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David Crews

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On Standardization in Schools, Remembering the Student

Day of the night
Day of the night

The sun goes down
The moon and the stars
Peek into water
What you are

The above lyric was written by my nephew Max a couple years ago (and used here with permission from my sister—the author’s mother—because he’s six). For years now I’ve been trying to write a poem retelling the myth of Narcissus. His story always seemed so distinctive to me: it was never really about being in love with himself. In my imagination Narcissus was a thoughtful, reflective human being and his reflections were evidence to that very existence. Each time I attempted to show this philosophical yearning that resides in so many of us, how as humans we long to make sense of the world on our own terms, the drafts of my poems always seemed to contain too much narrative, too many unnecessary details. Somehow, the simplicity of my nephew’s perspective gets it just right.

Upon asking of my interests in teaching literature, frequently I encounter an individual who under raised eyebrow or gaping mouth responds, “Oh, I never understood poetry.” If only more people could approach poetry with the wonder of a child. What happened to that world of innocent curiosity, of youthful creativity? When we’re young anything seems possible, thus our hearts and minds likewise remain open. But then we grow up, go to school. Recognize the world contains other people. Learn the power of *no*. We enter into the modern machine called society and production begins. Sure we learn to count, read letters, learn to find nuance in the similarities and differences of things. But years later, too often, we wake as adults to find the imagination of our youth, the songs of our childhood, now just foreign memories.

There seems to be a missing quality to our lives, an ineffable essence of what it means to be alive, and something my nephew is surely bidding

us to see. As a teacher I cannot help but return to the classroom to question how it is we educate, to consider what kind of role our schools serve in developing those minds that seem to become so conditioned and desensitized. Schools look to prepare young people—both emotionally and intellectually—for the complex world of their adult lives. Schools must generate skilled workers, informed citizens, sensitive members of a community who on a daily basis both understand and agree to a variety of social contracts. But there is a disconnect. When one considers topics most discussed at school board meetings or department meetings or professional in-service seminars, so often the focus remains on what is taught, what we test. We spend so much time scrutinizing what we teach when real efforts should examine how we educate. And yet, here we are—2015—and secondary schools undergoing radical change: in New Jersey teacher evaluation now directly tied to student performance through Growth Objectives, from school district to school district an influx of attention and scrutiny on the rising interest in Data, and districts struggling now to schedule into the school year—not weeks—but open months for standardized testing.

What saddens most is this feeling we are somehow regressing in educational reform, returning to an early twentieth century paradigm when students were seen more as clients, products, widgets. In *Schools That Learn* Peter Senge explores this factory-model of education: “It is little surprise that educators of the mid-nineteenth century explicitly borrowed their new designs from the factory-builders they admired. The result was industrial-age school systems fashioned in the image of the assembly line, the icon of the booming industrial age” (Senge 30). In a culture such as this, students are not seen as individuals. And here Senge’s language draws our attention to the idea that when schools don’t perform at ideal standards, even problem-solving can take on the vernacular of corporations: “The products are no longer judged adequate by society. Its productivity is questioned. And it is responding in the only way the system knows how to respond:

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by doing what it has always done but harder. Workloads increase. Standardized testing is intensified” (Senge 32).

Some could argue schools are our last great stand for democracy. (Think Brown versus the Board of Education, 1954 or Tinker versus Des Moines Independent School District, 1969.) In *Democracy and Education* John Dewey writes, “In the olden times, the diversity of groups was largely a geographical matter. There were many societies, but each, within its own territory, was comparatively homogeneous. But with the development of commerce, transportation, intercommunication, and emigration, countries like the United States are composed of a combination of different groups with different traditional customs. It is this situation which has, perhaps more than any other one cause, forced the demand for an education institution which shall provide something like a homogenous and balanced environment for the young” (Dewey 21). Dewey exposes the need for a general education as a democratizing agent, and does so in the heart of the rising influence of early corporate America, when industrial age thinking placed great social pressure on law-making for schools. He also defines one of the greatest challenges U.S. public education continues to face, a challenge that is deeply unique to this country: how do educators account for the tremendous diversity in student populations?

When the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1975 put into law a revolutionary change to public schools in America, it attempted to bridge that very gap between the rights of individuals under social contract. I can still hear my father’s words—my father the educator, my high school principal—as he spoke to me when I myself became a teacher, how “all students deserve a free and open education,” how this was a cornerstone of IDEA. This country educates all young people up until the age of eighteen without stipulation, without conditions or restrictions, regardless of race, regardless of socio-economic status, of gender, sexual orientation, disability or emotional well-being, or whether even that child is a citizen. In addition, unlike many other countries public education in the United States does not stipulate or pre-determine required fields of study; instead young people are free to choose a vocational path. From this perspective public education in this

country proves an incredible undertaking. To measure progress continues to confound schools, boards, taxpayers, lawmakers.

Standardized testing, however, has become not just the catch-all of educational planning, but for many school districts the increase in its volume, frequency, or intensity now simply drives instruction. And so, we return to Dewey: “In our search for aims in education, we are not concerned, therefore, with finding an end outside of the educative process to which education is subordinate” (Dewey 100). The inherent problem continues to be a problem of perception: the ultimate conclusion of success on a standardized test simply shows a student’s ability to take a standardized test. The test itself ultimately remains “outside” the educational process. The test is created by companies and individuals who have never visited *my* learning environment. Driven by politicians who seem to neglect the complex nuances associated with sincere learning. Often supported by boards of education who want to see their schools climb in educational rankings. And so, the learning environment continues to remain “subordinate,” because we feign scratching our heads and holding out our hands to ask how else can we prove students are progressing.

It was *The Eight-Year Study*—conducted in 1934 by the Progressive Education Association (PEA)—that not only targeted the growing standardization in American public education, but proved there were ways schools could actually account for the ineffable qualities of an authentic learning environment. The study re-infused a sense of individuality and independence into public education; in *The Story of the Eight-Year Study* Director Wilford Aikin asserts, “The school should be a living social organism of which each student is a vital part” (Lounsbury 6). This longitudinal study would follow almost 1500 students over the course of eight years, secondary school into college, and partnered with more than 300 colleges and universities across the country, who agreed to forego standardized tests and entrance exams so that those participating secondary schools might have the opportunity to re-imagine educational curriculums. This allowed schools to experiment, redefine contents of learning, so that the material studied would benefit those specific individuals studying it. The results were exceptional.

Upon graduating, the participating students were paired with a peer (not from the study) though from the same college. They were paired based on demographics such as age, gender, race, scholastic aptitude scores, home and community background, interests. The study then asked professors at those schools to examine the groups of students and found “colleges got from these most experimental schools a higher proportion of sound, effective college material than they did from the more conventional schools in similar environments” (Alessi and Toepfer 118). The study continued to raise the idea that in order to develop sound, critical thinkers schools would need to “encourage the already obvious trend away from restrictions which tend to inhibit departures or deviations from the conventional curriculum patterns” (ibid 118). When one returns to the pressing problems in present education, it is clear these are not new issues. Eighty years ago too there were progressive thinkers attempting to show how standardizing a classroom inhibits real learning, but it has unfortunately taken decades for this research to once again resurface, because World War II put these findings on the back burner. The *Eight Year Study*, however, serves as an example of what education could be if there existed actual trust in the learning environment. If the needs of individuals were in fact accounted for, balanced with the needs of bureaucracy and public perception, perhaps we would still see “sound” and “effective” young learners.

But that requires a major shift in thinking—a metanoia. It would require the freedom for “departures and deviations from conventional curriculum patterns.” Unfortunately, the more we standardize, the more we inhibit a teacher’s sense of creativity, the more we remove the student from the educational process. Although these reflections seem to address standardizing any general learning environment, I can only speak to the time spent inside my own classroom as a teacher of English. And to capture here the many authentic moments of real learning that occur inside the classroom seems a difficult task. Hopefully, even a glimpse will offer a little perspective. Now in my tenth year, my experiences have traversed an interesting amount of emotional and intellectual territory. First, there’s my own natural professional evolution—one that began as a teacher who outlined activities and lessons into ten minute increments to an

educator who now allows a classroom discussion to evolve organically. Unfortunately, that development felt stunted by a great deal of change. Since that time, I’ve worked through three building principals, three superintendents, and an organizational shift from lead teachers to supervisors. HSPA was here, and now it’s not. I’ve experienced life before Student Growth Objectives, and now must account for Student Growth Objectives (mine specifically tied to the new PARCC assessment).

When looking back, it was right around the time of my fourth or fifth year teaching when it seemed I was really hitting a stride as an educator, developing my own personal pedagogy. I struggled to unlock my students’ minds with regards to the writing process, asking them to break the constrictions and restrictions of their formalized teachings in order to generate creative, unique argumentation. It became clear that teaching one way to write is how these students ended up all sounding the same, and it was why it seemed their essays lacked creative thinking, voice. A new mantra took over my classroom: “There is no write way to right.” And together, we began thinking up creative ways to shed their standardized thought patterns. For one, in order to force students to explore more deeply the complexity of their idea-making, they were asked to write an essay using only questions. One question had to inevitably lead to a more complicated question if students were expected to build toward an argument. Interestingly enough, this is the same process that helps students delve more deeply into reading. Naturally, some students struggled; however many not only enjoyed the task but their work reflected the expectation. On another occasion, I sensed my students were leaving ideas too quickly, so they were asked to write an essay in which each sentence had to begin with the very same word that ended the previous. While that task did not achieve the desired effect for which I was hoping, students were so frustrated none of them wanted to end sentences, and I witnessed six perfect uses of the semicolon! Upon interviewing one class in particular, of nineteen students, nine actually attempted to use a semicolon, five of whom never tried before.

Without opportunities for play and exploration, how do we expect students to discover? In *Language and Thought* Noam Chomsky

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claims, “Living one’s life is a creative activity” (Chomsky 33). The standardized classroom, however, the classroom that teaches to a test, does not provide ample possibility for discovery because it ends up suffering from the fear of coverage. Authentic learning moments are drowned in the didacticism of transferring details, figures, facts, from teacher to student. Thus, young people often end up fielding large amounts of information without a complete understanding of the context for which the information matters. My father experienced something like this once, and he loves to tell the story about a time when he was a young homeowner and set out one weekend to build a deck. For hours, he could not for the life of him get the first corner of the deck to stay a perfect right angle. His neighbor Bill, a contractor, happened to stop by to see what he was up to. Bill offered a simple solution: Measure three feet from the corner down one edge of the deck, insert a nail. Measure four feet down the other edge, insert another nail. Then tie a string between the two nails and when it measures five feet—he’d have a right triangle. My father exclaimed, “Bill, that’s the Pythagorean Theorem!” Bill replied, “I don’t know what you call it, but it works.”

When we succumb to the paradigm of universality, of standardization, we lose sight of the very thing my father did: efforts focus more on what we teach rather than how we learn. And so, the humanity is lost. Students learn from those people with whom they build true, authentic relationships. Students learn when a teacher has the space and creativity to generate a learning environment that values and challenges each student in his or her own right. Students learn when they are encouraged to have a voice. To standardize a curriculum, to standardize common assessments, is to standardize a way of thinking.

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David Crews (davidcrewspoeetry.com) has poems published or forthcoming in *The Greensboro Review*, *The Southeast Review*, *The Carolina Quarterly*, *Berkeley Poetry Review*, *Wisconsin Review*,

And once a school embraces the creed that all students should learn specific information, that all students need to succeed on a specific test, that all students learn the same way, the learning environment itself is placed into a box with no room to breathe, no room to evolve. Schools need to acknowledge the laws that govern nature: adaptation, transmutability, evolution. This means what and how we teach must constantly be evolving too. Anyone who has spent time in the classroom knows a group of students from year to year can prove drastically unique. Two classes could read the same book and want to discuss radically different themes, or a wonderful lesson one year could prove completely uneventful the next. When we standardize our classrooms we take that innate and organic curiosity built into the primordial make-up of all young people and we silence it. We take the teacher’s greatest asset in motivating students to learn and we silence it. We take the voices of young people and we silence them.

In “Poetry is Not a Luxury” Audre Lorde writes, “Our children cannot dream unless they live, they cannot live unless they are nourished, and who else will feed them the real food without which their dreams will be no different from ours?” (Lorde 38) Bring the individual student back into the forefront of our educational endeavors. Allow our teachers a sense of their own individuality, so they may in-turn embrace the individuality of their students. As my nephew Max calls upon us to consider, we are all a bit like Narcissus: peeking into water, wondering what we are. In those early moments when the initial wonderings of identity and consciousness and curiosity enter the mind of a young child, do we really want to stand between those innocent, gazing eyes and the mirror in the water?

Paterson Literary Review, and others. Essays found in *Adanna Literary Journal* and *SPECTRUM*. He both teaches and lives in northwest New Jersey. Currently, he's working on a poetry chapbook that catalogs the hiking of "The 46ers" (or the forty-six high peaks in New York's Adirondack State Park). He can be reached at dscrews20@gmail.com.



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