying, "What are all the things you think that need to happen in a healthy meal—components of a healthy meal." And then I might say, "Okay, think to yourself, now, of the things that are in your section, I'd like you to select—what are the top three that you think are most crucial in order to have a healthy meal? And now as you go around the circle and you share, I want you to select those pieces that you all agree are important, put them in the middle, and now together rank order which of those are most crucial. If you had to select from them, which are they?" So as a process by which you filter, you rank, you make decisions, you select—can take a strategy from simply being a brainstorming strategy to being a strategy that invites thinking, makes it visible, and therefore that grappling leads to deep learning—could lead to deep learning.

Warren 17:02

In your description, I really noticed how you intentionally—you were phrasing questions and tasks to invite students to make judgments, right? The problematization—it's something we haven't talked about yet but I know how important that is. And it's a quick way that we could refine practices. How well do they problematize or invite judgment? Usha, I'm going to invite you in a moment to go back to early in our conversation when you were describing deep learning, and you described it as being transformative in nature. And then a moment ago, you were talking about having students know information content—engaging in that. How would you respond to a teacher that might say, "Well, I don't have time for this transformative stuff that you keep talking about because there's the pressure of the curriculum, and kids need to know this content?" And then maybe, even conversely, how can we be transformative when that content still exists? How do you bridge those two? How do you make the link between those when it—when you're thinking about deep learning?

Usha 18:02

Well, it's interesting, because we do set it up as a bit of a binary, right? Either we're going to teach the curriculum which needs to be taught and that has background knowledge in it, or we're going to invite students to think. Two things are crucial for me. One is, you can't think about nothing. You have to have some relevant information, some background knowledge to think about. So there isn't really the dichotomy of background knowledge over here and thinking over here. I always say to teachers, "Consider what you were going to teach anyway. What was the text? What was the set of statistics? What was the experiment? What was the experience? What was it that you were going to teach? Now, let's wrap a challenge or a question around that that's going to be an invitation to think." So I think that's the first part of it—that the two things don't really live separately.

The second thing that I think is crucial is, there's more than enough research out there, both scholarly research and also the experiences of teachers to know that students will retain things better.

Remember what I said at the beginning, right? All learning, learning, if somebody has learned something, it's a permanent learning. So we are looking for retention, but retention, first of all, of what? Of facts that they can find elsewhere or of core concepts? Right? Of crucial competencies. We know that retention is increased when students have an opportunity to not only grapple with a concept, but also to grapple with it in an iterative way. That's something we haven't quite talked about yet. You asked about strategies at the beginning. We want to problematize. We want to frame a question or a challenge that invites thinking upfront, but then we want to return to it lots of times. We want to ask it on day one, and we want to return to it at the end of day one and say, "What do you think now? How has your thinking changed? What do you believe now? Apply the learning you've just had." And our experience has—we've seen it, our teachers have told us about it—that when students return to the same challenge, when they grapple with that learning, and they continuously apply the learning to that challenge and change their mind, by the end, they own that learning, because they've played with it in a whole variety of different ways. So, I'm not sure if the binary exists at all.

Warren 20:30

It, I think that it, it exists in the fact that the teachers may feel a tension between those. But that tension might be something that I impose upon myself as I grapple with this, that I that I feel the pressure of a curriculum or a government exam, and then I also, I feel the need when I observe and I live in the world that's around me, for transformation, and how do we bring those pieces together? Usha as we start to begin to wrap up our conversation that's gone by very, very quickly, I wonder if you might highlight any guiding principles that you would offer if you were speaking to a large group of teachers, and they're from different grades, and different subjects, and different focuses, and they have different students involved. Are there any guiding principles, big ideas that you think could be applied by many teachers—diverse range of teachers?

Usha 21:19

It's a good question. I always come back to centering the student. Warren, I'm thinking about a project that you and I have been working on recently, in which we've been working with young people who are asking adults who are working with them to engage them better. Listening to student voice really impacts me. I think about centering student voice and in this case, as we are working with these young people, this youth council that happens to be working with international organizations, they clearly said to us that in order to learn, in order to move beyond mere compliance in school, in order to feel like learning is valuable and meaningful in my life, they talked about three things.

They said that in order to be engaged, I need to feel included, and in really important ways. Inclusion, not as tokenism. Inclusion, not as through a deficit lens that, oh, we're going to create an environment because Warren doesn't have the abilities or the skills to rise up here and so therefore, we're going to do something different for him. But real inclusion that centers their strengths, and what their hopes and their desires and their aspirations.

The second thing they talked about was agency. For students to feel like they have the power to not just make choices about their learning, because we know as I said, at the beginning, there are important things that we might need to determine that have to be learned, but that they have some

agency in their learning, and making decisions about their learning, and making decisions about the world, and making decisions about themselves.

The third thing that these young people said to us was—impact. They're engaged by knowing that they could potentially have an impact on the world around them on themselves on what they what they're engaging in. When we make decisions about our practice, that starts with centering students, their strengths and their needs, then what will flow out of that is an inclination to frame our practice so we can learn about them, which means that we will problematize the learning to make it visible so we can see their thinking. It means we will create questions and tasks and challenges on a daily basis that excite them, that inspire them as Garfield said in our last podcast, that deeply engage them at a level of engagement where they're caught up. They're intellectually challenged. They care. They find it meaningful.

When we center our students, we will make decisions about our practice that allow us to change course, when we see that we're using a strategy—and this is where I think it's important for teachers to be forgiving of themselves—but to take an inquiry stance towards their own practice. So they're in the middle of a strategy, I decided to use a "placemat" or a "think-pair-share" or a "four corners", and it's not yielding the rich thinking that I think it should, that I'm watching closely, I'm putting students in the center of my thinking about my practice, and so I can shift gears. I can say, you know what, let's just tweak this a little bit in the moment to achieve the outcomes for our kids that we know that are going to be best for them. So I don't know if that gets at what you were asking at, but I do feel like that is the one piece of the puzzle that helps me make sure that I'm thinking about my practice in ways that are going to make a difference for students.

Warren 25:06

I think, Usha, you've offered three principles that I don't think that I thought about, especially early in my career. I know that I didn't think about those in a really meaningful way that we talked about student voice and choice. What does that really look like when we consider it in terms of agency, right? There's something different there and there's something different when we combine that with thinking about impact. Usha, to conclude our conversation, I wonder if you might share something that you're curious about. So, when you think about this idea of the role of teachers in deep learning and promoting deep learning, what's something that you're curious about? Maybe you have a question about that, in the next few years of your career, you want to explore.

Usha 25:47

I am really enticed by the idea of co-constructing these classroom environments that lead to deep learning, with kids. That's something I am really curious about—is how can we create opportunities for students themselves to help co-construct the strategies—the environments—to have not only their voice in it, but their innovative thinking, based on their years of experience schooling? It's something that excites me to explore further.

Warren 26:21

Thanks Usha. I can actually see it in your eyes when you describe it and I think that's really wonderful. Thanks for joining us, Usha, and thanks again for listening to podcast episode two.

Usha 26:30

Thanks, Warren.

Warren

Thanks for listening to podcast number two, our episode on what really matters when teaching for deep learning. We hope that you found some practical and powerful ideas to support you as you re-think your own teaching and learning practices. If you'd like to learn more about the ideas that Usha discusses in our conversation, you might want to check out two resources. First, our book called *Creating Thinking Classrooms*. Usha references ideas from Chapter five on *Moving from knowledge to deep understanding*. Usha also references Chapter eight on *Engaging students*, especially the idea of a new taxonomy of student engagement. The second resource you might want to review is our Quick Guide on *Building a community of thinkers*.

Warren

You've been listening to *Re: thinking education*, a podcast from The Critical Thinking Consortium. To learn more about The Critical Thinking Consortium, visit our website at tc2.ca, where we have many resources that help teachers and students become great thinkers. We'd also love to hear your feedback, thoughts, and questions about this podcast. Send us an email at mail@tc2.ca. Be sure to click the subscribe button for future episodes. Thanks for listening.