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Beyond tests: How to foster imagination in students

By Marion Brady

Teachers teach to tests. Up until a few years ago, that wasn't a problem because most teachers wrote their own. When business leaders convinced Congress that teachers couldn't be trusted, testing was handed over to commercial manufacturers.

Those paying attention know that the high-stakes testing craze has pushed hundreds of thousands of kids out of school, trivialized learning, radically limited teacher ability to adapt to learner differences, and ended many physical education, art, and music programs. It unfairly advantages those who can afford test prep, makes Congress America's school board, creates unreasonable pressures to cheat, closes neighborhood schools, taints the teaching profession, and blocks all innovations except those the results of which can be measured by machines—just to begin a much longer list.

In books, journal articles, op-eds, columns and blog posts, I've explored many of these and other problems created by the new testing policies, but I don't remember calling attention to a problem created by today's emphasis on “minimum competence.” It deserves serious thought.

Stripped to essentials, here's how minimum competency testing works: Authorities make lists of what they think kids should know. The lists are given to teachers, along with orders to teach what's on them. Standardized tests check to see if orders are being followed. Somebody (not educators) sets arbitrary pass-fail cut scores, and kids who score above the cut are considered “minimally competent.”

Sound reasonable? Most people seem to think so. But schools concentrating on minimum competence can't turn out kids smart enough to deal with the problems they're going to inherit. Schooling's proper emphasis is on maximum performance, not minimum competence, but most educators' minds are on something else—the penalties for failure to lift kids above minimum competence levels. Those penalties are so harsh that devising strategies to avoid them has become educator Job One.

Few school administrators will admit it, but one avoidance strategy has them assigning their best people to the kids clustered around the pass-fail cutline, trying to nudge them up into minimum competence territory. This, of course, can work, but it comes at the expense of all the other kids in the school—those considered hopelessly below or safely above that pass-fail line.

Maximum performance

Maximum academic performance lies in a direction where few seem to be looking, and fewer still are offering instructional materials designed to get there. To avoid being

dismissed as too far out in education la-la land to take seriously, I'll let Albert Einstein point the direction, then I'll suggest a way to get there.

“Imagination,” said Einstein, “is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand.”

Consider: We can't do anything about the past. It is what it is, and there's no changing it. The most we can do is try (certainly harder than we now are) to make useful sense of it. But the future is a different matter. Its arrival is inevitable, we have at least some control over it, the importance of exercising that control wisely is self-evident (except perhaps in Congress), and if schools don't teach how to do it, it's not going to get done—at least not on a scale sufficient to save our skins.

To that end, there's no getting around the central role played by imagination. If probable, possible, and preferable futures can't be imagined, the skills necessary for coping with those alternatives aren't going to be developed. And if those skills aren't developed, America will continue its downward educational trajectory.

Below are four imagination-stimulating learning tasks written for middle or high school project teams. All four meet criteria that many years of working with adolescents tell me are important. (a) The tasks are intellectually challenging but doable. (b) They're concrete rather than abstract. (c) They're real-world rather than theoretical. (d) They make use of all school subjects. (e) They require thinking-out-loud dialogue. (f) Most kids find them interesting enough to arouse emotion. (G) They require learners to switch from *mentally storing existing knowledge, to creating new knowledge*.

I made that “g” big to call particular attention to the sentence that follows it. If traditional education had been more defensible, if it had always required kids to construct new knowledge, the last quarter-century of corporately driven educational turmoil would never have happened. It would have been obvious to those now running the education show that they didn't know enough about educating to take control of policy.

Assignments:

- (1) *Much of what humans accomplish is done by organizations. Armies protect from enemies, legislatures write laws, manufacturers produce goods, contractors build roads, religious congregations promote spiritual values, hospital staffs care for the sick, and so on.*

Given the importance of organizations, understanding them is essential. You should know why and how they form, how they differ, why some are efficient and others not, how decisions are made, why all of them tend to become obsolescent, etc.

Your school is a convenient organization to examine. Work with your team to design an outline or plan to guide study of “My School”—everything you can think of that relates to it in any way. When you've finished, combine your plans

with those of other teams to create a master plan, then use it to organize your descriptions and analyses.

Finally, use what you've learned to make recommendations to administrators or the school board for how the organization could do better what it's supposed to do.

Organizations are complicated. Take your time, do the job right, and realize that what you're doing will help you for the rest of your life as you take what you learn to workplaces and the world beyond school.

- (2) *Almost certainly, the immediate area around your school is changing—gradually getting dirtier or cleaner, prettier or uglier, safer or more dangerous, more or less of a “community,” etc. List questions and step-by-step procedures you'd follow to find out what's changing, how, why, and with what possible long-term outcomes.*

- (3) *Choose one of the following policies and create a flow chart identifying its probable consequences for a nearby neighborhood. Extend the flow chart to identify the probable consequences of those initial consequences, and the further consequences of **those** consequences:*
 - *Every family must grow at least a little—say, at least an eighth—of the food it eats.*
 - *No person can generate more than one pound of waste per week that can't be recycled.*
 - *Except in an emergency, no able-bodied adult can use a motorized vehicle for a commute of less than a mile.*

- (4) *A local official has proposed zoning changes that would allow families to run small businesses in their homes or live in their places of business. In a series of numbered points, argue the pros and cons of the zoning change.**

I know from many years of firsthand classroom experience that these kinds of projects work. They don't just stimulate interest, imagination and creativity, they integrate and make active use of every school subject, bring out unexpected intellectual strengths, and almost always reorder perceptions of relative student ability.

But there's a problem: Most educators aren't free to use such activities because standardized tests can't evaluate what the kids do. The work they produce is too complex, too original, too idiosyncratic to be scored by a machine. This, more than anything else, explains my opposition to the current thrust of test-based “reform.”

Arne Duncan, Michael Bloomberg, Bill Gates, Joel Klein, Jeb Bush, and others now involved in setting school policy across America demand that decisions be “data driven.” They cite an old business adage: You can’t manage what you don’t measure.

To these reformers, “data” largely means scores on standardized tests. Those scores (despite test manufacturers’ warnings) increasingly determine educator reputation, employment, and pay. They assign letter grades to schools, grades that often affect real estate values, redistribute state funding, rationalize parent-trigger legislation, and enable other devious privatizing schemes. The scores justify closing neighborhood schools or converting them to charters. They get misused by politicians, and channel billions of dollars of public money into corporate coffers to buy consultant services, tests, and test prep materials.

That’s what test scores do. What they don’t do, what they can’t do, what they’ll never be able to do, is measure what’s easily the most valuable outcomes of a good education—imagination and creativity.

(I note in passing that piling all the above consequences on the shoulders of the young goes a long way toward explaining why test-inundated kids get depressed, sick, cry, soil their underwear, vomit, hate themselves when they can’t finish a test or don’t know answers, tune out or drop out when their scores say they’re not minimally competent.)

Today’s reformers refuse to admit that they have anchored their mandates in false premises. They’re so sure that what the young need to know is known, so sure that standardized tests can evaluate the quality of non-standard thought, so sure that competition can do for education what it sometimes does in business, they won’t even talk to those of us who disagree. Over the last quarter-century they’ve built a multi-billion dollar juggernaut based on those three false premises, and it’s rapidly burying America in intellectual mediocrity.

Parents and concerned citizens have a choice. They can stand quietly aside as business leaders, lawyers, hedge-fund managers and politicians, cheer-led by mainstream media, continue down the super-standardizing education road, wasting billions of dollars and trillions of learning hours on tests that can’t measure abilities essential to survival and success. Or they can accept the centrality of imagination and creativity in humankind’s struggle to achieve its potential, and demand that minimum-competency testing be replaced with maximum-performance tasks.

It’s one or the other because the two are incompatible.

*These tasks are taken from or are similar to those found in the course of study *Connections: Investigating Reality* (<http://www.marionbrady.com/CIR.asp>).

Notwithstanding the fact that the course is free in exchange for useful feedback from teachers, it doesn’t get used or even piloted because commercially produced standardized tests can’t evaluate this kind of learner performance.

