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Standardized snake oil

By Valerie Strauss

This was written by [Marion Brady](#), veteran teacher, administrator, curriculum designer and author. His latest book is [What's Worth Learning?](#) from Information Age Publishing.

By Marion Brady

I was, generally speaking, a fairly well-behaved kid. I've no reasonable explanation, then, for burning a hole in the wall of the one-room school I attended in the late 1930s.

It wasn't an original idea. A precedent had been set by somebody who'd come and gone before I arrived at Union School the previous year as a third grader. He (I can't imagine it was a "she") had heated the steel rod used to stoke the fire in the stove until it was red hot, pressed the end of it against the white-painted interior wood wall near the entrance door, and pushed until it burned all the way through. The result was a very neat black hole about the size of a marble.

The blackened area around the hole looked a little like fetching eyelashes.

One cold winter morning, arriving at the tiny school after the nearest neighbor had added fresh coal to the fire and gone, but before anyone else had arrived, it occurred to me that a similar hole three or four inches to the left of the existing hole offered an interesting possibility. Using a black crayon, I could add eyebrows to good effect.

I got the hole done, but not the eyebrows. Sixth grader Naomi arrived, saw the still-smoldering new "eye," and waited at the door to tattle to the teacher.

Confronted by high authority, my eyes-with-eyebrows project seemed less than wise, much less funny. I vaguely recall responding to Miss Woods' observation that I could have burned the school down by mumbling something about the big community tin drinking cup hanging on a nail beside the nearby water cooler. I think I suggested that it provided the necessary insurance against disaster.

She didn't buy it. I was sent home and told to come back with my mother or father, or both.

In the years since I burned that hole, I've stayed connected to schools and schooling as a student, teacher, administrator, college professor, writer of texts and professional books, contributor to academic journals, education columnist for newspapers, blogger, visitor to schools around the world, and consultant to publishers, states and foundations.

And for the last 20 years, I've done my best to burn holes in the myth that standardized tests are a means to the end of improving America's schools. I haven't the slightest doubt that if the

testing tail continues to wag the education dog, it will kill the dog and with it the ability of future generations to cope with their fates.

It's not that America's schools don't have really serious problems. They certainly do. And I'm not talking just about big, inner city institutions surrounded by blight, encircled by barbed wire, entered through metal detectors, patrolled by cops, and churning out dropouts, future prison inmates, and other social problems.

There are many of those, but I'm not singling them out. As a mountain of research makes clear, what ails them is primarily long-term poverty and the myriad problems poverty spawns. That's a matter I'm not qualified to write about, but for those who think test scores actually mean something important, I'll note in passing that Finland always ranks near the top, and their child poverty rate is less than 3%, while America's rate is over 20% and climbing rapidly. Those who believe skilled teachers can level the education playing field enough to erase that difference in the quality of the material they're given to work with aren't just not in the game, they're not even in the ball park.

Yes, include those blighted urban schools as a target of my criticism, but include also America's many well-ordered schools in quiet, leafy suburbs. Include schools in top-scale ZIP codes that have been adopted by venture capitalists who see to it that every hint of a need is instantly met. Include schools where, before opening bells, Benz, Bentley, and BMW doors swing open and kids slide out to be greeted by name by headmasters and faculties. And include schools where chauffeur-driven limousines deliver their body-guarded charges because school policy forbids noisy arrivals by helicopter. (Yes, there are such schools.)

Consider as failing every school – public, charter, private, whatever – that assumes that corporately produced, standardized tests say something important about something important. Using test scores to guide education policy makes about as much sense as using the horoscope of whoever happens to be Secretary of State to guide US foreign policy.

That standardized tests are a useful tool for guiding education reform is a myth, pure and simple – a myth constructed from ignorance and perpetuated by misinformation, or conjured from hope and reinforced by cherry-picked data.

I grew up in Appalachia where the old adage, “You can't make a silk purse out of sow's ear” was familiar speech. Standardized tests are a “sow's ear.” The only things they can measure accurately are random bits of information stored in short-term memory.

But even if every kid remembered everything taught, it's hard to imagine a more wasteful use of teacher and learner time and taxpayer money than preparing for and taking standardized tests.

When the world changed little or not at all from generation to generation and nearly everyone was illiterate, unaided memory was essential. What needed to be known existed in the memories of the elders, and the young, living in that static world, either learned it from them or suffered the consequences.

That era is long gone. It's over. Finished. It began to end when writing was developed, and its demise proceeded with the invention of the printing press, cheap books, photography, moving pictures, television, the Internet, search engines, and other means of information gathering and archiving. In today's world, tests of unaided memory are about as useful as (insert another Appalachian slang expression having to do with the anatomy of boar hogs).

Standardized, subject-matter tests are worse than a waste. We're spending billions of dollars and instructional hours on a tool that measures one thought process to the neglect of all others, wreaks havoc on the minds and emotions of teachers and learners, and diverts attention from a fundamental, ignored problem.

That problem? Longshoreman and college professor [Eric Hoffer](#) summed it up a lifetime ago. Because the world is dynamic, the future belongs not to the learned but to learners.

Read that sentence again. Then read it again. Even if standardized tests didn't cost billions, even if they yielded something that teachers didn't already know, even if they hadn't narrowed the curriculum down to joke level, even if they weren't the main generators of educational drivel, even if they weren't driving the best teachers out of the profession, they should be abandoned because they measure the wrong thing.

The future belongs not to the learned but to learners. American education isn't designed to produce learners, and the proof of that contention is the standardized test.

America's system of education is designed to clone the learned. And motivated either by ignorance or greed, the wealthy and powerful, using educationally naïve celebrities as fronts, are spending obscene amounts of money to convince politicians, pundits, policymakers, and the public that this is a good and necessary thing.

Thus far, they've been wildly successful. If they're not stopped, those now sitting in our classrooms won't just witness America's descent into Third World status, they'll accelerate it.

On a somewhat lighter note, and in the spirit of the season, below is a link to a free gift – a complete, down-loadable book. It's not my new [What's Worth Learning?](#), but it's perhaps more appropriate for days made busy by holiday preparation:

<http://www.marionbrady.com/documents/TheRoadtoHell.pdf>

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