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Why I Will Not Teach to the Test

It's Time to Focus on In-Depth Learning, Not Shallow Answers

By Kelly Gallaghe

In the midst of controversy surrounding “value added” teacher assessment, which flared recently following the *Los Angeles Times*’ public teacher rankings, the real issue is often overlooked: The state tests being used to evaluate student progress—and, in turn, the effectiveness of teachers—virtually ensure mediocrity.

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Consider the following California 10th-grade-history standard: “Relate the moral and ethical principles in ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, in Judaism, and in Christianity to the development of Western political thought.” How long do you think it would take to teach this standard before a classroom of 16-year-olds reached a thorough understanding? Weeks? Months? Consider another social studies standard: “Compare and contrast the Glorious Revolution of England, the American Revolution, and the French Revolution and their enduring effects worldwide on the political expectations for self-government and individual liberty.” How much time for this unit? A semester? A year? I am sure that history teachers would love to have the opportunity to delve deeply into these standards, but the state test does not permit deeper instruction. Why? Because these two standards come from a much longer list of standards that will be measured on the exam. Teachers in California know the results of this exam may now be used as a factor in their evaluations, so they are forced to accelerate their instruction into “sprint and cover” mode.

What harm comes from a sprint-and-cover approach? A [study](#) published in the journal *Science Education* in December 2008 looked at two sets of high school science students. One set “sprinted”; the other set had teachers who slowed down, went deeper, and did not cover as much material. The results? The first group of students actually scored higher on the state tests at the end of the year. This is not surprising, as their teachers covered more of the test material. I am sure it made their parents, teachers, and administrators happy. What is more interesting, however, is that the students who learned through the slower, in-depth approach actually earned higher grades once they made it to college. This, too, is not surprising. These students were taught to think critically.

In considering this study, it is important to note that the standards are not the problem. We all want standards that set high expectations for our

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My highest priority is to design lessons that enable my kids to think critically and to give them the skills they will need to live productive lives. I want my students to grow up to be problem-solvers, not test-takers. I want them to be innovators, not automatons.

children's learning. The problem is that there are too many standards. If teachers were to teach all the standards at the level they need to be taught so that students would acquire meaningful understanding, one study found, we would have to change the educational system from K-12 to K-22. Because there are too many standards, and because most of these standards are assessed on the state tests, teachers are pressured to cover everything. When everything is covered, shallow teaching and thinking occur.

Any teacher worth his or her salt knows that if you really want to measure the level of student thinking, you have to have students write. Answers to multiple-choice questions can often be faked; answers to essay questions cannot. This is why it is heartening to note that on the **California High School Exit Exam**, students must produce an on-demand essay. But allow me to let you in on California's dirty little secret: A student can receive a zero on the essay portion of the exam and still pass the exam. That's right. A student can write absolute gibberish, or write nothing at all, and still pass the exam. How is this possible? It's because the weight placed on the multiple-choice section of the exam is four times heavier than the weight placed on the essay section. The essay section counts for so little of the final score that it is possible to blow it off and still receive a diploma. Sadly, the state's high school exit exam values shallow thinking (multiple-choice) much more than it values critical thinking (writing). When multiple-choice becomes the valued assessment, essay-writing gets placed on the back burner, and we end up with a school system that raises multiple-choice thinkers in an essay world.

I also find it odd that while many states have raised their test scores over the past few years, we as a country continue to fall in international comparisons of academic achievement. How can this be? If we are getting "better," why are we declining internationally?

In an attempt to answer these questions, Linda Darling-Hammond of Stanford University **studied high-achieving countries** from around the world. Her findings? School systems in high-achieving countries value higher-order thinking. They parse their standards

to make them lean. They use very little, if any, multiple-choice assessments to monitor student progress. They require students to research, to inquire, to write—to think critically. They give students time to reflect upon their learning. They emphasize the skills graduates will need to be college- or career-ready in a globally competitive marketplace. They surround their students with interesting books. Because their assessments demand critical thinking, their students are moving ahead. Because our assessments demand shallow thinking, our students are falling behind.

As teachers, we want to know if we are doing a good job. We want to know our strengths and our weaknesses. We welcome accountability. Frankly, I am embarrassed by how hard teachers' unions have fought to protect weak teachers. It is shameful. But scoring all teachers based on a system that pushes educators to produce memorizers instead of thinkers is not the answer. Worse, it actually rewards mediocre teaching.

The argument on whether "value added" should be used to assess teacher effectiveness misses the larger point. Why do we want to assess a system that is broken? Fix the system first, and then



design tests that will accurately assess deeper learning and better teaching. Let's begin to think like those educators in the highest-achieving countries. We could start by ending this false pursuit of unobtainable standards and design tests that truly value writing and critical thinking. Let's aim for creating big thinkers, not small thinkers. And let's recognize that critical thinking in many classrooms will not occur until the state assessment demands critical thinking in all our classrooms

As I plunge into the school year, my highest priority is to design lessons that enable my kids to think critically and to give them the skills they will need to live productive lives. I want my student to grow up to be problem-solvers, not test-takers. I want them to be innovators, not automatons.

So, go ahead. Tell me my value-added score if you'd like. Just remember, I am not teaching to the test.

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