

Why are strong readers being labeled remedial?

By Marion Brady

I began teaching history at the high school level in the fall of 1952. It wasn't by choice. I hadn't majored in the subject in college. It had always been just another required hoop to jump through.

But the school was small, and all the teachers had multiple preparations. I was assigned two sections of 11th grade American history.

Some historian (Charles Beard? Arnold Toynbee? Winston Churchill?) is supposed to have said, “History is just one damn thing after another.” That's how it had always seemed to me, so I came to my two classes determined not to do the usual — assign a few pages in the textbook as homework and spend the next day telling kids my version of what they'd already read.

I wanted us to think and talk together about big, important ideas such as Einstein's view that technological change was like an ax in the hands of a sociopath. I thought that exploring the blood left on the floor by change — technological, demographic, and environmental — put history to work in a relevant, important, interesting, useful way.

But dealing thoroughly with complicated issues takes lots of time, and I couldn't bring myself not to cover the standard textbook story.

So I worked out a simple solution. I assigned four or five pages from the book as homework, and the next day, as soon as the kids were seated, I'd give them a written, five-question, short-answer quiz. The questions were easy, since the point was just to keep them “covering the material.” The whole procedure took about three minutes, leaving the rest of the period free for work more challenging than stuffing facts into kids' short-term memories.

I woke up three or four days ago remembering that procedure and asking myself a question probably triggered by conversations I'm having with Rick Roach, an Orange County, Florida, school board member. You may remember Rick. [I wrote about him in my December 5 Answer Sheet blog post](#) — how he took a version of the state's 10th grade high-stakes standardized reading test and got 62, a score that would have landed him in a remedial reading class. It would also have kept him from taking a class that led to his joining the swim team, becoming its captain, and being named the team's Most Valuable Player.

What I remembered as I was waking up was that every student I taught in four different high schools apparently knew how to read because they all passed those five-question quizzes. None of the four high schools in which I taught had even one reading teacher.

There are three high schools in the part of Orange County that Rick represents. In those three schools, 30 remedial reading teachers are teaching about 3,000 students!

What's going on here? What's changed? Why, a few years ago, was there no apparent need for remedial reading programs for high school students, and now about one out of three are enrolled in them? Have ability levels dropped that far that fast?

Rick wants answers to those questions, and he's doing what legislators and policymakers should be doing but are not — talking to teachers and students.

From teachers of remedial reading he hears that relatively few of their students really have reading problems. Those that do are from families in which English isn't spoken, or they have a genuine learning disability. The rest are average or above-average students. Many are enrolled in honors and advanced placement classes, some even in extremely text-heavy International Baccalaureate programs.

Students in advanced studies spending five to ten hours a week in remedial reading classes? What's going on here?

From kids, Rick hears that the [standardized high-stakes tests](#) they failed were of no interest to them, or had trick questions, or some questions had more than one right answer, or they're just tired of nonstop reading drills, or they slacked off because the tests were so long, or they weren't given enough time, or they froze up because they knew their score could hang an embarrassing label on them.

Rick, quizzing kids in a middle school remedial reading program, asked a boy with a Kindle what he was reading at that moment. "*Othello*," the kid said. For an assignment? No, the kid replied. He just liked Shakespeare.

A 7th grade kid who owns a Kindle and reads Shakespeare for pleasure is in a remedial reading program! What's going on here?

Full disclosure: I know next to nothing about teaching reading, I've never taught anyone to read, and I've done no research in the field. That said, it seems to me there's an obvious explanation for why so many kids are labeled poor readers.

Here's my theory: Congress, by way of the [No Child Left Behind](#) legislation, targeted reading (and math) for improvement. This handed publishers of textbooks, tests, and test-prep materials a marketing opportunity. Not surprisingly, publishers want to maximize sales. To maximize sales, there has to be a perception of a serious reading problem, and the easiest way to create the perception of a reading problem is to give tests that kids fail.

So that's what they do.

It's easy. Make the passages to be read boring. Ask questions that have more than one right answer but count only one answer as correct. Throw in a few unfamiliar words or references.

Increase the length of sentences. Make the test so long that fatigue or impatience set in. Add a few trick questions. Increase stress levels by setting a too-short completion time. Or, easiest of all, just arbitrarily raise the passing score.

Tests can be designed to yield any failure rate from zero to a hundred percent. Publishers just have to be careful not to make the failure rate so high that test buyers get suspicious.

Add up the amounts taxpayers are on the hook for reading teachers, reading tests, and test prep materials and you're talking billions of dollars. The market potential when every kid in every state is tested not just for reading and math but for every subject every year boggles the mind. And this at the same time legislators are making draconian cuts in school funding!

Back before the big corporate push to privatize public education, back before corporate heads and politicians began blaming teachers for America's poor economic performance, back when teacher judgment was trusted and they wrote their own tests, the cost of testing was close to zero. Evaluating learner performance was just part of the job. When I was still in the classroom, I evaluated learner performance all day every day.

I may, of course, be wrong. But is there a better explanation for why so many kids are being labeled lousy readers? That strategy, after all, is just a variation of the one being put to work since adoption of No Child Left Behind — arbitrarily inching the performance bar up a little every year, leading more and more public schools to fail, thereby destroying confidence in public schooling and opening the door wider for privatization.

The cost of what's happening in Orange County, Florida, and other school systems across America isn't, of course, just the money being channeled away from instruction and into corporate coffers. They deprive the young of diplomas they've earned by completing all their courses with passing grades. They keep talent and potential out of courses and extracurricular activities that enrich education. They make kids hate every subject that has a high-stakes test attached.

And there's not one shred of evidence that standardized tests are a more accurate and useful measure of learner performance than teacher judgment. Indeed, I'd argue that they're far less accurate and useful, and therefore a harmful, expensive distraction.

I asked a bunch of nationally known reading experts to explain why standardized tests are timed. Here's one's response: "It has to do with the absurd notion of standardizing the testing situation in an attempt to get 'valid' results. If everyone takes the test under the exact same conditions, the results are valid information.... Yeah, right. And so what we actually do is assess how well a population performs under testing conditions rather than testing what they actually know."

Rick isn't letting it go. He's pulled together an 11-county coalition of school board members and educators to try to find out why kids who can read are wasting time in remedial reading programs. I'm invited to their meetings.