

Washington Post, "The Answer Sheet" Blog, by Valerie Strauss
Posted at 11:30 AM ET, 02/ 2/2011

The Bartleby Project

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

(Note: This version differs very slightly from the version published on "The Answer Sheet.")

"Juggernaut."

Picture a huge, ancient chariot being pulled through narrow city streets, carrying a crude idol of a god. So massive is the chariot, citizens are crushed under its wooden wheels.

The education reform effort begun in the 1980s at the urging of corporate America is a juggernaut. The god it carries is The Standardized Test.

On board the chariot, surrounding the god and enthusiastically waving the standards and accountability banner, are the President of the United States, the Secretary of Education, nearly all the state governors, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Business Roundtable, the Gates, Broad, and Walton foundations, hedge fund managers, publishers of test and test prep materials, a few big-city mayors, and celebrities such as Michelle Rhee, Oprah Winfrey, Mark Zuckerberg, Jeb Bush.

The chariot riders, true believers, take it for granted that learning isn't a natural act, that it happens only under threat, and that high-stakes, standardized tests provide that necessary threat. Their money, name recognition, political power, public relations skills, and easy access to the mainstream media, are used to steadily increase the number of worshipers of the Standardized Test God.

But the chariot has stalled, so hard questions must be asked.

And of those questions, easily the most important one is this: Can standardized tests measure complex, "higher order" thinking skills? Can they not merely gather the contents of every learners' memory, but arrange and rearrange those memories in ways that enable them to infer, hypothesize, generalize, relate, synthesize, judge relative value, create new knowledge?

Experienced educators say "No."

But those now shaping education policy say "Yes," and have handed near-absolute power to the Standardized Test God. It's reasonable, then, to ask them to explain and defend their actions to the educators whose agreement and cooperation they must have if the juggernaut is to move on.

Congressional action looms, and time is short. Establishing a schedule for deciding who's right-educators or politicians-is appropriate and necessary.

Here's how that can be made to happen:

For four days, between July 28 -31, a march and a call to action called "Save Our Schools" will take place in Washington, D.C.

At least two weeks before the protesters arrive, the US Department of Education should post ten illustrative or model questions on its website, two each for five different complex, "higher order" thought processes. The ten questions, when answered, should produce scores that compare and rank the test-taker's skill with that of all others answering the same question.

On the website, following each question, provision should be made for dialogue—for a conversation between experienced educators and policymakers in Washington.

To set wise policy, out of that dialog must come a clear answer. Can machine-scored standardized tests measure human thought processes precisely enough to allow standardized tests to shape America's future? Yes, or no?

The ten model questions posted by the USDOE should meet two criteria.

First, they must be 100 % machine scoreable and reliable. This is essential, for sooner or later, taxpayers will want to know why they're paying billions of dollars to corporations to score single examples of school work (work taxpayers will rarely or never see), when those same taxpayers have already paid teachers to score a far richer and more visible stream of work?

Second, each USDOE sample questions must yield a useful, meaningful score. It must say, for example, that in a practical, real-world situation—a situation familiar to the test taker—the test-taker's inference, hypothesis, generalization, value judgment or other complex thought process deserves an "8" rather than a "7," a "9," or some other score.

And then, to the satisfaction of the citizenry, the reason for the assigned rank must be explained.

At a meeting I attended on August 2, 2008 in Titusville, Florida, prior to his election, President Obama recognized me, asked about my teaching experience, and accepted my question about his future administration's openness to the input of educators on matters of education policy.

To his credit, he didn't promise me that such would be the case; his answer came later when, to the great disappointment of many educators, he chose the cliché-prone Arne Duncan rather than an educator to head the Department of Education.

After the election, in a small, classroom meeting with Secretary Arne Duncan near Orlando, Florida, my raised hand went unacknowledged, but the Secretary said that, although present standardized tests were flawed and in need of major improvement, much greater use was going to be made of them.

Any trace of logic in that policy escapes me. Why are billions of dollars being spent to buy and administer tests the Secretary admits are flawed? What purpose is served by numbers and rankings that yield no reliable, useful information?

Do we now accept without question that political agendas and stockholder gains trump common sense?

I agree with the late, highly respected paleontologist, biologist and historian Stephen Jay Gould who near the end of his book [*The Mismeasure of Man*](#), summed up what everyone who's given more than a moment's serious thought to the matter knows: "Human uniqueness lies in the flexibility of what our brains can do. What is intelligence, if not the ability to face problems in an unprogrammed manner?"

The situation calls for action. Now. Students, strongly supported by their teachers, parents, grandparents, and all others who care about the future of education and America, should join the Bartleby Project initiated in 2008 by John Taylor Gatto.

In an Afterward to his book *[Weapons of Mass Instruction](#)*, Gatto calls the young to participate in what he calls "an open conspiracy" to destroy the standardized testing industry.

If destroying the standardized testing industry sounds like an extreme action, you don't understand the problem.

Gatto's argument can be accessed at:

http://www.newsociety.com/titleimages/TI004012_OI001098_23.pdf

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