



Teacher Accountability? It's About Time!

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by: Marion Brady, truthout | Op-Ed

Once upon a time teachers assigned grades, and that was pretty much that. Oh, occasionally a kid would argue that a particular grade was unfair, or complain so loudly that parents or an administrator would get involved, but that was relatively rare.

About a generation ago, acceptance of teacher judgment about the quality of student work began to disappear. Waving the "standards and accountability!" banner, leaders of business and industry convinced politicians that this generation's teachers (unlike those they remembered from their own schooling) couldn't be trusted to evaluate learner performance. Today's teachers, they were sure, suffered from "the soft bigotry of low expectations."

What drives the campaign to discredit teacher judgment isn't clear. Some are convinced there's a long-running, behind-the-scenes attempt to undermine confidence in public schools to pave the way for privatizing them. Others think the loss of faith has been engineered by testing companies to expand the lucrative market for standardized tests and test prep materials. Still others blame it on naive policymakers who don't understand the vast limitations of machine-scored tests.

Whether for one of these or some other reason, "accountability" is now a major issue. It's widely believed that if America doesn't shape up, scientists and engineers from beyond our borders will soon be eating our technological lunch. Accompanying that belief is a second one, that the best way to keep track of how America stands in relation to the competition is to give the same test to every kid on the planet and compare the scores.

We have a problem. We've put all our quality-monitoring eggs in the standardized testing basket, but the only thing computer-scored tests can measure with absolute precision is short-

term memory. Short-term memory has its uses, but a good one doesn't turn a kid into a good mathematician, good scientist, good engineer, or good anything else. Expertise and accomplishment require intention, interest, insight, imagination, creativity, and probably a brain wired in a particular manner, all combined in a way little understood, incapable of being directly taught, and impossible to measure with a standardized test.

We seem to be over a barrel. To maintain educational quality, we need to monitor and measure performance. But learner qualities and capabilities most deserving of being evaluated are far too complex for our crude tests to monitor.

Fortunately, the barrel is of our own making, and can be rolled aside. Philosopher and mathematician Alfred North Whitehead, in his 1916 Presidential Address to the Mathematical Association of England, pointed the way. "The secondhandedness of the learned world," he said, "is the secret of its mediocrity." When kids are merely trying to remember something read in a textbook or heard in teacher talk, they're in the secondhand-knowledge business. When they're figuring out how to make sense of something complicated and important that can be seen and touched, they're in the firsthand-knowledge business. Switching from secondhand to firsthand student work changes the game and therefore everything that follows, including the kinds of tests that are necessary.

A firsthand-knowledge assignment for a high school social studies class: "How are major decisions about your school's day-to-day operation made, and what general conclusions and attitudes about decision-making and governing might you carry into adulthood as a consequence?"

A firsthand-knowledge assignment for a high school science class: "What's happening to the solid waste your school generates, and if the system for dealing with it continues to function as it presently does, what will be the likely consequences for future generations?"

A firsthand-knowledge assignment for a high school humanities class: Graffiti fits dictionary definitions of literature. Reading "between the lines," what does local graffiti have to say about the interests, concerns, and problems of its creators? Do they differ from yours? How? Why?

That's firsthand, real-world work, and what comes out of it is firsthand knowledge. It's unquestionably relevant. Its intellectual challenges are qualitative rather than quantitative. It forces secondhand knowledge to play its proper, supportive role. Its intellectual payoff is immediate and continuous. It connects directly to larger issues of life, liberty, and happiness. It

erases the arbitrary, artificial, intellect-limiting boundaries between school subjects. And the shift of emphasis for learners from simple memory exercises to complex logic tends to shake up perceptions of who's smart and who's less so in surprising and healthy ways.

By any measure, firsthand work is work worth doing. But it's work that, by its very nature, can't be standardized, so evaluating it can't be standardized. No way can Educational Testing Service, McGraw-Hill, Pearson, or some other remote corporate entity write a machine-scored test to determine the quality of what's happening in the heads of kids as they wrestle with firsthand, real-world work.

How, then, can performance be monitored? In the same way performance was monitored for the decades before the campaign to discredit teachers began: by returning respect and authority to those best positioned by time and experience to make the judgment calls - returning it to classroom teachers.

Blamed by business leaders for problems over which they have no control, scapegoated by platitude-prone politicians, ignored by educationally challenged policymakers, mauled by mainstream media unwilling to look past the conventional wisdom, it's possible that classroom teachers have lost confidence in their ability to evaluate student work. But as long as those in authority think that sorting, labeling, and assigning numbers to kids has something to do with educating, classroom teachers are the only people who know the game and the players well enough to meet their demands.

Are teacher judgments subjective? Of course. So what? For comprehensiveness, reliability and usefulness, no other approach to performance evaluation comes even close. (And it's a helluva lot cheaper.)

It's years of time and many billions of dollars too late to undo the damage done to the young by the standardized testing fad, but next school year would be a good time for an aroused citizenry to demand that a salvage operation be undertaken.

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