

# Breadth and Depth: Can We Have It Both Ways?

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**T**his past fall I shared a prospectus for a book I'm working on about "deeper learning" with my Ed School friend and colleague, higher education historian Julie Reuben. She read it, and said some nice things about the prospectus, but didn't seem fully convinced. When I pressed her, she said that the reason is that she isn't sold on depth as a goal. Young people should be exposed to the range of human pursuits—breadth was what we should be seeking; specialization and depth could come later.

That led us to give a talk about breadth and depth. I advocated for depth; she for breadth, and then we each tried to integrate the two.

Here is an abridged version, told from my perspective.

## **The Case for Depth**

In Sarah Fine and my research on contemporary high schools, the aspiration of breadth was frequently a barrier to more significant and powerful educational experiences. In the name of breadth, curriculum

was often a “mile wide and an inch deep,” and teachers repeatedly told us that the pressure to cover topics interfered with the ability to really investigate a text or explore a scientific principle. The consequence of this rushed pace was that students frequently did not have time to actually do the subjects; for example, reading about or quickly walking through an experiment to achieve a pre-specified results is the opposite of the uncertainty that is at the heart of real scientific inquiry. Society’s desire that all high school students know X and Y and Z also frequently constrained students’ ability to exercise choice and agency over their own education. The desire for breadth also led to a heavily fragmented schedule—45 minutes of one subject followed by 45 minutes of another—short blocks that didn’t enable significant investigations of a topic, and meant that students’ homework was also a little of that and a little of that. And the nail in the coffin was that organizing for breadth didn’t seem to yield even what it was seeking; in the rush to take 9th graders from Mesopotamia to the French revolution, students did not end up either knowing broad swaths of history or how to do real historical inquiry.

Conversely, almost all of the best educational experiences we saw took the opposite stance and privileged breadth over depth. Problem-based learning in math, for example, would feature one single difficult problem rather than lots of problems that were an application of one rule. Schools that took this stance also frequently had longer blocks and fewer subjects (at a time), allowing for more sustained inquiry in a particular domain. In terms of classroom experiences, the best teachers we saw tried to create an atmosphere where immersion in the thing was the only thing, where time stopped as students explored a text or investigated a scientific question. Depth was also often associated with student choice and, in turn, intrinsic motivation. As students choose to spend sustained time in electives or extracurriculars on subjects they liked, these environments were thus infused with the kind of energy and momentum that was frequently absent from more required subjects. And when, judging by adult eyes, we saw significant comprehension of a subject, an ability to not only know but do the things in the domain, it was almost always when students had gone “deep” in a field. For all of these reasons, we were left thinking that high schools should potentially be reorganized to enable students to take fewer subjects and spend more time on the ones they cared the most about, with external pressures for content coverage significantly lessened.

## The Case for Breadth

Julie is a historian of higher education. She argued that the history of efforts for breadth in higher education was mostly a failed one, but that it was worthwhile to do it anyway. She argued that students preferred depth over breadth for many of the reasons I described; namely that it enabled them to spend more time on the things they were most interested in. Faculty also preferred depth over breadth, because it enabled them to teach the specialties in which they were most interested in. The result, she argued, was implicit collusion between students and faculty in higher education to prefer depth over breadth; no one wanted to teach more general courses and few people wanted to take them. Establishing something like a core also meant huge fights over what should be in and out, which generally were unpleasant and were never resolved to everyone's satisfaction. Hence, with some signal exceptions, like the Core at Columbia or "great books" at St. Johns, depth and choice had usually won out over breadth and core requirements.

But, Julie argued, just because it is easy does not mean that it is right. Most students will not become professional academicians; the role of both high school and the non-major part of college is to prepare people to become informed and thoughtful citizens. To do this, they should not be taking hyper-specialized courses that faculty might like to teach, but rather they should be confronting broad questions that are important for modern humanity. As Jerome Bruner pointed out long ago, domains also have a certain underlying structure or logic to them, and broad courses can introduce students to key perspectives, ideas, concepts, and events that are important for understanding how those domains work. And while they may not remember everything they learn, they should at least have some acquaintance with the chronology of major historical events, understand something about the nature of evolution and the biological basis of life, and be exposed to many of the other core topics that are frequent staples of the high school and college curriculum. While there will surely be debates about what should and shouldn't be included, particularly around the canon and its modern critics, these are exactly the debates that those who are running an educational institution should be engaged in.

## Having It Both Ways

There may be ways to have it both ways. On further reflection, it seems as if breadth and depth are much more intertwined than they initially appear; it is not possible to become a deep inquirer in a subject without some broader understanding that goes around the specific thing you are exploring; conversely, it is not worth much to do a historical survey if it comes at the expense of understanding how that history was constructed.

We thus far have identified two possibilities for having it both ways; we would love to hear from readers of other ideas for potential syntheses.

1) The T shaped design: One possibility, which is frequently used at both the high school and the college level, is to create a T shaped course design. The T represents people who are moderately knowledgeable across a domain, and deeply knowledgeable within a strand of that domain. So, for example, when I teach course in Education Policy, I tell students that they should be able to come out of it able to hold their own in a policy conversation on most of the major contemporary topics, as well as to become deeply knowledgeable about one. Concretely, that means that the majority of the course time moves through readings and topics chosen by the instructor to help students understand the range of topics and perspectives in the field, but that the student is also pursuing a longer term project on a topic of interest to them. Such a design also balances the light paternalism that education for breadth requires with the choice and student agency that are central to education for depth. In the best versions of this design, core concepts or themes are threaded through the topics; these concepts or themes both tie together the different weeks of substantive content and are applied and reinforced through the students' chosen projects.

2) Essential questions that force integration of breadth and depth: Imagine if you took that same 9th grade “Mesopotamia to the French revolution” course and organized it instead around the following essential question: “Why do civilizations rise and fall?” This kind of question forces some coverage, as students look across the Greeks, Romans, Mayans, and others, but it also puts students in the role of historical social scientists as they seek to develop theories, weigh

evidence, and consider context. Such an examination could also clearly connect to contemporary questions about whether America is a civilization in decline, a thesis recently proffered by some noted commentators. It might also help students to remember some of what they learned in the longer term, as specific historical events would no longer seem like a string of facts but rather part of a pattern or thesis that the student had developed.

Deeper learning is a good name for a movement, especially one targeted at improving secondary schools that historically have privileged breadth over depth. But if the goal is to think hard about the nature of good education, it only gets at one part of the equation; schools of the future need to think about ways to integrate breadth and depth if they are to produce an educated citizenry.

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