



A SKETCHY MAP TO DEEP UNDERSTANDING

A REVIEW OF TEACHING FOR DEEP UNDERSTANDING: WHAT EVERY EDUCATOR SHOULD KNOW

BY KENNETH A. LEITHWOOD, PAT MCADIE, NINA BASCIA AND ANNE RODRIGUE. CORWIN PRESS, 2006. ISBN 1412926963

The editors of this compendium of contributed articles have the stated intention of bridging the worlds of educational practice and research and seem to seek an audience that includes policy makers, academics and practitioners. The book provides a broad sampling of ideas that might be well-suited as an introduction to the systemic interplay of policy and practice for a Masters level course in curriculum or administration, but ultimately suffers from the “mile wide and inch deep” criticism that it levels at the curriculum. That is not to say that it is without interest or merit, far from it, but only that for any particular audience or purpose it requires supplementation by more thoroughly elaborated analysis and illustration.

There is an evident political agenda within this book, which advocates in the introduction that “teaching for deep understanding should be viewed as an alternative to adopting one of the CSR [Comprehensive School Reform] models” (p. 10), and concludes by advising that “we should likely start by implementing our recommendations for the states or provinces and for faculties of education. It is likely to be very difficult for teachers to extend their teaching for deep understanding much further until the school, district and provincial contexts in which they work provide much greater support for their efforts” (p. 184). The longest chapter is devoted to results of a survey by the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario, which concludes that “curriculum and assessment policies currently in place in Ontario are not conducive to teaching for depth” (p. 146), and two of the editors are affiliated with that organization.

The introduction’s claim that deep understanding should be the overarching goal for public education is based on six common-sense assertions: “many specific facts have a very short half-life”; “you can have your cake and eat it too (or you don’t need to trade off good test results)”; “the experience of deeply understanding something encourages further learning”; “most real-life tasks require serious, self-directed problem solving”; “the broader context of our lives places a premium on deep understanding for survival”; and “the alternatives are not very compelling ... if not

deep understanding, then what?” These brief declarations are, however, not the logical foundations of the book so much as the informal introduction to a collection of articles by various authors associated with OISE/UT.

The contents are organized in five sections: The Significance and Meaning of “Deep Understanding,” Teaching for Deep Understanding in the Disciplines, Teaching for Deep Understanding Across the Curriculum, The Challenge of Teaching for Deep Understanding, and Enabling the Teaching of Deep Understanding. The chapters are brief and easy to read. They are thematically linked but not sequential, so that the book can be easily used as a sampler.

There is no specific instructional guidance for the classroom teacher in this book, but there are many intriguing suggestions; for example, nine constructivist principles for deep understanding (Chapter 3), ten implications for teaching mathematics (Chapter 5), eight principles for science education with multiple web site references (Chapter 7), four instructional frameworks for thinking about integrated instruction (Chapter 9), seven ways to teach for wisdom (Chapter 12), four information and communication technologies that deepen understanding (Chapter 13), five ways that assessment can help to promote deep understanding (Chapter 15), and four key challenges for teaching for depth in teacher education (Chapter 19). Each is promising, but the “Reader’s Digest” presentation imposed by the compendium format does not deliver on that promise because it lacks detail. In all likelihood the extensive bibliography that is provided would guide one to more substantial explanations.

The final chapter provides recommendations for the classroom, school, district, state/provincial policymakers and teacher education schools. These seem useful, but they are presented without sufficient detail to be persuasive (except for those who are already convinced) or useful (except as a general overview of a complex pedagogical and political issue). Moreover, while the recommendations are consistent with the preceding contents, it is not clear how they have been

derived from them, and thus the reader cannot easily refer to those contents for explanation. For example, schools leaders are urged to “develop a strong sense of professional community” in schools and align leadership practices “with the expectation that teachers will focus on teaching for deep understanding”, but there is only a single page of explanation and guidance in the summary chapter to which they can refer for assistance in doing so.

Teaching for deep understanding requires deep understanding. This broad introduction provides glimpses into substantial issues and serves a useful purpose by opening an important door for the reader, but it unfortunately offers only a sketchy map to the treasures beyond. ■

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