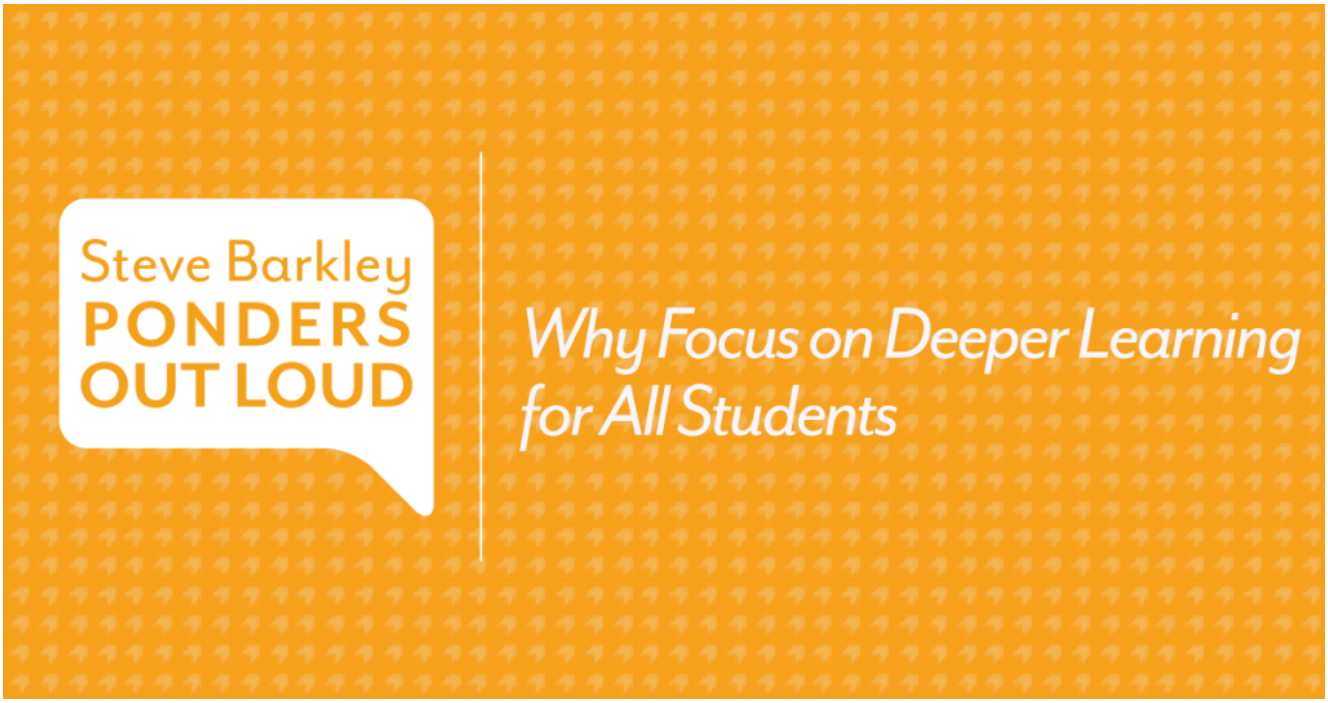
Podcast: Why Focus on Deeper Learning for All Students



What is deeper learning and how does it meaningfully engage students, preparing them for success beyond the classroom? How can teachers incorporate deeper learning into their classrooms? Dr. David Reese, from Defined Learning, explores these topics and identifies the six critical competencies that are important to all students' for success. These competencies are often framed within the context of future-ready skills, which also include creativity, citizenship, and character.

Find David's blog, "Why Deeper Learning? 6 Competencies EVERY Student Needs to Succeed" here.

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Podcast Transcript:

[00:00:00.300] – Steve [Intro]

Welcome to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast. As instructional coaches and school leaders, you are tasked with guiding continuous teacher growth to create student success. This podcast looks to support you with strategies from experienced guests, as well as my own insights that I've gathered over the years. I'm thrilled to have you with us. Thanks for tuning in.

[00:00:29.820] – Steve

Why focus on deeper learning for all students? It's great to welcome a longtime colleague and friend to the podcast, Dr. David Reese, who is the Chief Academic Officer for Defined Learning. Dave has served K-12 students as a science teacher, curriculum specialist, and central office administrator. He has taught master's and doctoral-level courses in all areas of curriculum and professional development leadership. Today, his work focuses on providing students with engaging, relevant learning opportunities designed to encourage students to apply content from a local, national, and international perspective. I reached out to Dave after I read his recent post titled, "Why Deeper Learning: 6 Competencies Every Student Needs to Succeed." Welcome, Dave. It's great to have you here.

[00:01:28.190] – Dr. David Reese

Thanks so much, Steve. I'm super excited to be here, and it was great to get your communication. So thank you.

[00:01:35.240] – Steve

I was reflecting on one of the last times we worked together, and I think we were in Istanbul.

[00:01:41.040] – Dr. David Reese

We were in Istanbul, and you were leading me around because I was a new Newbie to Istanbul. Boy, did we have some fun. So thanks.

[00:01:50.040] – Steve

So jumping in, I'm wondering, could you talk a little bit about how historically has the term, "deeper learning" emerged? You find that term everywhere now.

[00:02:01.190] – Dr. David Reese

Absolutely. Steve, it's funny because we use these two sentences to frame everything we do. And as students, we've all said it countless times, why do I need to know this? And when am I ever going to use this? So as I dug into the history of deeper learning, those questions resonated me because I definitely was not the best student as it relates to educational history. Don't tell my professors, but if they're listening, thank you for all you did. [laughter] But my work now, you have to go back and form the foundation for what you're doing. I think about those questions, and at the time, they had no relevance to me. And now it does. So when we think about the history, it reads like the greatest hits of our educational classes. It begins in the early 1900s. John Dewey, others, Advocating for Learning. It went beyond rote memorization, and it includes critical thinking, problem solving, real-world applications. What I think is great about that is 100 and some years later, they're three of the most important things we need to have our kids to be successful beyond school. Then, the world's famous Bloom's Taxonomy. Benjamin Bloom, he was very much emphasizing in the late '50s, higher-order thinking, distinguishing between surface learning and deeper cognitive processes, things like evaluation analysis, having kids dig deeper.

[00:03:29.050] – Dr. David Reese

Makes sense. Then from there, we get to the constructivist theories of, like Vygotsky and Piaget, and that idea of constructing meaning through experience and through reflections, which, as we look at today, project, problem, place-based learning, inquiry, they all come in there. And

then really the big push to the deeper learning phrase, as it's called today, was actually the standards movement, that idea of the '90s and 2000s. And in my work today, every school is tied to standards of some sort. And as a result, whenever we're trying to do something that may be more deeper for students, you're always coming up against those state and national tests and the test scores and what they mean. So there's this big battle going on. And so as a reaction to that idea of test scores narrowing the curriculum, many researchers and educators started to look at the idea beyond test scores, collaboration, communication, metacognition. And so for me, in a phone call I had recently with a colleague really led me to the Hewlett Foundation. And ultimately, they are the people that came together and helped to form the term deeper learning as it is today.

[00:04:40.710] – Dr. David Reese

They funded research, school networks to build the ideas out and ultimately, what they did is they built a set of competencies needed to succeed in the 21st century. And what I think is incredibly visionary, they're the competencies we use today. And quite frankly, they were a lot of the competencies we needed before that.

[00:05:00.980] – Steve

In your article, you hit on those six competencies. I'm wondering if you could just briefly lay them out here for folks to make a connection.

[00:05:12.140] – Dr. David Reese

Absolutely. I think one of the important things when educators listen to this or we talk with educators is helping them understand that we don't have time for one more thing in the classroom, so it needs to be the thing. So these six competencies really work well together. So the first one is mastering core academic content. That brings in the standards.

The students need to have a foundational knowledge of the content, of the skills, of the practices. And they need to master those basics as well as going beyond. That's really where, excuse me, competency-based evaluation models get their start. Thinking critically and solving complex problems. We need students to analyze information, make sound judgments, solve complex problems. One of the things I really like about this is, we mentioned earlier, problem solving. And everywhere you go, everything is about problem solving. Well, the issue is we spend so much time problem solving that we're not necessarily problem finding. And so there's a quote by Einstein that says, "If I had an hour to solve a problem, I'd spend the first 55 minutes figuring out what the problem is and five minutes solving it." And that's really powerful.

[00:06:29.880] – Dr. David Reese

But based upon structure and schedules, which we'll talk about in a little while, everyone just jumps to the solution. So that's an important piece. The next one is working collaboratively. We need students to work together. They need to be effective, they need to be productive, they need to be respectful. When we think about what we're doing in education and getting our kids ready for the world beyond school, whatever that may be, we have to be able to work together. The world we live in, look at you and I, we're across the pond from each other, but yet we're collaborating. So that's a very important piece. And we want that collaboration to be within teams. And then also the idea of working with students, excuse me, other students, teachers, family members, and also community members, communicating effectively. That's really just expressing your ideas and information, very much ties to the ELA standards, but thinking about that orally, in writing, being able to read, in the world we live in now, being able to effectively use digital resources, and they need to be able to communicate in a clear, concise manner. Another piece, we always talk about, I know in all our classes and our work, lifelong learning.

[00:07:43.520] – Dr. David Reese

Well, part of that is helping students understand to learn how to learn, helping them develop those metacognitive skills, self-reflection, self-regulation to become independent learners. They need to learn how to effectively ask the right questions. And also get answers and then re-ask questions, cycling of questions. Then finally, developing academic mindsets. That idea of being able to persevere, of growing over time. Also that idea that I belong in this learning environment. I feel safe, the world we live in. And we want to make sure that we have a focus for them on the relevance of their learning and their own self-efficacy. Those six competencies really come together. And for educators, we need to realize that comes together in our learning environment. But it also sets the stage for the things that students are going to need when they leave us and giving them the best opportunity to be successful.

[00:08:44.110] – Steve

You talked about them coming together as I looked at the list in your article. And then as I listened to you now, what's striking me is that you have to be working on them at the same time in their interconnected in this. Too often at school, we try to split them out.

[00:09:05.650] – Dr. David Reese

Without question. I think that really gets at the instruction. That idea of the instructional strategies coming together, really using that application of ideas, problems, projects so that students can see why what they're learning matters and how they can apply it. Absolutely.

[00:09:27.590] – Steve

I get a chance to be in a place where deeper learning is occurring. Give me a little bit of a picture. If I'm focusing on kids and students, what am I likely to be seeing? Then if

I’m focusing on the teacher, what am I likely to be seeing?

[00:09:46.680] – Dr. David Reese

Absolutely. I just want to start with a quick memory of mine. When I first started teaching as a new teacher, terrified, I always believed in this active learning environment. I’ll never forget, two weeks after I was teaching, the principal said, “Okay, Dave, I don’t know if this is going to work because there’s way too much noise going on in your room.” As a new teacher, I felt really good about what my kids were doing, but I quickly went to the idea, “you will all be quiet.” Then as I gained, maybe it was tenure, but ultimately it evolved. So that idea, Steve, with… Sorry, that memory just came flying back to me. [laughter] But that focus on a student, it’s really active engagement. It’s getting kids involved involved, getting them excited, doing active thinking, working through problem finding, problem solving, then project development and presentation over time. It’s very much that idea of a productive struggle in a supportive manner. So often, productive struggle, we’re like, “Oh, we got to help our students.” And that’s really how they learn and when they learn best. And also, from a personal point of view, the motivation they get out of that and the success they feel.

[00:11:00.670] – Dr. David Reese

The idea of connecting, right? So when we go into our classroom, our students are taking what they’re learning and connecting it to the real world. That might be a career, thinking about how careers can tie into what I’m learning. It could be the community, helping make the community a better place, locally, nationally, globally. It could be global issues. We have a lot of schools that use the UN Sustainable Development Goals to guide their work and guide their thinking. What’s neat with that is the students can think about that world beyond and then bring it right down to the neighborhood around their classroom. As I mentioned earlier, collaboration. Students working together. They’re in teams.

They’re engaged in meaningful dialog. They question each other. They build on each other’s thinking. What they’re learning and what they’re doing is that personal interaction and mutual respect. They have to have that. The idea of inquiry, which goes to the constructivist in some of the other early pieces. But having students, again, ask questions, make choices about which way they want to go, which path they want to pursue, how best to solve the problems or explore the ideas, and having the students think about who they’re solving the problem for, bringing in empathy, that idea of, this matters to them why?

[00:12:21.630] – Dr. David Reese

Also, which can be challenging in schools with a very rigid schedule, but that idea of doing this in continual cycles, where often one cycle leads to another. In many places, this is one cycle, one shot at doing the project. And the outcome for the students is incredible. As someone like yourself who does professional learning, my professional learning sessions model this. And what’s amazing is a couple of years later, I’ll go back to a place and no one remembers my name. But what they remember is, oh, you’re the backpack guy or you’re the aquarium designer. So they remember that learning experience and they took a great big deal out of it. And I’m sure for you, too, that’s the greatest compliment I can receive. And then finally, but also that thought of reflection, watching students engaging in ongoing purposeful reflection for themselves with their peers and with the teacher and building all of that out. And ultimately, just having projects where they take time. So the students have to be persistent, not a 15-minute challenge, which has value in its own purpose, not necessarily for this. And that’s really what the students want to see.

[00:13:37.240] – Dr. David Reese

You want me to think about talking about the teacher? I didn’t remember your question. [laughter]

[00:13:42.360] – Steve

[laughter] Yeah. There's two thoughts going through my mind here that I wanted to run by you, and maybe it lays out the teacher part. As I was listening to you, one thought that was coming to my mind is we need learning inside school to look more like learning outside of school.

[00:13:58.580] – Dr. David Reese

Absolutely. That's well said. If you don't use that phrase, I will probably use it in a couple of weeks.

[00:14:05.360] – Steve

Let's go right ahead. Then the other thought, and maybe it sets us up for talk on the teacher, but I have this sense of if I walked in and I have trouble figuring out who the teacher is, it might be an indicator that I've got happening what I'm looking to have happen.

[00:14:25.430] – Dr. David Reese

I think you said that perfectly. That's exactly right. I think the thing is that as we begin to focus on the teacher, so often schools, leaders will say, "This is the learning environment. This is the climate. This is the culture we want." And so, we're going to identify this as this matters in August. So by October, I'm expecting to see this throughout the school integrated. And that really gets at that big idea of a mission, a vision of this is where we want to get to. And to get to this point, it's going to take some time, some work, persistence, leadership, and energy. So just to bring that up, because that happens a great deal. And people will look at super successful schools that have been doing this and say, yes, that's what we want to be. But they don't realize they've been working on that for 5, 10 years. So I think it's really powerful, which we'll get to leadership. But I always try to share that with people. We need to take, just like our students, scaffolding baby steps.

[00:15:34.950] – Steve

It’s like observing in a teacher’s classroom that has this magic happening and trying to take the activity that she was doing back to your classroom, not realizing the six months that she took to get the students to the point where they’re at, which is why it’s working.

[00:15:55.140] – Dr. David Reese

No, and that’s it. And Steve, a really good point you just made there, right, is going back that idea I have the content standards. But the skills and ideas that we shared earlier, those are just as important for the students now and beyond school. And a lot of times, especially teachers that have a content before their teacher. They will say it’s very difficult to focus on that. But my argument is the success is I was a biology teacher. Maybe 5, 10% of my kids work in biology. 100% of them work in areas where they need the skills we’re talking about. So it’s an important thought.

[00:16:39.440] – Steve

So let’s go to leadership. A lot of listeners to this podcast are instructional coaches and school-based administrators. What thoughts do you have as to steps they take to encourage teachers to take learning deeper, knowing that I’ve got a group of teachers are afraid of the schedule and afraid of the test dates, it seems to trump, even if it feels like that’s where I want to be going.

[00:17:08.490] – Dr. David Reese

I think that’s where that idea of a strategic plan, a curriculum-based strategic plan is really important because everything you just said is absolutely true, and it’s the right answer, meaning it’s very difficult to do certain things in a structured schedule where I don’t have a chance to collaborate. With that said, that’s exactly what to talk about. It’s really about setting the climate and culture for

teacher and learning. You need, as a leader, as a coach, have that clear vision. One of the things that I think really matters is a shared language. Have a vocabulary of the work that you all know, you all understand. And one of the examples I always use is critical thinking. Every person you talk to says, “Yeah, we do critical thinking in our classroom every day.” Well, what is that? “Well, it’s this, it’s that…” So having common vocabulary, and that’s a really great opportunity, we use workplace skills, durable skills, but knowing what this means, what this looks like, and then how to assess it. And that’s an incredibly important piece. And for the leaders, they very much need to set up that opportunity for structure, for time to talk, to communicate.

[00:18:20.900] – Dr. David Reese

What a lot of people are doing, which is creating profiles or portraits of a learner, and they’re making those observable skills that form the mission and vision. And that becomes a great modeling opportunity. The other piece, which is interesting, is that idea of building a culture of trust and risk-taking. So you can take this as a school leader and put this on your school. You can take this as a teacher and put this in your classroom. The idea of it’s okay to fail or it’s okay to not get it perfect, is such an important part of this. And in a lot of places, people are nervous because we have these teacher evaluations and things. So what we want to do is create a proactive support environment as opposed to a reactive or punitive. Leaders, coaches, they’re going to visit classrooms to learn to share, to evaluate, to reflect, and provide these supportive feedback loops. Having the coaches is obviously incredibly important, but having the leader to support that and also be part of that communication. You mentioned, and we know this, we’ve all been in education a long time. But the leaders need to prioritize deeper learning in the structures.

[00:19:40.050] – Dr. David Reese

Over time, they have to build schedules that allow for collaboration among students and staff. They have to create time. That time is going to keep coming up. Interdisciplinary projects. I always say, in the real world, subjects exist in an interchangeable way. We need to try to do that. We need to have student exibitons. Let's open it up to the community. It's a big deal, but money is tight. We must invest in ongoing professional learning. That's a level one, level two, level three. Let's get people a foundational idea. Let's support them. And then, Steve, your work, right? I mean, this goes through the three, but let's really personalize it, help them to all become the best, because ultimately, by doing this with our teachers and supporting their professional growth, our student success is going to be a big deal. So to me, those are a variety. And then the last piece is just celebrating success. John Cotter has all this work on the change process, and it's about celebrating small wins. So we look at this idea and go, five years from now, we're going to have a big family night. Well, no. Why can't we have family nights every few months?

[00:20:52.000] – Dr. David Reese

So as the leader, that's the big idea, is letting the coaches, letting the teachers do what they do best, but also giving them the tools, the knowledge and skills to do that, which is where we invest.

[00:21:07.970] – Steve

Probably, I was going to say 35, maybe 45 years ago, I started with the phrase in leadership of, you got to model the model. If you're in a leadership role, if I watch you, I should be able to figure out what I'm supposed to be doing. I would carry it back to the classroom. If students are watching their teacher learn, it's one of the best ways to learn. I was just working with a school where the staff keeps requesting experts

to come in and do the PD on whatever they're on. Number one, the administration doesn't have the money, even if they decided they wanted to go that route. But number two, there is a lot of expertise on staff, but as soon as they go with the word expert, and I said, well, understand what you're up against. You're trying to convince teachers to go to student-centered learning where the student is a risk taker and learns through a trial and error process or learns with some failure. But you got a whole staff who's not experiencing that at all. It really is coming back and getting a PD model that looks much more like the learning model for students that you want to make happen in the school.

[00:22:29.010] – Dr. David Reese

No, absolutely. I always make this – and I'm sure, I'm often introduced as the expert, and that sets people off sometimes. I was like, no, listen, the expert is the person who traveled the furthest to get here, so I don't want that. But no, you're absolutely right. We do a lot of work, and I have some colleagues who are administrators, and that's exactly what they strive to be. They look at their school or their school system as a classroom, and they want to model to the teachers so the teachers can feel a sense of comfort and strength in what they're doing and why this matters. And also, even when we do our PD, we have, and it's funny, it goes exactly with what you just said, the teachers go through the project as a student so they can see that lens. Exactly what you just said, right? Now they get to see how that lens works and can see the leader doing that. So it's a strong point.

[00:23:27.510] – Steve

So how does everything we've been discussing here fit into your work at Define Learning?

[00:23:35.200] – Dr. David Reese

Absolutely. We started about 15 years ago as Define STEM. And

then over the course of time, being in schools, we quickly realized that it was full faculty. And the only way you can really do stem is if you incorporate all the subjects. So things like social studies, ELA. And I always say in our work and in our resources, we have more language arts connections than we do anything else. For us, it's all about the idea of authentic real-world context. We've been doing this. We use the understanding by design framework, the GRASP template. It's goal, role, audience, situation, and products. For me, as a former teacher, the aha moment is that role and audience. Every one of our roles, Pre-K to 12, the students take on a role that's career-based because it brings that relevance beyond school. The audience is who they're doing the project, solving the problem, the issue for, and it does. It really brings in relevance. Everything we do is tied to that authenticity and that application of knowledge, application of skills, working through those ideas, and then creating projects. And in often cases, they may be multimedia, they may be demonstrations, they may be models, they may be articles, and a lot of maybes.

[00:24:59.530] – Dr. David Reese

But then the students are able to communicate, and they also can demonstrate their understanding. So we're getting at that mastery of content, mastery of skills in an applied way. We do a lot of work with students in alternative learning settings, and they thrive in this because this is what they want to do. They take such ownership. As a teacher, there's no greater pride than seeing your students take ownership and be excited to share. We embed, we strongly encourage the idea of collaboration, having students work in teams, work across teams, building mentorships in the community. The neat thing about a career is if you have an architect in the community, they're super excited to work. We do a lot of things with food. Restaurants are always opening their kitchens. And then it's also thinking about a structured approach, going back to where we talked about. A lot of students don't know how to do

this because they never had the opportunity. So we need to think about a structured inquiry approach, where one of our goals is that idea of lifelong learning. So as we see our students grow, they should be more and more independent using you.

[00:26:10.700] – Dr. David Reese

And what greater pride than to be wandering around? I got this. I don't need anything. So all those things are built into what we do, cross-disciplinary knowledge. And then as we've grown, we now have defined learning, which is a standards-based site, and define careers, which is Career Pathways focused. And beginning in July, those two sites are going to be unified because really what everyone is concerned with is the opportunity gap. We want to make sure that all students have the opportunity to succeed beyond school. So they need that content. They need those skills. They need those personal ideas, which brings us back to deeper learning. And it just becomes an important piece. And for us in our work, we have this phrase, a colleague of ours, I don't know, created, shared, but it's, "You can't be what you can't see." And so whether we're working in North Central Pennsylvania or we're working in the middle of Los Angeles, the students see what they see, and there's a lot they don't see. So this gives them a chance to explore, think about career connections to their content, the skills they need, regardless of what they're going to do, because as we know, so many jobs don't even yet exist for these kids, meaning when they finish.

[00:27:34.290] – Dr. David Reese

And that's our work. So that's how it fits into what we do, very much that interconnectedness. And we spend a lot of time really supporting professional learning. So that as people use the resources, that they can go deeper and deeper into supporting student learning and instructional coaching.

[00:27:54.680] – Steve

Well, Dave, I was looking forward to this conversation because I knew you would would continue to fan the flame that burns for me. I'm sitting here thinking, we really have to keep making deeper learning happen for all the educators if we're going to get to deeper learning happening for students.

[00:28:19.610] – Dr. David Reese

Well said.

[00:28:21.400] – Steve

What's the best way for our listeners to… I'll post a link to your blog in the podcast podcast lead-in. What's the best way for folks to connect with you?

[00:28:32.990] – Dr. David Reese

The best way initially is on LinkedIn. On LinkedIn, I'm Dave Reece, EDD. So that would be great. Also, we have Defined Learning and Defined Dareer under the Define logo. But any social media, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, and YouTube, would love to reach out, talk more. It's always fun making new friends and new colleagues who knew sitting in Istanbul that you and I would be lifelong. It works out well. But no, thank you very much, Steve. I greatly appreciate the invitation and super much enjoyed the conversation. I believe in what we're doing.

[00:29:14.300] – Steve

Me too. Thanks a lot.

[00:29:16.260] – Dr. David Reese

All right, Steve. Thank you.

[00:29:19.540] – Steve [Outro]

Thanks for listening, folks. I'd love to hear what you're pondering. You can find me on Twitter or LinkedIn at Steve

Barkley, or send me your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com.