

I'm a better teacher when students aren't tested

Fear of not scoring well on mandated assessments cripples teachers' ability to teach for learning and not just performance.



A month ago, Raimundo knew no English. But he's been practicing; reciting the sentence stems, looking up phrases in Google translate, speaking up in the simple present tense that we're learning in our English as a Second Language lesson. And so, he looks intently, wanting to be ready when I draw the popsicle stick with his name.

I hesitate for a moment when his name comes up, but I call Raimundo by name.

Simple? Not so much.

Present? Absolutely.

Tense? Incredibly.

Students beg me to spare Raimundo. They wave their hands wildly, ready to speak up in complete sentences.

Raimundo stumbles over his words, looking up at the air at what he has memorized in his mind. The words are far from fluent. He is still translating.

But he speaks up with a slow, drawn-out sentence. "I use the computer to talk to friends," he says. He pauses and looks at the sentence stem with the word "because."

"I use the computer to talk to friends because I miss them. America is difficult. I miss my family."

The boy next to him claps, and I worry that Raimundo will be embarrassed. Then, another

student offers a fist bump and a high five. Another student claps and slowly it morphs into applause. A student stands up. More students clap. Nobody laughs. Nobody mocks. Instead, these students have become a team celebrating learning.

The moment is powerful. The bravery to speak up, the discovery of one's voice, and the hard work toward acquiring a new language won't be enough for this monolingual student to pass the quarterly standardized reading test. His learning is immeasurable, which means his learning won't count.

A different lesson in math

Later that day, in my 6th-grade classroom, we're finding the least common multiple and greatest common factor. I want this to be relevant so I look for a few contexts where this might apply. I identify opportunities for math discourse and allow students to use manipulatives. On paper, my math lesson is just as good as my grammar lesson.

However, my approach changes. I speak faster during direct instruction. I ask fewer questions and fail to offer the think time that students need. After all, we have only three days to learn a complicated concept before the common assessment. The pace feels rushed, and students respond with a restless anxiety.

I glance at the clock during guided practice and scrap the planned discourse questions. I cringe at my thought process

later, but, in the moment, it seems logical. Why let them talk about their process if the test is going to be silent? No, they need to move into independent practice quickly.



"We're allowed to make mistakes," I say. But my actions betray my words.

I move through the room at a frantic pace, keeping a mental checklist of who gets it and who doesn't. On some level, it works. My manic energy seems to get students to work faster. But are they learning more?

While many students rush to solve the problems, others simply give up entirely.

I point to a student's empty paper. "Where's your work?"

"It's too hard," he complains.

"Just do it," I snap back. In other subjects, I would have asked

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him what he had tried and why he felt helpless.

“Let’s go, let’s go!” I say to a table, missing the fact that two students who aren’t working are actually discussing the process verbally.

A student rushes to me with her paper. “Did I do it right?” she asks with an expression that borders on terror. She is an amazing math student who is afraid of having the wrong answer.

I survey her work. “It’s all correct,” I tell her.

She sighs heavily, in relief.

“But it would have been OK if you’d gotten a few wrong, too. We’re allowed to make mistakes,” I say. However, as I look around the room I realize that my actions betray my words. My students do not feel the permission to take risks, make mistakes, or move at their own pace through math. Instead, there is a looming, unspoken pressure about the test scores. I don’t have to say anything. Students sense my fear of failure. I’m not sure they know that others will evaluate my work based on their scores, but they feel the pressure squeezing the life out of a lesson.

I step away and take a deep breath. I think of Raimundo, courageously speaking, boldly walking into the unknown. I remind myself that learning is more important than achievement and that mastery matters more than quantifiable data.

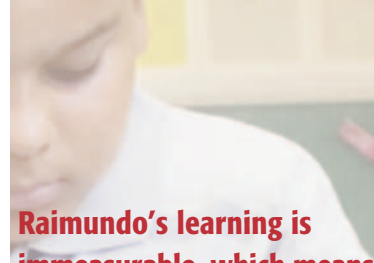
The results

I can blame the testing system, but the truth is it’s me. Somehow, the fear of being labeled as needing “corrective action” doesn’t work with me. I don’t try harder. I don’t increase my use of research-based teaching strategies. Instead, I become impatient, anxious, and guarded in the execution of my lessons.

When I know a subject will be tested, I’m more likely to teach in a way that isn’t best for students. Instead of pushing for discourse, critical thinking, technology integration, creativity, and a constructivist pedagogy, I go for a certain middle ground that will still allow

students to succeed on the tests. After all, students take tests in isolation, with disconnected, chunked-up content that lacks critical thinking, context, or technology. I’m afraid to teach in ways that I believe will really help students learn. I’m not convinced that knowing the standards will mean they’ll perform well on the tests.

When students won’t be tested by the state on a subject, I’m willing to give them time to master it. Failure is an acceptable part of the learning process.



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But when the state plans to test a student on a subject, I grow anxious. I’m less likely to try new strategies. I’m less patient with students who fail to meet the standards. I move into an unhealthy perfectionism, and students feel a constant urgency to get the right answer regardless of the process or thinking involved.

On a logical level, I know I probably won’t be placed on an

improvement plan or fired at the end of the year. My data remains among the top quadrant in the district. Theoretically, I have nothing to lose. But I’ve seen too many amazing teachers whose classes show a low growth score. While I’m confident that critical thinking and constructivism increase learning, I’m not fully convinced they increase scores.

As hard as I try to talk myself out of it, I’m afraid of the data sheet with graphs showing unsatisfactory data. So, I teach math and reading cautiously, trying to convert what I believe is best for students into what will allow them to score high on the test. I respond to failure with impatience, rather than empathy or support. I promote basic skills over critical thinking. I start to believe that what is measurable matters more

than the immeasurable. I begin to view students not as individuals thinking well about life, but as data points and colored dots and a means to a positive evaluation.

And yet . . . when I see the courage of my students, I can allow myself to take a deep breath, slow down, and realize that I would rather risk lower achievement if it leads to higher learning.

