

JoLLE Forum-The Testing Juggernaut

Marion Brady
Cocoa, FL

David Berliner and Bruce Biddle nailed it. They titled their 1996 book about corporate America's attack on America's public schools *The Manufactured Crisis*. When future historians study the campaign to privatize public education that began in the last decade of the 20th Century, they'll marvel at how quickly it changed centuries-old assumptions. One of those assumptions: Teachers—those who work with learners day after day, guiding the learning process, assigning them tasks, watching them interact with others, reading their papers, listening to their responses, observing their facial expressions and body language—are best positioned to evaluate performance. In less than one generation, that assumption disappeared. Teachers, the President of the United States said, were guilty of “the soft bigotry of low expectations.” By the time that accusation had finished bouncing around inside the mainstream media echo chamber, just about everybody in the country believed it. Teacher judgment couldn't be trusted. The job had to be given to someone else.

Test manufacturers, contracts in hand, stepped forward.

Maybe it's the appeal of simplicity, or a poor grasp of statistics, or lack of understanding of what it means to be educated, or ignorance of research, or something else. Whatever the reason, standardized test scores have become the tail that wags the education dog, closing treasured neighborhood schools, keeping students in the same grade indefinitely, ending the careers of effective and experienced teachers, swinging elections, putting enormous dents in school budgets, even calling into question the value of public schooling.

The validity of standardized tests and their central role in shaping education policy are now ordinarily simply taken for granted. Even educators who should be aware not just of the vast limitations of standardized tests but of the havoc they are wreaking on the institution, assume such tests are a necessary thing, and complain only about what they see as their excessive use.

I don't share that assumption. In no particular order, I'll list some of the reasons I think standardized testing—if not an outright curse—is educationally destructive.

1. Standardized tests purport to generate hard data useful in guiding decision making in pursuit of an overarching institutional aim. Unfortunately, the institution has no such aim, making meaningful measurement of progress toward it impossible.

Read the literature, study the legislation, listen to the speeches, talk to educators or the general public, and the lack of aim is apparent. The “official” list is long—prepare students for democratic citizenship; keep America economically competitive; introduce the academic

disciplines; teach thinking skills; instill a love of learning; explore “eternal” questions; transmit societal values; prepare the young for useful work; develop character; teach “the basics.”

Those barely begin a list.

All such aims may be defensible, but each calls, at the least, for particular instructional materials, particular teaching methods, particular kinds of tests. Until there’s consensus on the aim of schooling, no test, standardized or otherwise, can measure progress. We accept the testing status quo because we haven’t thought the matter through.

2. We learn most of what we know from firsthand, real-world experience. How that works is little understood, but it’s clear that physical movement, music, art, emotional state, the immediate physical environment, relationships with peers, myriad nonschool factors—these and other, non-verbal ways of learning—come together in a complex, idiosyncratic mix to make us who we are.

Standardized tests assume that the benefits and consequences of all those ways of learning can be evaluated by the test-taker’s familiarity with and ability to interpret and manipulate text—words in textbooks, words on a screen, words on a whiteboard, words from teachers’ mouths, words on a test item.

The assumption is at odds with common sense.

3. The over-reliance on text as an indicator of intellectual ability creates another problem. Because standardized test items are products of the dominant culture—perhaps even a product of a sub-group within the dominant culture—word choice, sentence structure, allusions, references, and so on, will reflect that culture in subtle ways, unfairly disadvantaging test takers not socialized in or only marginally socialized in the dominant culture from early childhood.

4. Of all the ideas embedded in American beliefs and values, at or near the top of the list is the claim that no two of us are exactly alike. Our differences, we insist, have always been a source of strength and should be honored, encouraged, and exploited. Developing these differences is often rightly cited as a primary aim of schooling.

How, then, do we explain or defend the role being played by standardized testing, with its emphasis on minimum achievement levels in a standardized curriculum rather than on open-ended, maximum performance of the sort in evidence in any randomly chosen group of learners? We don’t seem to have thought through the costs of reinforcing sameness rather than exploring the possibilities of human variability.

5. The phrase “higher order thinking skills,” may suggest thought processes of a sort engaged in only by some people some of the time. In fact, everybody uses them all the time. Routine, daily functioning requires that we make value judgments, generate hypotheses, make comparisons, categorize, recall, imagine, generalize, relate, and so on.

Unfortunately, for purposes of evaluation, traditional schooling has focused on learners' ability merely to recall content to the neglect of all other thought processes. The main reason is probably obvious. Recall of content is the only thought process that lends itself to precise measurement and instantaneous scoring by machine. A version of Gresham's law operates: Bad testing drives out good.

6. Teachers teach to tests. When reputation, pay, and even employment hinge on test scores, that's not surprising. But if the test comes out of a corporate cubicle remote from instruction, it comes at the expense of local control, attention to local problems, the exploiting of teachable moments, teacher judgment, flexibility, creativity, and teacher and learner autonomy.

7. Political campaign rhetoric, the conventional wisdom, and the current reform effort are in agreement: The bottom-line purpose of schooling isn't to develop individual potential but to prepare the young for college and career.

There's no evidence that America's colleges are giving serious thought to the future and how to adapt to the radical changes it will necessitate. Neither are there reliable projections of the nature of future careers. That being the case, it's surely presumptuous to claim that standardized tests designed to prepare the young for college and careers are meeting real educational or societal needs.

8. The traditional "core" curriculum was adopted in the late 19th Century. It's assumed that its major fields—math, science, language arts, and social studies—cover all important knowledge.

They don't. But even if they did, testing learner familiarity with the content of the core subjects misses the point. School subjects are mere tools. What counts is learners' ability to use them in real-world situations and circumstance. Evaluating that ability in learners whose interests, abilities, and situations vary in ways that aren't (and can't be) known to testers is impossible.

9. It's a well-established fact that instantaneous or near-instantaneous feedback is important in learning. We don't swat a puppy with a rolled-up newspaper fifteen minutes after it's made a mess. In teaching and learning, continual feedback is optimal. A one-shot test that delivers a single number weeks or months after the learner pencils in an oval or clicks a mouse on a now-forgotten test item, benefits no one except test manufacturer stockholders.

10. The bottom-line test of a society's system of education is simple: Does it contribute in a clear and unmistakable ways to societal survival?

The world changes. Water tables decline; top soil disappears; deserts expand; populations explode or are decimated; resource bases shrink; ideologies come and go; technological innovations change human relationships; wars change everything—the list of the drivers of social change could go on and on. Survival requires awareness and understanding of such changes, their probable and possible effects, and appropriate responses.

No mechanisms are in place in institutionalized education to systematically monitor change, much less respond to it in thoughtful ways. What gets tested gets taught, and what gets taught gets tested, an incestuous, static, paralyzing arrangement.

To those ten problems with standardized tests, add others. They turn kids off to learning, create unreasonable pressures to cheat, have no “success in life” predictive power; lead to the neglect of the best and worst students as resources are channeled to lift marginal kids above pass-fail “cut lines”; are open to massive scoring errors with life-changing consequences; trivialize learning; penalize test-takers whose minds work in non-standardized ways; hide problems created by margin-of-error computations in scoring; dump major public money into corporate coffers instead of classrooms; privilege the privileged in any number of ways.

Even the fact that the tests are timed, are administered at different times of the day in schools with physical conditions that range from ideal to appalling, in school cultures equally disparate, would be enough to reject them even if the tests actually measured something of consequence.

The conventional wisdom, including among many educators, is that commercially produced standardized tests have a role to play in learner evaluation, but are being misused and overused. I don’t share that view. In fact, I believe the whole idea that a test item can be genuinely “objective” is a myth. Given the subjective nature of culture, bias is inevitable. Even the initial decision to test is a cultural bias, as are attempts to quantify quality, categorize, and rank, assign more value or merit to those at the top of the lists that testing creates.

Stephen Jay Gould (1981) sums it up when he says, “I believe that science must be understood as a social phenomenon, a gutsy human enterprise, not the work of robots programmed to collect pure information” (p. 21).

A Step Back

It may be that the drive to test excessively has a relatively simple explanation. It’s highly profitable for commercial publishers, and is shaping up to be even more so in the future when the Common Core Standards allow the same test bank questions to be administered nationwide. Nobody in the industry has been blind to the possibilities flowing from hooking a permanent pipeline up to public money.

But whether or not that’s responsible, or to what extent it explains the campaign to undermine public confidence in teacher ability to evaluate the performance of those they teach, that effort has fallen on fertile ground for a reason the education establishment should have long ago addressed but has largely ignored. For centuries, scholars have been pointing out that adequate sense can’t be made of the world by slicing it into little pieces and studying the pieces without regard for how they fit together to form a whole greater than the sum of the parts.

The traditional curriculum is fragmented, and grows steadily more so as the discipline-based search for understanding expands without provision for significant or systematic dialogue among the guardians of the fragments. Standardized tests thrive on the details of the disciplines, focusing on the trees and hiding the woods.

To make matters worse, the Common Core States Standards Initiative, undertaken by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governor's Association, has locked in the focus-on-the-trees curriculum even more rigidly. At the moment, the situation seems rather hopeless, the only possible relief coming from political pressures put on politicians by parents, knowledgeable citizens, and perhaps students who can plainly see that, as the old saying goes, it's not possible to fatten a pig by constantly weighing it.

Given bureaucratic rigidities and institutional inertia, if effective actions are taken to counter the dysfunctional nature of present test-based reform efforts, they'll almost certainly need to begin with variations on the status quo. Below are three possible ways to insert a toe into the institutional door, perhaps propping it open enough to make apparent the inadequacy of standardized tests scores as indicators of learner and school performance.

Possibility #1

As in any large social institution, it's not hard to find stupidities. There really are teachers who don't know what they're doing, teachers ill-suited temperamentally for the work, teachers incapable of growth. Mainstream pundits with ideological axes to grind will never have difficulty finding examples of such, using horror stories to reinforce the current contention that teachers can't be trusted to evaluate.

But there's a relatively easy, cost-free way around that problem. Return the task to those who did it routinely for decades with minimal problems—teachers. But avoid trouble-causing individual grading idiosyncrasies by adopting multi-disciplinary team teaching for the core subjects. Who's likely to question the judgment of three or four teachers working together daily with a learner?

Possibility #2

My initial enthusiasm for charters has disappeared. Years ago, I served on the board of governors of one, until looking for material for my newspaper column, I visited other charters, monitored charter chat rooms and listservs, studied the proposals of those applying to open charters, and watched as these supposed springs of innovation were taken over or started by chains so standardized they could use the same promotional brochures, materials and methods in every school.

Nevertheless there are, here and there, exceptions—charters that have something important to offer that lies beyond that which standardized tests can evaluate. Publicized, they could be forces for good by calling into question the conventional wisdom that everything that counts can be counted.

Possibility #3

The greatest pressures being exerted by standardized testing are on the “bubble kids”—those scoring or anticipated to score at or near arbitrarily set pass-fail lines. Those working with learners at the extremes of performance are therefore somewhat insulated, with greater freedom to exercise discretion, to innovate, to explore alternative methods and materials the value of which are indisputable but don't lend themselves to mass testing.

The comparative autonomy enjoyed by at least some of these “outliers” offers possibilities with little or no risk and the possibility of great gain.

The present orgy of testing has produced nothing of value; indeed, it has been a disaster. It hasn’t brought academic gains, but has instead harmed students, teachers, administrators, neighborhoods, and local, state, and federal economies.

To the claim that a testing corner will soon be turned, that better, more sophisticated evaluation instruments will soon be in place, there’s only one proper response: Stop mass standardized testing until those promised instruments have been thoroughly piloted and their worth firmly established. The stakes are too high to do anything else.

[1] To this end, I offer, free and without obligation, a comprehensive course of study that uses General Systems Theory to integrate school subjects, thereby creating time for other learning activities. It can be downloaded from the internet at: <http://www.marionbrady.com/Connections-InvestigatingReality-ACourseofStudy.asp>

References

Berliner, D. C., & Biddle, B. J. (1995). *The manufactured crisis: Myths, frauds, and the attack on America’s public schools*. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.

Gould, S. J. (1981). *The mismeasure of man*. New York: Norton.