The Core of All Learning

AN INTERVIEW WITH

Diana Laufenberg

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Interview Transcript:

The Core of all Learning – it isn't about what you know, but what you can create from what you know – Diana Laufenberg.

L: Thanks so much for taking your time. It's early in the morning. Anyway, just as a quick introduction, I will just say that we are talking today to Diana Laufenberg who I first saw you on TED, probably about 2 years ago now. Your talk just blew me away because I thought it was really inspiring. In the meantime, you've gone and done some really exciting things including taking whole year out from teaching and travelling around the country. I thought, if it's ok with you, could you perhaps catch us up to speed with what you've been doing and all the exciting projects you're working on.

DL: Sure. I taught for 15 years in four different US states; Wisconsin, Kansas, Arizona and Pennsylvania. At the end of 2012 schooling year, I decided to do other types of work outside classroom and basically have been doing work on something like 14 US states and 3 countries last year. But the big projects I have been doing, that was small work, like a day here, couple days there. Big work I've been working on is to start new schools, in the model of the school that I was working at Pennsylvania.

We just opened a high school in September in Philadelphia, so a second version of Science Leadership Academy. Then we're in works of trying to start a middle school of getting at 2014 and also been assisting K through 8 schools, that's in what Philadelphia calls turn around status, so it's in kind of ultra reform mode, school that's really struggle to perform over the last few years and they've been putting in something to some reforms to change that and I've been helping with that.

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L: Right. Very exciting. I was curious because in your talk you talked about how you started with a bit of inquiry-based and project based learning. But going back, presumably you taught the traditional way as well or you started out teaching traditionally, how did you make that move?

DL: I actually really didn't. I would say, more traditional I became at the end, but I never quite did the thing the way everybody else did it. My very first teaching job was during my student teaching, I had a very unique experience where I didn't have a cooperating teacher in the room with me, I just had a, they call it, teaching internship, that's why I was able to teach on my own for half of a day. I taught opposite a gentleman who was the Assistant Principal half a day. So I taught the other half of his course load and he and I taught the same material in a very different ways. He would just look at me sometimes and be like, I see how we get to the same place but you're going about it in a completely different way. I kind of never did it the traditional way other people did.

I started out my teaching using textbooks as resource and that kind of thing. But never in the same way, it was never then we read Chapter 1 followed by Chapter 2, and we do the questions, it was never really was that in my classroom.

Then I completely went all to the other side of things and I moved to Science Leadership Academy where we had access to all one-to-one (access to one-to-one devices) all the time and it just completely went all the way over to inquiry-driven project-based more in the one-to-one because it had the tools. I wouldn't say I was ever doing things traditionally.

L: Fantastic. Lots of teachers are. Have you any thoughts in how they make that jump from traditional teaching?

DL: It's a bit of a dance, so you have to figure out. I was lucky to always work for people that was fine with that. I have worked in non-tested area largely, so you get certain amount of autonomy. A joke that in the middle school, as long as the kids weren't

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running around going crazy, everybody's like I don't care what you do with them. Nobody gets hurt and we'll all be fine. I have always been kind of lucky to have Principals that were pretty ok with doing some unconventional things. At times, I wouldn't even say necessarily supportive but not resistant.

L: Yeah, they let you get on.

DL: Sometimes, they would be supportive, but sometimes just kind of tolerant of it. Also being in non-tested area, I don't see the kind of heat that comes from Math and English.

But most of the time, you have to have a sense of couple of things.

1. Covering more materials more quickly and a less engaging fashion doesn't yield more learning.
2. And that if you're thoughtful and produce research and show solid kind of backing behind your ideas, you can move in that direction. You just have to do it a little bit differently. Or in some cases, move to the places where it's going to allow you to do that.

   Where I left in out in Arizona, the time that I left, the building was shifting away from having that kind of autonomy to do the things like I was doing and I said, no, that's not really something that I want to be a part of anymore and made the shift to go out to Philadelphia.
3. It's a number of different things, but a part of it is just to realizing that it's not good what we're doing. More drill and kill, more low-level thinking, everybody knows it's not enough, but everybody feels like they need to follow rules or follow. It's not the case, and frankly some districts are doing some wholly uninspired things like scripting curriculums and day to day you've to be on lock-steps with everybody else, meaning none of that yields the kind of situation where you can get kids really prepared to do more than just take the test.

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L: Absolutely. I completed agree with everything you're saying and I so see it because when you said in your talk about how information is there at their fingertips and all we have to do is actually teach them to assess and ask the right questions and that is very true.

I suppose, much of the UK curriculum is very assessment driven, there are defined curriculum and there are targets. Every single child has targets to meet and that kind of throws out this fun of learning. Even though it's available, but I think, lots of teachers are under stress to tick the boxes, check off that these kids can do this and that. How would you propose, presumably this would change with higher level of thinking and reforming approaches to curriculum, how do you think we could start making the first step towards that? What have you thought about?

DL: Part of it is just everybody saying out loud that just getting them good test scores is not enough. There needs to an accepted moment like that's we're doing by doing scripted curriculum and so controlling the outcome that it's not enough.

So, the thing I keep on saying is if you teach to the test which is what they're driving system to do, you going to take the test. But if you teach past the test, you will both the test and this other set of skills which is critical thinking and analysis, synthesis and inquiry. You get all of that.

Now the thing that people get caught on is that, I use the analogy in US that when test scores come out and printed in newspapers, we look at them as baseball scores. It's like my team is doing better than your team. I can tell because the numbers are bigger. But

L: It's not suppose to a competition.

DL: This is just doesn't mean anything. This is an aggregate, average of all of these kids, you know, it's just doesn't mean anything in the way people assign the meaning, so part of it is you really need to start educating your parents about. I mean, one of the reasons

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that I was able to do what I was able to do for so long since I worked with the team, there were 4 of us on a team and it was inter-disciplinary.

We educated the parents very clearly about what was going on with their students and they loved it. I mean, I haven't been out there for five years but I could find five parents right now in Facebook that would attest to what that experience meant to their kids and how it set them up to be successful. Not because we did anything magical but we attended to more than just rote-memorization or testing skills, average mean scores or whatever is that you're trying to hit. When you go past it and go beyond the base, you actually pick up a lot more than you think.

Now, you have to have a certain will to trust children in this. Basically, we are trying to make both the curriculum teacher-proof and curriculum frankly student-proof. So absolutely everyone no matter what can get there, instead of leaving them with open-ended answers and interesting things, puzzling questions. They want things that have a very defined outcome, but it's not that. So that's my thoughts on that.

L: So do you do assessment at all and if you do, how do you do them?

DL: At the previous school that I was at, the Science Leadership Academy, we had tons of assessment. We still do tests and quizzes along the way, but not as the final assessment of whether or not a kid had learned. The final assessment is not what do you know, which you can quiz and test along the way but it's what can you do with what you know.

And that's the project they would create from their learning. So your final assessment of whether or not they have learned was whether or not they could create from that learning, synthesize all the information, think critically and then create from it.

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That's when you know whether a kid really has it because you can see whether or not they can demonstrate the evidence of learning in a way that's authentic and creative and student centered and student driven.

So there's project in each of their major classes that are graded on a shared rubric. Everybody uses the same categories, so when a kid goes to my class or English class, they know it's going to be the same type of assessment. They are going to be looking for the same kinds of things, whether or not what their progress looks like, what their application of knowledge looks like, how they show off the knowledge they did have, whether or not presented well, whether or not designed well.

Those were the 5 categories they were assessed on with every project, so piece of every project was whether or not they could also present it and design it which are huge skills coming out into the world. That is something people are forgetting about in the education space. They have often times student creating 35 of the same thing and calling it learning.

It's just again misses the capacity for what is possible. We've taken something and boiled it back down to least common denominator so everybody can get it rather than to say I don't know how to use this information presented, what do you think is the most effective way to tell the story, what are the resources that you believe should be put in here, rather than here's exactly what you need to do and if you replicate this in this way, you'll get an A.

And one of those paths yields a independent self-reflecting thoughtful being and the other one gets a kid who knows how to do what they are told. So that's one layer of assessment and then we also do standard space grading where we let kids know how they're doing toward meeting certain standards, now they're not like the list of 40 standards, it's like 5, that we have it in studies area. Twice a year they get feedback on those and they also receive narrative report cards twice a year from us, which are two

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to three paragraphs narrating how the student is doing and that information is communicated between their advisor and parents and students and have meetings twice a year to discuss their progress.

So our assessments are there and quite prolific actually, but do not yield

L: test scores and standards

DL: So, it's just a very different way of looking at and frankly a much more authentic way to the way they are going to be doing work. Which is to meet with the people that are in their support network to talk about their progress and to assess reviewing, to take a look at how they are doing towards meeting different standard goals they have within their jobs and also what are they producing and how is it measuring up.

This is it, this is an art, not that tricky but doesn't yield the type of baseball scores that people often like to see, because it often times seems too difficult to learning that way. People sometimes say, if you don't give them test, how do you know what they know? I ask them. I talk to children actually and have conversations with them. They're learning. It's just very frustrating sometimes when people believe that the only one to tell is if there is a score attached to it and it's incredibly misleading.

L: It is, particularly when you got people like PISA who go around aggregating worldwide scores and say a particular system is better than another one. I suppose, it doesn't help the likes of us who actually feel like they aren't, that's not the way the kids should be learning.

DL: And in the places that will do well in the tests, they never test. That's funny part, like proving the point.

L: It's funny because I know, Singapore does really well but it isn't the education system that's different, it's the parents expectations of their kids, they are so different.

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DL: They are so cultural.

L: Ya, lots of cultural influences. That aside, for a subject like math, say, how would you see an approach?

DL: It's like again what they do at SLA. They have very rigorous set of standards based quizzes. So, every time they learn a new set of skills, kids have to take a quiz and they can always retake them until they show mastery. They can constantly continue to loop back around and then on each new quiz given, includes material from previous so we are constantly looping around with their skills. And that is the piece of the course but an equal piece of the course is what can you do in an authentic way with that information. Now that you have these skills what kind of work can you do with that so they come up. Trying to remember some math projects

L: They do projects from math as well?

DL: Oh, ya. Every core class has a big project each quarter. They will do 20 math projects in the course of their career as a high school student at school, 4 year 60

L: Do you think the same approach would work for middle school and primary school kids?

DL: K1 to kindergarten through to 2nd grade are all basically doing very similar things because the kids are largely pre-literate so they are needing to do some more interesting things to get at how kids know what they know.

Middle school is where a lot of this. Most of people were at high school where I was, came out of high school. Kids at that are incredibly enthusiastic and energetic and you do not do something that interests them and allows them to have some choice and voice and their own curriculum, they check out. It's the years that you loose kids. At least in the US, it's where we loose them, they might make it through their 9th grade and they start dropping out. But if you can re-engage them in grade 6,7, 8 you end up with

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students that are much more resilient moving at high school years because they have set of learning skills not just testing skills, and that's the overly important thing.

We send kids out that have the capacity to problem solve, think critically, deal with difficult deadlines, manage challenging set of circumstances, collaborate with other people that are successful, those types of things that you send kids out with are actually that which makes some more successful. In Middle grade years, if you can do that, it will make them more resilient for more rigorous high school. If you can keep that going in the High school, then makes them totally ready to shred College. Our students show off like no, problem; I got this. I often think if we can get a full system K-12 that ran like this, what would be if we started this in kindergarten and just kept it rolling through 12th grade, what would the potential be, how ?

L: How different would they be?

DL: Yeah, we kind of joked in between 9th and 12th grade, we see the massive shifts and changes in kids, ability to speak well, not like speak properly but really explain their learning, deeply understand their own process, present information in a way that others can understand it, work well with other people, what would you get if not just 4 years of this, but if you did a full K-12 experience. But what would that look like and what would those kids be capable of.

L: So you said you've working with some other districts, people, how have they taken on board what you've been telling them.

DL: So, there's 2 very different projects. 1: We have full autonomy to do whatever we want to and replicate exactly what we're doing only better because we learned so many things in the second school. Then I have been working with a more traditional K-8 school that had massive trouble. It's just struggled in about every way with behavior, discipline, attendance, test scores, learning in general, forget the test scores, just straight up learning process as a child, so they got put in what the District calls Promise

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Academy status, which allows you to restructure your entire system. Teachers have to re-apply for their jobs and they were able to hire other teachers to take open positions to try to how to reintegrate the teaching force.

Then the part that I am working on is the section of 6th, 7th and 8th grade really into it's own Middle Grades' academy within the building, and trying to create Middle Grades' culture. We're able to do some really interesting things with their schedule to get them very small classes.

We instituted common prep hours so that they would have some time to be together as team, implement what's called an enrichment hours so they could build in. these are the kids that are going home and doing homework, there are kids that are watching younger siblings, have part of duties in their families and aren't getting their homework done for a number of very good reasons. So, we built an hour back in the beginning of the day, 1st hour of the day for the teachers is their prep hour, and for kids it's their elective classes, 2nd hour for everybody is this enrichment hour where they can work on skills that sets where they can work on the soft-skills of organization, where they can get their homework done with some assistance and can go into their rest of the day ready to go, prepared for what's coming.

Things like that have structurally given us a lot of autonomy to do, working on middle grades method that are more engaging for kids and kind of what are the tools of the trade that yield more thoughtful and I don't mean kind, I mean like full of thought, kind of kids that are interested in learning ideas and what that is.

So, it's going to be a year-long process, but in the beginning start of it, you know about a month in school, a lot of it was structural changes and setting up the system so that people are prepared for the job to do the job, for kids side, what needed to happen and then what from the teachers side needed to happen and how does the administration support that throughout the year.

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So we are giving that rolling, I will do most of that digitally over the course of year. We going to set up a series of courses for middle graders to talk about, how things are going in the class, what they are seeing and set them up in a reflective process of learning as well.

District is fine with all that because you're really at the fringes of the thing. SLA, the school I was at is successful. So one more of those more successful stuff. They are finally letting us do that. And on the other hand, nothing has worked in school for very long time. Again, they are very tolerant of differences there because something needs to give and they are willing to give some latitude to see it happen.

The problems occur in the middle where they are doing slightly better than bottom and not as good as top. That is where strangle hold on creativity really is finding it hard from the District. We are hoping if we push from the fringes that there can be some that starts to trickle in and if it does work with the kids that are struggling the most than the systems are. And it does work with the kids who aren't struggling, why wouldn't it work for everybody else too. We're trying but it's definitely an uphill battle for sure.

L: You mentioned changing class sizes, how important is that in your experience?

DL: The Promise Academy is in weird designation inside the district, nobody else gets this. But, they got a lot of teachers assigned to them, so we were able to in that situation get English and math classes between 12-18. That's unheard of in all of Philadelphia, nobody else has class sizes, everybody else has class sizes of 30 and above including SLA.

They assign the people so we said alright, what's the most effective use of this and most of the research says if you can get class sizes under 15, then it's an effective way to do it. They also want to do series intervention with a lot of middle grade students that have serious deficits in both reading and math. Not just the level of better test scores, they

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are missing basic skills of reading math that are going to haunt them prolifically throughout their lives if we don't get a handle on it.

We figure that by lessening the no. of students, each teacher to have contacts with, science and social studies teacher, have about 105 students, each of the math and English teachers have above 52 total. The total no. of students of less so that they can focus more intensely on those students to try to reduce targeted intervention with them to get past some of the hurdles they have had for learning, reading and math along the way. But it's not. What will be interesting is you can show change with that but the minute they start doing better they'll probably pull back the extra teachers and stop funding extra teachers. For now we have it and we going to make full use of it to the best of our abilities and when it goes away, we'll have to figure something else out.

L: In your approach to teaching, technology obviously plays a very big role. Have you ever come across schools that don't have capacity to enable all kids to have access and what would you do in the case like that?

DL: You can still do, when I was in Arizona, I did project based learning with no computers. A very limited computer access, we just had a computer lab, so it wasn't like we had one-to-one and you can still do the stuff. It looks different.

Rather than have all the kids look things up on computer sites, I 'd wheel in every book that library had on that particular set of topics and they would sit up there as well. So, there's other ways to accomplish it, but the biggest thing to consider is how you're spending the money you have.

Frankly, too much money is spent on textbooks, a lot less needs to be spent on textbooks. The devices like chrome books are so affordable at this time that purchasing a chrome book for $300 is cheaper over 4 years that purchasing those individuals textbooks.

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We taught without textbooks completely at SLA. It can be done. There is eons of information out there to be had for free and can be curated in a way that can kick off the learning for kids. But then the skill becomes not handing the kid a textbook but rather allowing them and helping them understand how to amass information from trusted sources in a way that they can then use that information.

All of that is possible in every system and probably throughout UK and US if they just chose to spend their money differently.

A one-to-one program isn't that expensive at this point of time if you go to lower cost Chromebook version of things. The BIG piece a lot of schools forget in this equation is that you need to have robust wireless situation, ready to go and infrastructure issues.

Some places try to go one-to-one without dealing with the infrastructure issues and they are like it's not working. That's because you have essentially dropped off machines that cannot connect to the internet. So if you set out today on a 3-year plan, you could be one-to-one in 3 years and it's not a money issue.

It isn't at all. It's the decision about how you reallocate resources every single school in UK and US, could go one-to-one if they chose to and reallocate the resources in the way it's supportive.

It's a matter of thinking differently about how you purchase content. It's a choice. I don't know if you follow it all what Los Angeles did, they did it wrong. Did you see what LA did?

L: Yeah, I heard

DL: They bought everybody iPads and they just kind of went, now everything will be better. But was very not student friendly and then they start hacking them.

L: I suppose it's the fear that they are not trusting that kids will learn.

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DL: Here's the thing. They are going to anyway, whether or not they use distinct device to do it or not. And frankly when kid walks back into their house with technology, that becomes a parent issue for running a network or monitoring their student use or assisting the student use or any of those things.

If a parent doesn't feel super comfortable with that then technology needs to stay in a common space where everybody can see them using it and goes into the parents room at night.

We got to be little bit understanding of when material goes from school to home, when it walks in the door its definitely parents who get to say this is appropriate, this is inappropriate just like anything else that happens in your home. That's another thing.

Yes, you need to trust kids. Yes, there's certain things that need to go out but you also need to understand that school isn't the great overlord that has to control everything 24 hours a day with that kid with that piece of technology. It's a lot about the parents.

And what we see out of kids is that in the freshman year they go through this, when they get their 'shiny'. We call it the 'Shiny', shiny new computer. They get very sparkly and dazzled by the shiny. And then by sophomore year, it's like interesting. The junior work is super heavy for work but by their senior year at lunch, none of the kids have their computers out at lunch. They get 65 minutes for lunch at school, they are playing cards, puzzles, hanging out with their friends like they return to a normal thing.

So when they are headed up to college, they already gone through the ark of I am going to figure out what this technology thing is. They go to college and look at the other kids and they are like seriously...

L: Been there done that

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DL: ...They do it in a supportive setting with parents, with teachers rather than trying to figure out when they are at college, when they are also making horrible decisions both in other 17 ways because they are on their own for the first time.

We really feel like bring the computers in as a tool for learning in the 9th grade, working through the art of it all. There's a value-add there that you cannot get it in any other way that we see because of what it enables, student driven, inquiry, it allows kids to create in a way that we can't do the same in another way.

Inquiry works best when they have access to the world's idea and then you let them sort it out. It's very difficult to that in any other way. You can pull it off but it isn't as easy and as smooth and frankly, there's no reason not to unless your main concern of school is control.

And if that is what you think your system is about completely, it's about control, then there's other things going on. But ours is about inquiry and creation and student empowerment. We get them until they are 18 and there got about 60 years to run with that. We're not setting them up to have successful 60 years if all they leave with is information and test taking questions.

L: Very true. I think I have run through my list of questions. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

DL: No, nothing that I can think of. Other than, teaching is, in my mind, the great puzzle.

It's a constant challenge, fascinating to try to figure out what helps one kid learn something one way and another kid another way, really trying to craft just enough of the learning to get them to the place where they are curious but not so much that they feel that they are absent from the process.

That is the balancing act of creating learning opportunities for kids is how little can I provide them that will start the momentum of learning but not so much that they feel

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like that it's all been done for them and therefore they are no longer part of the process. That's what that really drives this whole train of thinking about how we create learning opportunities for kids.

L: I have come towards the ideas that teaching with technology these days isn't really about teaching, it's more about facilitating learning, facilitating the kids, building up exactly like you described, skills and how they need to be able to evaluate information to select, search, do all the things that people do with technology these days.

DL: Agreed

L: Absolutely. Thank you very much for your time. It's brilliant. I am sure there will be lots of input in this because it's such a different approach.

DL: My pleasure. Always just trying to move the needle a little bit towards the things that are little more authentic and less numbers driven.

L: That's a big ask for lot of people

DL: It is. It is necessary. I often use the analogy that it's like exercise. People expect, when people do test scores, they want to see a score, they want to see growth. It's like going to a gym for a week and expecting a six pack abs.

If you haven't been learning in a more authentic way, it's very similar to getting off the couch when you haven't been exercising. The first month or two feels horrible, like it's just wrong that you are moving that way. It feels the same way with learning. Some people try to move down this path and they are like, it doesn't work, I tried it for a week, it doesn't work. It's a lot like exercise, the rewards don't come quickly but it's more about lifelong commitment to way of being and then, when you're first starting out, it feels bad and it feels messy, you are sure that something is wrong but if you push through that and commit to it, you are on a different path.

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That's the best analogy that I know. It's easier to sit on the couch. But it isn't going to get you anywhere.

L: Fruitful thought.

L: Thank you for your time.

DL: Thank you. No worries.

We hope you enjoyed this interview.

The Video and Audio of this Interview is available at http://www.colourmylearning.com/2014/04/the-core-of-all-learning-an-interview-with-diana-laufenberg/

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