# Moving Beyond Knowledge: 4 Learning Outcomes that Lead to Fulfilling Lives

Voices From the Field |  22 August 2019

> *The system isn't going to change until we can prove not only that [other outcomes beyond knowledge] can be measured but also that measuring and improving upon each outcome will improve the lives of every child in every community.*

**JOANNE MCEACHEN AND MATTHEW KANE**
**LEADERS AT THE LEARNER FIRST**

*Joanne McEachen and Matthew Kane are learner-centered leaders at The Learner First—an organization that is "putting the learner first by focusing all activity within our schools and school systems on the development of deeper learning outcomes: self-understanding, competency, knowledge, and connection." In the second of a two-part series, McEachen and Kane highlight how we can measure the four deeper learning outcomes, so we can move beyond seeing knowledge acquisition as the only indicator of success.*

The measurement of deeper learning outcomes—self-understanding, competency, knowledge, and connection—places learners at the center of all education-system activity. By focusing on each of the four outcomes equally, every action we take will be directed toward the development of what uniquely and universally matters for each child.

Measurement has always been one of the most significant barriers to the implementation of deeper learning. As the old adage goes, "If you can't measure it, you can't improve it." When the conventional system looks at the four deeper learning outcomes, they see knowledge as the only quantifiable outcome. The system isn't going to change until we can prove not only that the other three can be measured but also that measuring and improving upon each outcome will improve the lives of every child in every community.

Before we dive any further, let's get clear about what we mean by "measurement" and how it relates to "assessment." **Measurement** provides an overall understanding of learning or development in relation to intended outcomes. It's an informed synthesis of available evidence. **Assessment** provides individual points of evidence underlying measurement decisions (Measuring Human Return: Understand and Assess What Really Matters for Deeper Learning, McEachen and Kane, 2018).

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To illustrate their relationship with a conventional, knowledge-based example, let's say we're working through a unit on the 50 states. We may only need a single assessment (say, a map) to evidence students' knowledge of the 50 states' locations. But, if we wanted to understand students' knowledge of the states more broadly (e.g. population, landmarks, history, etc.), we could use a range of individual assessments that, taken together, allow us to measure students' levels of learning. Here's a helpful way to think about it: when we gather information, we assess—when we synthesize information, we measure.

### *Knowledge alone is not fulfillment.*

**Measurement matters for two main reasons**: (1) it's the only way to know whether what we're doing is working; and (2) it directs the main educational practices—teaching, learning, and support. We won't know whether a child has learned the location of all 50 states until they have the opportunity to fill in or point them out on a map. We have to provide students with opportunities to evidence their learning, which in turn provides evidence of our success as educators.

Of course, if students' success is solely dependent on their knowledge of the 50 states, that's what we're going to help them learn. And, it's what we'll be supported to teach through the actions and decisions of school leaders and the district office. In fact, that's exactly how curricula is designed within a system that solely focuses on knowledge acquisition as the metric for success. Why is that system problematic? **Because knowledge alone is not fulfillment.**

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For learners to get what they need, education systems need to support their teachers to focus on all of the outcomes that matter. To fully achieve that focus, they have to be able to measure each outcome. And, while this brings forth the objection that knowledge is easier to measure than the others, we'd argue that stems from familiarity—not capability. When measuring deeper learning outcomes, it's simply a matter of knowing what we're looking for. Collectively, we have the knowledge we need to bring these outcomes to the fore.

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# Learning Progressions

We can tell to what extent our students know the 50 states' locations because we know the 50 states' locations. It follows, then, that we can tell to what extent our students have developed any outcome as long as we've defined varying levels of success. Luckily, those definitions are right at our fingertips.

When The Learner First introduces outcomes like connection and self-understanding to teachers, principals, young learners, and other education partners, we like to have people share what the outcomes mean to them. Individually, thanks to our lived experiences, we discover how much we already know about connection and self-understanding. And, when we share our thoughts with our fellow community members, we arrive at a shared understanding of what it means to achieve each outcome. Here, we've arrived at the very foundation of measurement—a shared understanding of success.

Through our work developing the deeper learning outcomes across diverse educational contexts, arriving at shared understandings has led to the identification and description of each outcome's high-level dimensions. This has ultimately led to the creation of Learning Progressions—learning continuums that measure students' development of self-understanding, connection, and competency.

Students' movement along the continuum reflects their levels of development across varying points in time, relative to the outcomes' dimensions. In Part I of this two-part series, we identified the dimensions of connection—interpersonal, environmental, conceptual, and universal. Those very dimensions and their accompanying descriptions comprise The Learner First's Connection Progression.

The progression's five-point scale (from Substantially off Track to Geared for Success) is designed to provide the precision that's needed to help students move along the continuum, while the descriptions within each progression are necessarily broad—allowing teachers to match widely varying sources of evidence (assessments) to each description of success. The progressions, like deeper learning, are truly universal.

Consider the Connection Progression's environmental dimension (connecting with natural and built environments) specifically in light of our daily use of digital spaces. The Substantially off Track description notes a destructive or negative impact in digital environments (among others); a failure to respect or benefit those environments; and the state of feeling unsafe, unwelcome, or antagonistic in digital spaces.

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This describes many people's (regardless of age) actions, behaviors, and feelings online. What matters, then, is supporting teachers first to recognize where students are and then to move them along the continuum. How can learners reach the point where they respect and feel deeply connected to digital spaces and the people within them? How can they actively make their environments safer and more welcoming than when they first arrived? The answers to these questions can be found through a purposeful approach to connection in schools, which requires a deeper approach to assessment.

## Assessment for Deeper Learning

When The Learner First collects Learning Progression data, we're always interested in sources of evidence. Rather than making gut decisions, we need to ask: what assessment evidence underlies our students' progress?

Here's an abbreviated list of assessments that students have used to demonstrate deeper learning:

| ABBREVIATED LIST OF ASSESSMENTS | | |
|---|---|---|
| Blog post | Interview | Reflection |
| Conversation | Journal Entry | Project |
| Drawing | Map (conceptual, geographical, etc.) | Self-Assessment |
| Essay | Movie making | Storytelling |
| Exhibition | Observation | Test |
| Experiment | Oral / Written Presentation | Website Development |
| Game | Peer-Assessment | Worksheet |
| Graphic Organizer (e.g., Venn diagram) | Play | Writing Piece (persuasive, creative, procedural, etc.) |

Three key points of learning can be gathered from the list of assessments above:

1. These assessments are familiar. Odds are you've seen many of these assessments used on a regular basis to meet conventional standards. Now, we can consider how they can be used to meet deeper learning outcomes.
2. They're easily implemented. Virtually all of these assessments can be incorporated into the day-to-day teaching and learning process.
3. They're assessments. It's a point worth stressing: when measuring all of the outcomes that matter, every engagement with students—from tests and presentations to conversations and observations—is an opportunity to gather assessment evidence.

Continuing with our example, to measure a student's environmental connection we can't simply refer to, for example, a single interaction with a classmate online. As with measuring students' broader knowledge of the 50 states, we would need to synthesize a wide range of assessment evidence collected over time to answer various questions: How does the learner view digital spaces? How does the learner behave in those spaces? For what purpose(s) does the learner use digital platforms, and to what effect?

Answering these questions, and measuring each of the deeper learning outcomes, calls for **authentic mixed-method assessment (AMMA)**—the process of gathering the full range of evidence, both qualitative and quantitative, required to arrive at an informed measurement decision.

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If you went to your doctor for a routine checkup and were clocked at an unusually high heart rate, your doctor wouldn't rush you off for emergency heart surgery. She would ask you questions about how you're feeling and what you'd just been doing—and possibly discover you'd sprinted up the stairs to make your appointment on time. No one, single assessment can paint a full picture of learning. It's important to draw from all the evidence that's available and to help our students evidence their learning in a variety of ways.

Think of deeper learning as looking for more. In the unit on US geography, instead of looking only for factual or conceptual understandings of the states, we can think about using the Learning Progressions to help come up with assessments that develop students' self-understanding, competency, and connection. What do you like or dislike about your home state or others; what states have you lived in; what's your place in the United States? Can you collaborate with your classmates, parents, and community members to learn about US or state geography; can you communicate what you learn with others in creative ways? Do you feel a connection with your state or your country; how do people play into your sense of connection; what are some challenges people face in different geographical areas? How can you contribute to your state or your country?

The answers inform the use of the Learning Progressions, and they all can be found in deeper learning experiences.

## Deeper Learning Experiences

A deeper learning experience is any learning experience that assesses and develops students' deeper learning outcomes. It's likely that knowledge will be the focal point for most experiences given the framework of conventional curricula. But, what if we looked beyond the conventional curricula and searched for how the experience can help answer questions about students' self-understanding, connection, and competency as well?

Looking again to the environmental dimension of the Connection Progression, let's shift our focus from digital to natural environments. The dimension's descriptions include interest in and respect for natural environments; understanding of environments from a range of perspectives; and the impact on environments as a result of learners' actions. An example from Burlington-Edison School District (BESD) in Washington state shows how the language of the progressions comes alive in deeper learning experiences.

BESD's Lucille Umbarger Elementary School answered the call for deeper learning experiences with a third-grade outdoor learning program called From Summit to Sea. The program was designed to connect classroom learning with their community's natural environments and also to connect students to those environments and their inhabitants. While learning about Native American history, third-graders visited Washington's Deception Pass State Park, where they teamed up with researchers to explore a forest and a beach,

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interact with wildlife, and learn the history and modern-day significance of the area's salmon. Throughout the unit, students continued their learning by testing water in a local river, taking action to rehabilitate the shoreline, creating digital slideshows to share their learning about the life cycle of salmon, and hatching salmon in tanks in school hallways— eventually releasing them into the river.

## *Students are ready to change the world now. All they need are opportunities to prove it.*

Think about all the opportunities these experiences provide for students to develop and evidence environmental connection—not to mention competency, self-understanding, and knowledge spanning a diversity of content areas.

BESD's desire to take deeper learning out of the classroom inspired the idea of "field experiences" (as opposed to field trips), which take the focus off the trip itself and place it instead on the learning experience. The first order of business is to determine what students need to learn across each outcome at any given time. After that, the question becomes how they'll learn it, and where—either in the classroom or out in the wider community.

Elsewhere in BESD, with an eye toward developing self-understanding, fifth-grade students at Bay View Elementary wanted to learn more about their heritage and family histories. Their research included interviews of parents and other family members, and it culminated in a family "Heritage Night" where they displayed posters, brought in cultural foods and clothing, and shared about their identities with others.

In kindergarten, a student-hosted "Me Museum" gave students a chance to share about themselves, learn about their classmates, and develop a deeper understanding of the beautiful similarities and differences present among their classmates.
For students at Burlington-Edison High School, yearly in-school workshops hosted by community volunteers help them understand how what they're learning in school can transfer into a work setting.

And, back at Lucille Umbarger, fourth-grade students determined which form of energy they were most interested in and teamed up to create chapters in a digital Forms of Energy Textbook, to be used by fourth-grade classes for years to come.

Successful implementation of deeper learning depends on the process of measurement. It embeds deeper learning in the culture of our schools, enhances what we're already doing, and enables what we've always wanted to do for our students.
As we set off on or continue our deeper learning journey, let's celebrate our students every step of the way—who they are, what they know and can do, their connections with others, and all that they do to contribute to the world.

Students are ready to change the world now. All they need are opportunities to prove it.

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Joanne has been a teacher, principal, and education system leader, and she understands the complexity of teaching and leading in a school system. Drawing from rich and varied experiences at all levels of educational systems, and from a focus on students' and teachers' sense of wellbeing, connection, and self-understanding, Joanne offers tools, processes, and expertise that enable anyone learning and working in a school system to unlock their greatest contributions to humanity.

**Matthew  Kane** is the Director of Research and Writing at The Learner First, where he focuses on the role and experiences of school systems in developing the learning outcomes that contribute to lifelong success, connect us with one another, and make a difference in our communities. He has partnered with diverse schools and school systems globally to develop deeper learning tools, language, and practices, and he works as a senior project manager with the New Pedagogies for Deep Learning (NPDL) global partnership.

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