



# Deep approaches to learning: A content-based, interdisciplinary workshop combining history and political science

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## Reference Data:

Bradley, A. (2007). Deep approaches to learning: A content-based, interdisciplinary workshop combining history and political science. In K. Bradford-Watts (Ed.), *JALT2006 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

Deep approaches (to learning) are related to higher quality outcomes and better grades. They are also more enjoyable. Surface approaches are dissatisfying and they are associated with poorer outcomes (Ramsden, 2003, p. 53). The point is clear, facts are dust unless they lead to understanding: but theories are fantasy unless they remain awake to the facts. The implications for faculty are also clear: teach towards understanding, not grades (Rehm, 1995). With a view to facilitating a deep approach to learning content, the presenter orchestrated an interactive interdisciplinary workshop on the subject of "Rousseau to Robespierre, from 'The Social Contract' to the Terror and one of the first manifestations of totalitarianism opposed to all human dignity." Activities included distinguishing between objectivity and subjectivity, reading, listening, viewing, and interpreting the content, and comparing and contrasting the materials. The materials included music and video extracts, pictures and text.

より良質な成果とより良い成績点に関する(学習への)奥深いアプローチ。それらはより楽しいものでもあります。表面的アプローチは満足できるものではありません；そしてそれらはより貧弱な結果に帰する事になります。(Ramsden P.P.2003 p.53) 要点は明白で、事実は理解するために導かれなければ価値がありません；がしかし、理論は事実を目を開き続けていない限り空論に過ぎません。才能のための密接な関わり合いも又明白です：理解のための教育であって成績点のためのものではありません。(Rehm J. 1995) 学習内容へのアプローチを容易にする目的を持って提出者は“全ての人格に反する全体主義の脅威と最初の示威行為の一つに対する社会的約束事からの ルソールソーからロベスピエール”の問題における双方向的、学際的(二つ以上の学問分野にまたがる)実験を演じました。活動は下記から引き出されました：客観性と主観性の識別：読む・聴く・観る、及び解釈、比較と対比教材は音楽、ビデオ抜粋、絵画、及びテキストを含みます。

## Review of the literature

The groundbreaking research of Entwistle, Ramsden, and others shifted the focus of pedagogy from the teacher to the student by placing the spotlight clearly and explicitly on learners and how they learn, when they classified it and named it a “deep approach” (Ramsden, 2003).

The meaning of deep approaches to learning may best be grasped if seen in contrast to surface approaches. A student whose approach fits with academic goals such as obtaining meaning from content, relating it to other knowledge and the world around him, distinguishing between evidence and argument, etc. is using a deep approach (Ramsden, 2003). Other research makes the point that metacognition, loosely defined as the ability to monitor one’s state of learning, is also related to improved learning (Moon, 1999). In contrast, a student who focuses on words rather than meaning, sees learning as an imposition, memorizes for assessments, and dissociates content from everyday reality, etc. denotes a surface approach (Ramsden, 2003).

Research has shown that deep approaches are conducive to better outcomes, such as the ability to connect the content to a broader context, to relate it in a more holistic way to the discipline as a whole and to the world in which the learner lives (Ramsden, 2003). By applying a deep approach, the content becomes more meaningful, the learner more energized in the moment, and more motivated in the longer term. Deep approaches to learning mirror the real life learning of most of us. They also reflect the attitude and process of the highly effective learning carried out by pre-school children, or even babies (Gattegno, 1976). Our students have themselves experienced such learning, and

will continue to do so, at the very least, outside the formal classroom setting. Yet little, if any mention has been made of deep approaches to learning in the context of Japanese higher education.

It goes without saying that in order to draw out a deep approach to learning on the part of students, factors beyond the teacher’s influence, such as the students’ intrinsic motivation, are in play. That being said, the teacher is also responsible for establishing a facilitating environment. Curran (1977) focuses on the psychological well-being of the learner as a crucial element for learning and attaches importance to the teacher’s role in understanding and accepting the learner at his or her stage in learning and otherwise creating and maintaining a favorable learning environment. Also, in the case of content-based instruction, the teacher’s choice and organization of the right amount of appropriate content is crucial. “The ordering of content should be educationally justifiable. In other words, it must be possible to defend the particular order and structure in which material is tackled from the point of view of its favorable effects on student learning” (Ramsden, 2003, p.134). Pedagogical expertise and the magic of a good teacher need also to be present.

The work of Gardner (1999) invites educators to break out of the conventional mode of teaching that values only linguistic and scientific skills, such as logical analysis, and to exploit the musical, bodily kinesthetic, and spatial *intelligences* with which humans are also endowed, as educational tools. In the classroom, the use of alternative, non-textual content including samples from the performing arts caters to the intelligences Gardner highlights. Gardner also values interpersonal

intelligence, characterized by the ability to relate well to others. In the classroom, cooperative activities allow learners to develop this ability. Finally, Gardner includes intrapersonal intelligence, the ability to know oneself, in his holistic view of human subjects. The teacher may harness this last intelligence by facilitating students' development of metacognitive skills.

### The backdrop to an exploration of deep approaches to learning

The particular academic curriculum at Miyazaki International College invited an exploration of such an approach. Miyazaki International College is a small liberal arts college with an English immersion program. At the core of the academic program is a philosophy of active learning. This philosophy asserts that knowledge is not acquired merely through passive reading of texts or listening to lectures, but requires that students be actively engaged in reading, writing, discussing, and problem solving. Through active learning students develop higher-order thinking skills that enable them to analyze, synthesize, evaluate, and create. (MIC Mission Statement).

Since academic enterprises are characterized by critical thinking, spontaneity and originality are major factors in English for academic purposes, distinguishing it from the notion that English is to be used for stock phrases and set answers to set questions, as is common in secondary level English. Yet the spontaneity of the academic environment does not mean *Anything OK*. The tertiary student's work is limited to certain themes, registers, formats, and standards respected as academic parameters.

The workshop, "Deep approaches to learning" was geared to the academic goals above. It was based on a reassessment of recent teaching and learning of students in political science and history classes, with a view to exploring and sharing insights with the participants. The reason for putting it together was that team-teaching history and political science over a number of years had opened up an inter-disciplinary perspective. At MIC, the presenter had simultaneously team-taught history and political science and frequently invited students with experience of both courses to connect the two disciplines. The Rousseau content had in fact been piloted in the political science class and the Robespierre content had been piloted in the history class. The workshop presented the opportunity of combining the total content in a deeper, explicitly interdisciplinary whole.

### Pedagogical goals

In keeping with the principles expounded by Ramsden (2003), Entwistle (1981), Gattegno (1976), Gardner (1999), and Curran (1977), the goal of the workshop was to create an appropriate environment to encourage deep approaches on the part of participants. The session aimed at achieving participants' maximum engagement with the topic on two levels, as an interdisciplinary history and political science workshop and also as a pedagogy workshop on deep approaches to learning. Accordingly, the desired outcomes were on the first score for participants to integrate the content (Rousseau to Robespierre) in history as a whole, including past and current history and politics, and on the pedagogical score, to distinguish between deep and surface approaches. The session was adapted for an anticipated audience of experienced, professional tertiary-level teachers.

## Procedure

Step 1: An extract from Rousseau's opera "The village soothsayer" (Le devin du village) was played as a schema activator. The libretto and English translation were also provided.

Step 2: The theme of deep approaches to learning was introduced with a brief talk.

Step 3: The distinction between objectivity and subjectivity was presented with a worksheet.

Step 4: The following quotation was presented, "Each day the world looks on. We must above all not show weakness or moral cowardliness. What would become of France if we ceased to have the trust of the French." (Robespierre in Wajda's "Danton")

Step 5: A brief Video extract from the ballet "Manon" was played. "Manon" is based on the French novel, "Manon Lescaut" by Abbé Prévost, (1753) Manon, a poor country girl seduced by the temptations of city life becomes the victim of the brutal, pre-revolutionary rich and poor society.

Step 6: Rousseau's chronology was presented for participants to skim.

Step 7: A junior high school level description of Rousseau's "Social contract" was presented for metacognition.

Step 8: An extended text on Rousseau's "Social contract" (adapted for the audience) was presented for metacognition.

Step 9: A Copy of the portrait of Sir Brooke Boothby, Rousseau's translator, by Joseph Wright of Derby and a brief written explanation were presented.

Step 10: A brief video extract from the opera "Andrea Chénier", (a story based on the life of the French poet André Chénier) by Umberto Giordano were shown. The scene depicts the growing rage of the underclass before the revolution.

Step 11: A brief video extract from "Captain Hornblower" (BBC series dramatizing the Hornblower novels by C.S. Forester) showing the Marquis guillotined by revolutionaries.

Step 12: Realia was passed around for participants to view and handle.

Step 13: A brief video extract from the film "Danton" was shown, where Robespierre addresses the Convention uttering the quotation, "Each day, the world looks on..." ( Vid: Step 5-) in untitled French.

Step 14: Lists of 1300 condemned by the Revolutionary Tribunal and guillotined in one location between June 14 and July 27, 1794 were presented.

Step 15: One (subjective) point of view (of the Custodians of the Picpus Cemetery, location of the common grave of the victims of the French revolutionary Terror, June 14-27, 1794) was presented on the whiteboard

"As the founders wished, this cemetery is a place of memory not only for the victims, but also the executioners, victims also of one of the first manifestations of totalitarianism opposed to all human dignity. The Picpus Cemetery is also a place of meditation and forgiveness for both men and women misguided by the excesses of materialist ideologies that now prevail."

Step 16: Participants were asked to share awareness gained from the workshop.

Step 17: Written feedback was requested.

### Summary

Approximately twenty participants attended. During preparation for the session, passersby stopped to read the session information on the door. The music was playing and may also have had an effect on would-be participants in the moment. Others had chosen to attend based on reading the program. In other words, a healthy element of informed choice impinged on the decision to attend. I could not help comparing with college students joining classes, the decision often made on the basis of logistics, or group conformity, etc.

The participants were extremely cooperative, one early comer offering to manage the audio and video equipment for the session. Thanks to that assistance, the extensive materials were implemented expeditiously.

The level of engagement was high. One participant dozed from time to time, but also made salient contributions at other moments, recalling a tenet of Gattegno's, namely when the student is there, he can work; When he is not, he cannot; and a concerned teacher focuses on the learner when he IS there.

One participant came in after the start and commented that the ballet video extract "was just people parading in costumes". He had missed the introduction to objectivity and subjectivity and had begun with a subjective judgment. However it appeared that he soon became aware of his behavior and as he did so, changed his attitude. He then continued in a more objective vein and seemed to

incorporate into the group, which was geared to going along with the lesson.

I asked if there were any political scientists and one participant said he knew something and I granted him the role of "knower" and leader, to validate his perceived expertise in that discipline.

Through a combination of their previous knowledge, their ability to relate to the content and the choice and organization of content, the participants were able to identify the period (mid/end of the 18th century), the social structure, and the political system.

Participants were unfazed by the unusual choice of ballet content and responded well to the non-vocal, kinesthetic medium, generating relevant, multiple answers. Their response to the opera was equally positive.

The participants' interpretation of Rousseau's opera music, however, was inaccurate. Rousseau's "Village Soothsayer" is a light pastoral comic opera depicting the triumph of rustic virtue over high-class venality (Sadie, 1992, vol. 1, 1148-49). The participants found it sad. They apparently focused, significantly, on the written words in the libretto: "I have lost my love" rather than the sweet-toned music. They also misinterpreted the period of the opera, "Andrea Chénier," set in the French revolution, one participant setting it in a slightly earlier context.

In pedagogical terms, since I did not assume the role of superior, but of facilitator, I negotiated the meaning with them. By that token, I accepted each answer and related it to the topic. For example, another participant interestingly attributed Robespierre's quotation to Chirac. Although erroneous, in reality, that connection fitted closely with the

purpose of the presentation, to show the ideology propagated by Rousseau, proceeding through Robespierre to the present day. It was therefore an extremely valid contribution.

One participant had visited the Picpus Cemetery and shared with the group his knowledge that La Fayette was also buried there, creating an appropriate American-European link to the content.

It remains for me to improve on technical details such as limiting the amount of content related to the past in order to allow for a more explicit focus on modern day politics, as suggested in the feedback. Also, a topic for reflection (in the event of my again teaching a group of mature expert and enthusiastic specialists,) is how to deal with the number of questions that met with wrong answers. Do I wish to help more, to provide more hints, or to ask easier questions? Should I revisit Rousseau's opera and its libretto to select an extract that better represents the carefree, *pastoral* fashion of the time?

### Conclusion

The workshop represented the ideal deep approach to learning content. The atmosphere was agreeable throughout; the participants engaged and went along with the lesson. They also interacted willingly with one another. They appeared to be intrinsically motivated from the start, to maintain their motivation throughout, and to be willing to provide feedback after the event.

I had the sense, assertively confirmed by feedback, below, that several participants had become "Stage Five" learners (Curran, 1977). In other words, they had equaled and

overtaken me, the *knower* in terms of their understanding of the content and its implications. They had grasped the key points of content. They had been able to further synthesize, and then generalize it in terms of history, and humanity as a whole. They had related it to their life and times. They had also, through their metacognition, explicitly and accurately described deep approaches to learning and had concluded that there was more to learn and they were interested in it.

In affective terms, there appeared to have been a symbiotic relationship between learners and knower "not a dominant-submissive relationship or a superior-inferior one, but a mutually respectful and convalidating one", such as Curran advocates (Curran, 1977, pp. 98-99). We had each flourished in the light of the other. Consequently, the workshop had allowed for participants' deep approach to issue from it.

Finally, in what is doubtless the litmus test for teaching, the outcomes, the participants' and my own learning about the content and the process of learning give testimony to the benefits of orchestrating deep approaches to learning in higher and further education.

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## Appendix

### Participant feedback

#### Feedback 1

My immediate reaction to the presentation was that the “deep” in “deep approach” did not refer to some mysteriously arcane “answer” or in an accumulation of supposedly objective facts. Instead, it referred to an individual and mutual engagement with various “means of access” to the issues in question.

Windows were opened by a range of manifestations related to the issues, many of them non-textual. They were specific enough, and also independent enough, to bear consideration and discussion for their own sake, while at the same time providing further perspectives on the main theme; in fact, making the main theme visible.

Since the theme of “Rousseau to Robespierre” involves an interpretation of historical events to find a pattern for them (to give them a story), with sources, reasons and consequences, the process of question-answering and discussion enabled the participants to become interpreters of the manifestations of the theme. Their participation was deepened, and they gained a sense of themselves as ever more objectively capable “judges of interpretation,” and not recipients/memorizers of facts. The “reality” of what was being learned became inseparable from its interpretation and discussion.

There was an outline of further points for consideration, but there was not enough time to go into them. However, it was clear that further reflection and discussion would be possible by returning to the various “manifestations”

that had been introduced and using them as the topics for comparisons, contrasts and status in relation to other possible interpretations: the “good” Rousseau of Sir Brook Boothby vs. the “bad” Rousseau as source for the Terror; why Wajda, the Polish director of the film “Danton,” created an interpretation of Robespierre that was not popular with film critics in France (good Rousseau vs. bad Rousseau?), etc.

### *Feedback 2*

I distinctly remember being moved to learn that Rousseau composed, and so beautifully. The comparison of the paintings impressed me somewhat. The “assignat” and token were interesting too.

Whatever may have been mentioned of Rousseau’s influence on Communism, I would have appreciated some reference to present-day, post-Communist (well, North Korean and Cuban totalitarianism[s] are nominally Communist) totalitarianism and how the phenomenon has a way of sneaking back into societies which had appeared to have done away with or graduated from it, such as in Russia and Poland. I suggest in a future version using “Each day the world looks at us” as a yardstick: does totalitarianism flourish more when it is not being “looked at”?

### *Feedback 3*

“Content teaching” is often associated with global concerns in general and peace education in particular. Rarely does it deal with moral and philosophical questions underlying these concerns: What turns people into tyrants inflicting death and misery on untold numbers? Does a deeper understanding of

this question entail forgiveness of the perpetrators as well as grieving for the victims?

Undoubtedly important questions, but much too difficult to deal with for most of my students using their own language, let alone in a foreign language, many would object. Amanda demonstrated with her deep approach to learning content that this need not be so by presenting a very rich variety of realia dealing with an equally rich variety of aspects of these questions. These ranged from music by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (!) to coins from the era to illustrate and elucidate.

While I missed the discussion of the theoretical and methodological underpinnings for this deep approach, what I did witness gave me a taste for much, much more.