

Washington Post, “The Answer Sheet” blog by Valerie Strauss

The right — and wrong role — for teachers

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Bill Gates spent \$45 million trying to find out what makes a school teacher effective. I’ve studied his Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) project (<http://www.metproject.org/>), and think it ignores a matter of fundamental importance.

Consider: What makes an effective lawyer, carpenter, baseball player, surgeon?

The answer is that it depends—depends on what they’re being asked to do. An effective divorce lawyer isn’t necessarily an effective criminal defense lawyer. A good framing carpenter isn’t necessarily a good finish carpenter. A good baseball catcher isn’t necessarily a good third baseman. A good heart surgeon isn’t necessarily a good hip-replacement surgeon.

Put lawyers, carpenters, baseball players, and surgeons in wrong roles, test them, and a likely conclusion will be that they’re not particularly effective. So it is with teachers. Put them in wrong roles, and they probably won’t be particularly effective.

Gates’ faith in test scores as indicators of effectiveness makes it clear that he buys the conventional wisdom that the teacher’s role is to “deliver information.” But what if the conventional wisdom is wrong?

Here’s an American history teacher playing the “delivering information” role:

“What were the Puritans like? Many of the things they did—and didn’t do—grew out of their religion. For example, they thought that all people were basically evil, and that the only way to keep this evil under control was to follow God’s laws given in the Bible. Anyone who didn’t follow those laws would spend eternity in Hell.”

Later—a few minutes, hours, days, or weeks—it’s the learners’ turn to play their role. They take a test to show how much of the delivered information they remember. If it’s a lot, the teacher is labeled “effective.” If most of it has been forgotten, he or she is “ineffective.”

Let’s call this “Teacher Role X.”

Now, suppose the teacher doesn’t play that role—delivers no information at all about Puritan beliefs and values or anything else—instead says, “I’m handing you copies of several pages from *The New England Primer*, the little book the Puritans used to teach the alphabet. Get with your team, and for the next couple of days try to think like a little Puritan kid studying the pages. What do you think you’d grow up believing or feeling that’s like or not like your present beliefs and values?”

A		In <i>Adam's</i> Fall We Sinned all.
B		Thy <i>Life</i> to Mend This <i>Book</i> Attend.
C		The <i>Cat</i> doth play And after slay.
D		A <i>Dog</i> will bite A <i>Thief</i> at night.
E		An <i>Eagles</i> flight Is out of sight.
F		The <i>Idle Fool</i> Is whipt at School.
G		As runs the <i>Glass</i> Mans life doth pass.
H		My <i>Book</i> and <i>Heart</i> Shall never part.
K		Our <i>K I N G</i> the good No man of blood.
L		The <i>Lion</i> hold The <i>Lamb</i> doth hold.
M		The <i>Moon</i> gives light In time of night.
N		<i>Nightingales</i> sing In Time of Spring!
O		The <i>Royal Oak</i> it was the <i>Tree</i> That sav'd His Royal Majestie;
P		<i>Peter</i> denies His Lord and cries.

character traits that a good education is expected to develop.

Role X teachers may care about those matters, but if they're standing behind a podium in a lecture auditorium, talking to a television camera, or teaching a class via the internet, caring is the most they can do. Real learning is a relationship-based experience. The effectiveness of Role

That's it. The teacher may be an expert on Puritan worldview, but offers no opinion, just wanders around the room listening to kids argue their assumptions, defend their hypotheses, elaborate their theories and generalizations, getting ready to later make their case to the other teams.

Let's call this "Teacher Role Y."

Which teacher—the one delivering information (X), or the one requiring kids to construct information for themselves (Y)—is more effective?

Here's Bill Gates, chief architect of the present education reform movement, giving [his answer](#) to that question: "If you look at something like class sizes going from 22 to 27, and paying that teacher a third of the savings, and you make sure it's the effective teachers you're retaining, by any measure, you're raising the quality of education."

Clearly, when Gates says it's just as easy to deliver information to 27 kids as it is to deliver it to 22, he's taking the teacher-as-deliverer-of-information role for granted. Just by talking a little louder, Role X teachers can deliver information to the additional five students. Give them bullhorns, and they can deliver to 127. Give them television transmitters or the Internet, and class size is irrelevant. [Salman Khan's](#) online math tutorials reach millions.

For Role Y teachers, however, every additional learner after the first makes the job harder. They're trying to gauge the nature and quality of learners' thought processes; assess depth of understanding; set and maintain a proper pace; decide whether to move on, go back, or go around a learning difficulty; determine learner attitudes toward and appreciation of the subject; trace the evolution of communication, collaboration, and other skills; and note honesty, tenacity, and other

X teachers won't change significantly unless somebody invents technology that's capable of, say, delivering a kiss remotely that has the same effect as the real thing.

Notwithstanding the assumption that Teach For America recruits or others who know a subject well can teach it, teaching—real teaching—is exceedingly complex, difficult work. That Role Y history teacher in my example had to decide that understanding a group's worldview is important enough to warrant devoting two or three days to it, and be able to explain, if challenged, why the study of worldview is relevant and important. He or she then had to find a vehicle (in this case, *The New England Primer*) that was intellectually manageable by adolescents of varying ability levels, dealt with the required content, required use of a full range of thought processes, and engaged kids sufficiently to be intrinsically satisfying.

Then the real work began—"reading" kids' minds—analyzing their dialogue, interpreting facial expressions and body language, and sensing other cues so subtle they're often below ordinary levels of awareness—cues that may relate to the learner's mood, ethnicity, prior experience, peer and family relationships, social class, and so on—the whole of the challenge further complicated by the fact that no two kids in any class will be alike.

It takes years for those skills to develop and become "second nature."

Teacher Roles X and Y are played not just in the teaching of history but in every subject, and the roles are poles apart. Indeed, so distinctive are the two approaches they create two entirely different classroom cultures, each with enough consequences—expected and unexpected—to warrant at least a half-dozen chapters in a book.

The performance of students taught by Role X teachers can be evaluated by machine-scored standardized tests. Machines can't come even close to evaluating the performance complexities of Role Y teachers. That's why the testing fad and everything that relates to it—the Common Core State Standards, student ranking, school grades, timed standardized tests, merit pay, pre-set test failure rates, and so on—drive Role Y teachers up a wall.

Failure to distinguish between teacher-centered and student-centered approaches to educating makes the conclusions of Gates' Measures of Effective Teaching project of limited usefulness at best, misleading at worst. That failure also generates problems within the ranks of teachers, creating a chasm of misunderstanding that more than a century of professional dialogue has thus far been unable to bridge.

Decades of firsthand experience with both Roles X and Y in my own teaching and that of teachers for whom I've been responsible leave me without the slightest doubt that, notwithstanding its continued use, much Role X instruction amounts to little more than ritual. Unfortunately, Role X is what No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and other policies being forced on teachers by corporate interests and politicians are reinforcing.

Given the wealth and power behind those misguided efforts, the refusal of their advocates to listen to experienced teachers or respect research, and the assumption by the likes of Rupert Murdoch that current reforms will build a money machine for investors, it seems likely that

present X-based education “reform” efforts will be the only game in town. (See <https://www.google.com/search?q=rupert%20murdock%20on%20education%20investment&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&aq=t&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox-a>)

I can think of only one sure-fire way to take control of public education away from Washington and state capitols, return it to educators and local community control, and open the door to broad dialogue and genuine reform. The young hold a wrench which, dropped into the standardizing gears, will bring them to a near-instant stop. If even a relatively small minority agree (as some already have) to either refuse to take any test not created or approved by their teachers, or else take the tests but “Christmas-tree” the ovals on their answer sheets, the data the tests produce will be useless.

Conscience-driven students who do that will be owed the gratitude of a nation. They’ll have put the brakes on a secretive, destructive reform effort based on a simplistic, teacher-centered, learner-neglecting conception of educating.

I can anticipate some of the conventional-wisdom reaction to what I’m advocating—that it’s irresponsible, that kids are too immature to evaluate the quality of their schooling, that I’m undermining the authority structure that holds the institution together.

Before hanging negative labels on me, ask yourself: Is a system of education that limits intellectual performance to the thought processes that machines can evaluate, adequately equipping the young to cope with the future they’re inheriting?

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Note: This article was republished by *Truthout* and *Alternet*.