

Deeper Learning in Christian Schools: Playing our Part in God's Story

People of God's story engaged in real work that forms self and shapes the world

What does it mean to approach learning as participation in "God's Story?" Learning in God's story is not primarily about content but about *experience*. Our participation is not only about what we think but also about our deepest hopes for ourselves and the world in light of God's story.

Our role in God's Story is discovered by looking inward, realizing who we are as image bearers, and looking outward, as we explore our world and see where God is working in it. Deeper learning in Christian education provides a way to learn content and skills, and to develop the character of Christ through aligning the unique gifts of the learner with the deep needs of the world.

So, for students and educators, 'Deeper Learning' invites us to become engaged in God's story, equips us to play our unique role, and empowers us to apply our knowledge and skills to produce real work that meets real needs for real people.

Encapsulated in our bolded definition, the following three foundations for designing Deeper Learning experiences for our students are expanded upon and explored throughout this document:

- A celebration of the learner: what it means to be created in God's image.
People of God's Story...
- A mindfulness towards learning design: how curriculum, instruction and assessment inspire inward and outward engagement.
...engaged in real work...
- A responsiveness to culture: how to embody our mission in every aspect of school life and how to live it out in God's world.
...that forms self and shapes the world.

Who are the Learners?

People of God's story...

*"For we are **God's handiwork**, created in Christ Jesus to do **good works**, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph. 2:10).*

Deeper learning helps all learners find their purpose within God's unfolding story: a story of intimacy, rebellion and brokenness, and an invitation from the cross to participate with the Trinity in restoring a fallen world. Deeper learning in Christian schools recognizes that the learner does not learn for advancement of self, but as a faithful response to co-create in establishing the kingdom of heaven - here and now.

All members of the community in a deeper learning Christian school are invited to see their identity as God's beautiful handiwork, made in his likeness. As image-bearers of God we are:

1. **Created to worship** – We are made to worship God, to find joy, meaning, faith, peace and love in relationship with the Trinity. Learning deepens when the process, the content and the application of all we learn is guided by our call to worship in spirit and truth.
2. **Created to connect** – We are designed for connection to God and others, reflecting the unity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Learning deepens when it promotes relationships, is dependent on collaboration, and connects our personal stories with the story of God's redemption.
3. **Created to create** – God's first role was Creator. Made in His image, we are made to create. Learning deepens when students are asked to apply knowledge and skills to create works of beauty, authenticity and service.
4. **Created to engage** – We are designed to put the love God has "shed abroad in our hearts" into action. Learning deepens when we are engaged in school, in our communities and in caring for God's creation..

Any Christian school that pursues deeper learning will have these image bearing characteristics at the foundation of their design, and maximize every opportunity for everyone in the community to manifest them.

What is the process of learning?

...Engaged in real work...

What if (Christian) education was primarily concerned with shaping our hopes and passions – our visions of the 'good life' – and not merely about the dissemination of data and information as inputs to our thinking? What if the primary work of (Christian) education was the transforming of our imagination rather than the saturation of our intellect? James K.A. Smith

The process of learning is rooted in finding our role in God's Story. In schools, our vehicles for exploring God's story and our role in it are:

- **Curriculum:** *the content of what we teach.*
Learning deepens when students discover the Creator's truth present in reality, in God's creation. Learning experiences are designed to provoke complex thinking, inspire beautiful work and form students into the character of Christ.
- **Instructional Practices:** *how we design and organize learning experiences.*
Learning deepens when students are engaged as active participants, having rigorous conversations, making creative connections, constructing meaning together in accord with God's word.

- **Assessment:** *what evidence of learning we choose to gather and how we gather it.*
Learning deepens when students are challenged to assume responsibility for their own learning. They work as if for God, and not for grades. Regular opportunities for reflection on work and character deepen our understanding of ourselves, our need for others and for God's grace.
- **Culture:** *how we establish our values and practice them together in community.*
Learning deepens when the mission of the school is reflected in every aspect of school life. Practices are designed to continually focus and remind everyone in the community of the purpose of our being together: to love the Lord with all our hearts and to love our neighbor as ourselves. The classroom learning environment - the relationships, the arrangement of space, the celebration of student work - reflects this purpose.

These domains intersect in schools as we seek to make connections between our stories and the stories of others, always connecting back to our shared story of God's redemption. Educators intentionally implement strategies that both challenge and support learners. They employ educational strategies that respect learners as image bearers, foster personal reflection, promote collaboration, and empower them to be the leaders of their own learning, resulting in a deeper relationship with God and others.

Any Christian school that pursues deeper learning will consider each learning experience an exploration of a small narrative chapter in the cosmic story. Educators design curriculum in which students not only learn about the stories of the world, they also serve as agents of change in response to what they learn, engaging in real work, thinking critically and creatively about how to work with God to restore the fallen brokenness of the world.

What is learning for?

...That forms self and shapes the world

I can only answer the question "What am I to do?" if I can answer the prior question, "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?" Alasdair MacIntyre

To practice deeper learning in Christian schools is to recognize the reciprocal process of spiritual development and active engagement in the world. Deeper learning requires the kind of work that both forms the character of the learner and shapes the world. This recognition gives direction for the type of beautiful work - qualities of purpose, complexity, craftsmanship and authenticity - that teachers are to design and students are to create.

Christian schools practicing deeper learning engage their larger cultural contexts, locally and globally, and view learning as something to be shared and lived out, rather than as a personal and private endeavor. Life experiences that happen both within school and beyond it are incorporated into ongoing learning. Deeper learners apply their knowledge and skills to produce beautiful work that solves real problems. They share it with an authentic

audience who can be blessed and shaped by it. In this way, learning experiences that involve real and beautiful work draw the connection between learning and living.

And, as learners form habits that connect learning to living, these outward practices are in turn forming the learner. Learning that draws the learner beyond self, deepens self. As students apply their learning to renew school, community and the natural world, an internal renewal and character development mirrors this external 'making of all things new again.'

Any Christian school that pursues deeper learning will design learning that facilitates both inward and outward renewal as students explore their role in God's story.

So what? Now what?

It is the hope that the ideas contained in this document serves as an invitation for Christian school educators to consider the type of learning shared above. It is the hope that this definition of Deeper Learning in Christian Schools, **People of God's story engaged in real work that forms self and shapes the world**, catalyzes Christian schools to reflect on their teaching practices to ensure they are aligned with their primary purpose of inviting, nurturing and empowering students and teachers to play their part within God's unfolding story of redemption.

Acknowledgements:

The authors of this document wish to note that the ideas in this document arise out of a rich tradition of Christian educational thought, and offer appreciation to the organizations that support them to do this work.

Dan Beerens: DB Consulting, Center for the Advancement of Christian Education (CACE)

Justin Cook: Ontario Alliance of Christian Schools (OACS)

Darryl DeBoer: Surrey Christian Schools, Teaching for Transformation (TfT), CACE

Danae LeMoine: Doulos Discovery School

Steven Levy: CACE, InspirED, EL Education