

Book Review of *The Depth Advantage Deeper Learning in a Distracted World*

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Abstract: This book review examines the book "The Depth Advantage: Deeper Learning in a Distracted World" written by Dr. John Spencer. This book explores an overall approach to teaching pedagogy at all levels of education that will enable students to engage in deeper learning through its eight interconnected, core competencies.

Keywords: Book review, pedagogy, competencies, deeper learning

The book *The Depth Advantage Deeper Learning in a Distracted World* by Dr. John Spencer aims to equip educators with a pedagogy of teaching, bridging research and practical learning strategies that incorporate eight core competencies necessary to foster deeper learning in classrooms: focus, mastery, problem-solving, curiosity, self-direction, resilience, collaboration, and communication. The author, a former middle school teacher and current college professor, argues that depth of learning in schools today requires more than just managing distractions such as cellphones and social media; it also involves fostering deeper thinking and a more comprehensive understanding of the content presented daily by teachers. Dr. John Spencer emphasizes that this deeper learning enables students to slow down and minimize distractions. To do this, educators and administrators can provide guidance to help students strengthen and apply the eight competencies that will allow them to thrive in multiple real-world problems and achieve deeper learning with their time engaged in the classroom context. The book focuses on a pedagogical model with practical methods for teachers to use in classrooms.

Book Structure and Content

The book's structure is well-organized and easy to follow. The ten chapters provide readers with a well-defined framework to help educators dive deep into areas of growth for their students and themselves. Each chapter begins with a story example drawn from the author's experiences, followed by an overview of the specific challenges related to that competency. This is then supplemented by research, sketches, classroom strategies, reflection questions, and tools for teachers to use immediately. The chapters logically build the eight competencies, progressing from internal habits to interpersonal skills, allowing readers to approach the book as a whole or select a chapter to explore in more detail. It is important to approach the book in its entirety, as this creates a more holistic view of the eight competencies. The competencies are interconnected, providing an overall approach for developing a mindset and skills that support student growth in today's classrooms.

The first chapter provides a strong foundation for understanding depth and distraction. Filled with creative visual representations, the book maintains a human-centred tone, guiding the reader and creating clarity on how the following nine chapters are structured. The author breaks down the book into digestible information for readers to understand the conceptual grounding of his research, while providing practitioners a guide to deeper learning in the classroom. The eight core competencies — focus, mastery, problem-solving, curiosity, self-direction, resilience, collaboration, and communication — are all connected to his sketches, making the book feel personal and engaging. The author's passion is evident in the work presented on the pages and grips the reader, compelling them to continue through the chapters. Embracing these eight competencies as a school is a start to supporting teachers, as they are the ones who provide different learning experiences for their students.

A bonus that the author has included in chapters 2-9 is personal reflection questions for educators to engage with, asking thought-provoking questions for any reader to consider as they interact with students each day. There is also access to a plethora of free tools that can be downloaded via Google Drive in connection with each of the eight competencies, supporting the development and implementation. For example, the tools you find in chapter 6 on empowering your students include a slide deck with John's history in connection to empowerment, followed by

ideas to support your students. You also find a student empowerment planner with guiding questions, along with an overview of the student self-direction progression map to support teacher planning.

Chapter 10 emphasizes the importance of a shift in teaching, whether big or small, to foster deeper learning through the eight competencies. This shift will support students who are growing up in a digital world, where they constantly feel anxious and overwhelmed by the constant access to information. As Haidt (2024) points out, “Anxiety and its associated disorders seem to be the defining mental illnesses of young people today” (p. 27). Spencer acknowledges this reality, emphasizing the benefits of the eight competencies and how they complement one another and evolve as students age. The author makes it clear that we cannot ignore the challenges of the digital age with this generation of learners, leaving it to us as teachers to help meet students where they are and encompass the eight competencies to help them work through the mistakes, try again, to explore new things, feel the success of hard work, and leaving them with tools to “navigate that world with confidence, compassion, and courage” (Spencer, 2025, p. 271).

Analysis and Critiques

The primary goal of this text seeks to support teachers in developing methods of teaching with the suggested overall approach of the eight core competencies. These goals are to support students' growth, shifting the focus for teachers from “what we are preparing them for to who we are empowering them to be” (Spencer, 2025, p. 25). Applying these eight competencies to everyday teaching does not have to radically change all aspects of teachers' daily practices with students. Still, it explains how small shifts in these practices will help classrooms to align with the broader teaching context seen today, “creating opportunities for students to discover their own sense of purpose,” connected to larger real-world contexts where we want to encourage students “collaborating to build capacities to improve the world” (UNESCO, 2021, p. 50).

The authors' emphasis on deeper learning to support student growth aligns with the broader educational perspectives of today, creating spaces where students are successful when provided with the right tools and resources. Mackenzie (2018) states, “Our learners not only deserve the opportunity to shape their learning pathways, but they can be incredibly successful when given the understanding, skills, and mindset to do so” (p. 178). Implementing the eight competencies as a whole school encourages educators to support students' learning and agency, seeing themselves as capable of navigating the complexity of a topic, rather than merely absorbing provided information.

The author's visual representation of what we are preparing students for in today's educational landscape shows and explains that what was once taught in schools has shifted to a more complex way of being. The author explains that the traditional education model was to attend school, work hard, get into college, graduate, and then climb the corporate ladder. This is not the case anymore. Through explanations supported by visual representations, the author clearly explains and visually represents that the corporate ladder has now become a complex maze in which we as educators need to give our students the proper tools to help them navigate (Spencer, 2025, pp. 23-24). The visual of the ladder and the maze makes it clear that educators need to adopt a deeper learning approach to build students' capacities, habits, mindsets, and skills, enabling them to thrive in this increasingly challenging world.

One challenge of this shift in the overall approach to student learning is that it may be difficult for teachers who have generally been trained in a more traditional model of teaching to incorporate these competencies individually. It would be important for the entire school staff to engage in professional learning opportunities and use similar language within the school to create a community of deeper thinkers. When a whole school approach is not implemented, the results of growth within classroom spaces vary depending on the teacher they have that year. Professional development for teachers generally relies on what administrators and school leadership teams decide are essential for that school year, which may not always incorporate different approaches to teaching in classrooms. Educators require ongoing, high-quality professional development to effectively manage and guide students' deeper thinking, enabling the consistent use of the same language in classrooms across grades. This is crucial for developing the skills associated with the eight competencies.

Another challenge to this approach is the difference between traditional assessments, which are generally numerical and standardized, and assessing deeper learning skills, such as critical thinking and collaboration. The traditional assessment approach provides a numerical score that “incentivize the wrong stuff: the product over the process” (Blum, 2020, p. 28) while deeper learning involves “building learning that lasts” (Spencer, 2025, p. 280). Traditional assessment models are deeply rooted in school cultures. Implementing deeper learning in all classrooms would require a systemic and structural shift to support educators as they help students develop and strengthen the eight competencies. Dr. John Spencer has included information at the end of chapter 10 to support readers with assessment practices for deeper learning. It is important to learn how to assess deeper learning because the overall approach prioritizes the process over the product, supporting students in taking ownership of their learning, reflecting on their growth and revisiting work they have previously completed to help them understand what to do differently (Spencer, 2025, p. 276).

Final Thoughts

Overall, *The Depth Advantage Deeper Learning in a Distracted World* is a vital, evidence-based resource that provides an overall approach, connecting research and practice to explain the complexities of supporting student learning today. This book covers the eight competencies, guiding educators and administrators to reflect and integrate these skills while maintaining academic rigour. The author's explanations and tools make it accessible for busy educators. It is essential for anyone dedicated to supporting educators and students through classroom learning and reflections on best practices.

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