

TEACHING TO A TEST WORTH TEACHING TO in COLLEGE and HIGH SCHOOL

Richard H. Hersh

Collegiate Learning Assessment Project

College and Work Readiness Assessment Project

rhersh@sbcglobal.net

203 407-1562

There is an old educational saw that says, “We value what we measure rather than measure what we value.” Unfortunately this turns out to be true more often than we would like to admit because too often tests are selected primarily for their low cost and minimal time demand. Most tests, therefore, are short-answer, machine scored devices. In an era demanding 21st century skills, such tests are hardly sufficient to the task of assessing the higher order learning expected of a high school and/or college graduate in preparation for citizenship and work. With the advent of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) initiative and ubiquitous high-stakes testing of the short-answer variety, there is an increasing unease that we have reduced our learning objectives to only those things that can be measured in such an economical format.

To the degree that we have “dumbed down” our curricula to fit the confines of short-answer tests, we short change both our students and our society in need of higher order learning to compete well in a global information society. “Teaching to the test” has thus become the pejorative mantra of educational critics for good reason. Moreover, such limited testing violates what we know about excellent education—that learning assessment is crucial in providing appropriate and timely feedback to students and teachers; that the most effective teaching requires tight coupling of objectives, curricular materials, pedagogy and assessment. In short, testing is most powerful when it serves a diagnostic

instructional function in the context of everyone understanding what is expected to be learned, linked to appropriate curricula and pedagogy, and linked to learning assessment that does justice to the complexity of the learning required. Put another way, a good assessment measure ought to give both students and teachers an adequate and accurate sense of learning objectives, standards of excellence, and achievement.

Consider how we educate people for the acquisition of highly valued knowledge and skills, for example, surgeons, airline pilots, and architects. Our lives depend on their expertise. Indeed, what they must learn is so important we devote much time and energy to making sure we assess their knowledge and skills in very sophisticated ways eventually leading to licensure—the assessment and public sanctioning of their prowess. We do not limit our testing of surgeons, pilots, or architects to short-answer and/or essay tests—we ask them to **perform** across a wide variety of real tasks they will face on the job and for tasks they will rarely face but must be ready for in case.

To prepare for these professions, students must undergo rigorous intellectual training and serve apprenticeships under masters (teachers, professors) who constantly assess their knowledge and skills through simulation, internships, and guided practice. High level mastery is the goal and quality and timely feedback from assessment is understood to be crucial to the development of that mastery. Their assessments are not limited to paper and pencil tests—none of us would ever consider flying with a pilot who has not been fully tested on take-offs and landings, or being operated on by a surgeon who had not been trained in operating rooms, or living in a building designed by an architect who had not had sufficient supervised practice and testing in the design and construction of such edifices.

It seems that when we truly value the outcomes we always find ways to make sure we robustly assess knowledge and skills in ways that approximate the ends

we seek. When something is important, we make sure that the ends, means and assessment are inextricably linked—and we devote whatever financial and time resources necessary to make sure the objectives are met at very high levels. In this sense, **we teach to a test worth teaching to**. But this is not what happens very often in K-12 or in college and university undergraduate programs. We list lofty goals too abstract to properly measure; we do not invest in the appropriate curricula and pedagogy to do justice to the learning we claim to value; and we use learning assessments that can not do justice to what we care about. This too common reality explains why high school and college students' lament dull lectures and mid-terms and finals as the only assessment, or papers due at the end of the term for which a grade is given with minimal feedback. Such learning is experienced by students as passive, unfulfilling and unhelpful even while they silently cooperate, happy to comply with so little demand.

Our current high school and college assessment of unclear outcomes or inadequate assessment of rich outcomes provides too few signals to students to help them understand what it is they are really being held accountable for and misses the opportunity to help students celebrate mastery on a challenging assessment worthy of the outcomes. Put bluntly, we have asked too little of our students and ourselves and we have reaped what we have sown. The increasing public lament about high school and college graduates is that they cannot write or speak well (thinking made public), cannot think critically, and that they graduate with a sense of entitlement with little self-discipline or the humility of knowing that there is so much one does not know. We are not doing justice to the enabling of our human capital, the most precious civic and economic resource in meeting the challenges of the 21st century.

In this context the Collegiate Learning Assessment project (CLA) has now added the College and Work Readiness Assessment (CWRA) that attempts to provide an exemplar of a high school and college test worth teaching to. And while the CWRA does not measure all that is worth learning, it is a test worth teaching to

because it takes seriously core outcomes of universally valued “higher” order learning, namely critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem solving and writing. Moreover, it demands performance from students that can only be accomplished by rigorous, sustained practice and feedback from caring teachers and professors who hold appropriately high expectations for their students.

The CLA and CWRA are intended to be powerful signaling devices—they make clear that specific higher order learning is valued because that is what the measures require; they allow an institution to gather formative data that informs institutional improvement; they allow for institutional comparisons and thus the ability to benchmark quality; they signal that such outcomes can only be collectively accomplished across the entire curriculum; and by measuring value added they permit both the individual student and institution to measure progress or the lack thereof in a way that allows for correction. Moreover, the CLA and CWRA signal the kinds of examples of pedagogy, materials, and standards one can construct in any and all classrooms to facilitate meeting these important objectives.

We recognize, of course, that subject matter and disciplined-based learning matters as well but our focus is to ask “how does one strike the right balance between teaching knowledge and comprehension on the one hand and on the other, the ability to make use of such knowledge and understanding to think critically, synthesize, and evaluate?” The answer, of course, is for teachers to develop learning objectives and assessments that simultaneously require the mastery of appropriate content *and* the ability to reason--to apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate data in cogent and coherent ways. In this sense, the CLA and CWRA signal teachers to think about how to construct similar assessments for classroom use in terms of *what* is worth learning and *how* to be able to make use of such knowledge.

At a time when this country is reaching an important consensus about what skills are necessary for a 21st century high school and college education, it is crucial that the conversation about outcomes does justice to the development of appropriate learning assessments. We believe that assessment is and ought to be an important form of teaching and learning rather than a ticket punched allowing students to take the next ride. Towards that end, “teaching to a test worth teaching to” is meant to convey the message that there is real potential for excellent and timely assessment to improve instruction and enhance learning.