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Who Likes to Get Weighed?

Reflections on Assessment by a Teacher and a Student

Stepping on a scale, evaluating BMI, receiving SAT or IQ scores, measuring our daily steps: our culture seems obsessed with numerical evaluations. Certainly, evaluations can serve a purpose, if they are used to help people improve themselves. In education, however, the dominant school culture in North America implies a connection between testing and learning, but some teachers and students disagree, suggesting the testing and grading culture creates a setting of distrust and dysfunction. It's unclear who first said this, but it is both true and pertinent here: *"Not everything that can be counted counts. Not everything that counts can be counted."* This concern is highlighted when viewing the contrast between required assessments in grade-obsessed classrooms and a voluntary, after-school book club, where students and teachers discuss literature in a relaxed, respectful environment. The following will provide discussion regarding the problematic assessment-testing culture, from both anecdotal and theoretical perspectives. Reflections and anecdotes offered by a recently retired language arts teacher and a current high school student who is also the book club president serve to humanize the stress and concerns generated in a school culture dominated by grades and assessments:

Recently Retired Language Arts Teacher Liz deBeer:

I loathed grading all those papers and tests. On tests, many students wrote perfunctory essays, so I found myself skimming responses. On take-home essays, many students seemingly wrote theirs the night before – or even on the bus before school or in another class. Some essays were unedited with significant deviation from the instructions. I would often save papers by strong students like Meg West, whose comments follow, as a reward; it was such a relief to read a thoughtful paper when so few seemed to care or try.

High School Senior and Book Club President Meg West:

When writing a paper, I often reflect that my teacher will read it in five minutes and slap a grade on it. Why should I slave over it when no one else is even going to look at it? The only time a student will pick up a pencil is if the teacher emphasizes a phrase like *"very important"* or *"could be used in the future"* so that it's clear the information will be on a test--which is the reason we go to school, right? To get good grades. To be able to put a letter or a number next to our brain and show it to our parents and our friends and colleges and say, "Look, *this* is how smart I am. *This* is how much I know: 96% of *The Crucible* or 60% of the literary devices in *To Kill a Mockingbird*." Otherwise, how would we be able to learn effectively?

Wrong, wrong, and wrong. Here is what is valuable about school: lessons that go beyond letter grades and percentiles. Literary devices that can be integrated into a student's own writing outside of class or in a book picked up outside of the curriculum.

But there are kids who have no desire to read outside of school, who care little about Scout and Jem and even less about metaphors. For these kids, the only incentive to memorize or read is the threat of a failing grade. My response: If we have to go over the symbolism in 19th century literature one more time, I might as well take a nap.

Research that Reflects this Conflict:

Often teachers feel that there is a palpable disconnect between what we know about assessment and what we feel we have to do. Many teachers fear punishment, even termination, if they deviate from the testing culture. Generations of teachers have read Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which bluntly criticizes the testing culture and "the banking concept of education" (58) where "the scope of action allowed to the

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students extends only as far as receiving, filling, and storing the deposits” and later “withdrawing” the information for tests (58). This culture directly contrasts with “liberation education” which stresses inquiry and reflection (59). Freire stresses that “innumerable well-intentioned bank-clerk teachers ... do not realize that they are serving only to dehumanize” (61). Further, many of us teachers do realize this phenomenon but feel helpless to challenge the system. Clearly, Freire supports removing the oppressor/oppressed relationship between teacher and student. Instead, he suggests equitable roles where students are given assignments involving inquiry, which lack pre-determined responses.

This concept of student empowerment in many ways reflects Louise Rosenblatt’s idea of the transactional approach to teaching reading. According to Rosenblatt, “A story or poem or play is merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols” (62). She stresses that the literature becomes alive through the students’ experiences with it – not the teachers’ lectures: “Literature provides a living through, not simply knowledge about...” (63).

Of course, teachers’ lessons and even assignments help students fully experience texts. Certainly, providing background information to help student understand setting or style can greatly aid students’ reading. The point is to assist readers so that they can understand and experience the book themselves. Rosenblatt stresses, though, that more than pushing students to have a pre-conceived idea of reading of a text, teachers should stress a more “organic” type of reading: “Above all, students need to be helped to have personally satisfying and personally meaningful transactions with literature. Then they will develop the habit of turning to literature for the pleasures and insights it offers” (Rosenblatt 63).

Therefore, teachers must work more on connecting the literature to students’ worlds than on evaluating students on minute details from a text. Rosenblatt states, “The literary work must hold out some link with the young reader’s own past and present preoccupations, emotions, anxieties, ambitions” (65). Such an environment helps students to feel the relevancy of literature and will subtly encourage them to reach for more. In sum, Rosenblatt’s ideas concretely create the

type of liberated environment Freire endorses, where the students’ voices, ideas, reflections, and very humanity are valued and celebrated.

Many educated teachers strive to create a classroom that balances students’ creativity, inquiry, and interests with moderate testing and evaluating. However, some subscribe to Alfie Kohn’s approach, which fully denounces the testing culture. Kohn, according to his biography on his own website, has been described by *Time* magazine as “perhaps the country’s most outspoken critic of education’s fixation on grades [and] test scores” (Kohn “Biography”). Kohn’s condemnation of grading is based on the following: Grades “tend to diminish students’ interest in what they are learning, ... create a preference for the easiest possible task, [and] ... reduce the quality of students’ thinking” (Kohn, “The Case...”). He argues that much about learning cannot be measured, which creates tests based, often, on skills easiest to measure and least important (Kohn, “The Case”). He offers many ideas, including “authentic assessments” where students design the assessment themselves, which helps teachers seeking something to put in the little box in Grade Quick. The idea is to focus on students’ individual growth, rather than a more competitive assessment form.

Voluntary Book Club: An Antidote

A different type of learning occurs altogether when there is no assessment and no classroom. Students willingly (often eagerly) read and discuss books in an informal, after school book club. When Liz first presented the idea of the book club to high school authorities in 2002, people said that “no one will join” because “kids don’t read unless they have to.” In response, Liz began the book club with no funds. A few students joined and read books like *Black Boy* or *The Things They Carried* or *Lovely Bones*. The principal agreed to the book club, so long as students were not required to read the books, since the titles were not formally approved by the school board. In some ways, this actually helped the club because the books were often chosen off best sellers lists or students’ own requests.

Later the club earned a grant from a school foundation, which required the books to be purchased at the beginning of the year. Therefore, students had fewer democratic choices. Further, because the books were purchased, the

intention was to incorporate more contemporary titles into the summer reading or curriculum. While this meant the book club's reading list was less spontaneous, it also meant that the titles read in school began to include more contemporary popular books, which often appealed to teen readers. It also allowed for some book choices, via literature circles or summer reading. Offering book choices was new to this school's curriculum.

The last title read in the book club each year, though, was not purchased, so the book club president could select the book at the end of the year: The student presidents over the years have selected titles such as *The Book Thief* or *The Fault in the Stars* or *Handle with Care*. This practice particularly highlights the value of student choice versus school-sanctioned texts. In fact, it was via the book club presidents' own choices that the teacher-advisors were introduced to young adult favorites like those by John Green.

The structure of the book club was simple: the book was announced over the loud speaker and fliers were posted. Often an informal invitation would be via authentic classroom discussions after class or even during class discussions when someone would mention a book the club was reading. Teachers and students would attend if they were interested in the book; some would attend if they had not read the book but were interested in learning more about it. Adult and teen views were equally valued, with the student book club president opening with a brief biography of the author and the teacher/advisor asking each participant to share his or her opinion about the book. Discussion would evolve organically from there. The club has been meeting since 2002 and typically has approximately 10 to 20 regular members. Some students do not meet regularly but still read the books, due to conflicts with work or other clubs.

Retired Language Arts Teacher Liz deBeer:

I look forward to every book club meeting. It's a thrill to see students even walking in the door. No credit. No grade. Just because they want to hang out and talk about a book. (And eat snacks). I don't care if they disliked the book; I'm so happy that they want to come and talk about the book – or the latest remake of the last book we read. I love hearing the students argue about the title of the book or the meaning of the ending. I love when they recommend other books

by the same author. Here, I am a co-learner enjoying the comments of my fellow readers. This is the antithesis of the banking theory of education. Even the setting contrasts typical classrooms: I sit in the same circle as the students and other teachers who choose to join the discussion.

High School Senior and Book Club President Meg West:

In the environment created by book club, there is nothing wrong with uttering the words "I don't know." You can show up without having done the homework. There is no pressure to cheat, to take notes, to say all the right things, or to raise your hand. No one is grading you on your interpretation of the novel. How is this learning environment free of all the things I have always associated with learning?

In a school where the most popular way to read *Hamlet* is through SparkNotes, it is often surprising that we can fill seats at an extracurricular based around an activity students claim to hate. Maybe the draw is John Green, or a Young Adult Romance, or any book that was actually written in the last 10 years. But it is so much more than that. We ask questions that often times we ourselves can't even answer. We argue with the advisors over the intentions of the author. We love the books. Sometimes we hate the books. I leave each meeting feeling like I have learned more about literature and my peers and teachers than I could have in a classroom with notes and hand-raising and pop quizzes.

The learning in book club has a lot to do with feeling. *How did you feel about the main character? Why do you think the author chose to tell this story?* The unique answers that come out these questions are often tied to personal experiences. There is not a fear of "right" or "wrong". When there is no grade attached to the learning, students are more willing to take risks.

I feel privileged to be a part of this unique space where all the kids are there because they want to be there and the reading is done out of a love for reading.

Conclusions

Often educators resort to formal assessments allegedly to prepare students for the future. Successful students need to know how to read, write, research, and cite, certainly. Some

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“deposits” must be made, despite Freire’s condemnation of the banking model. How else will students learn the MLA method? They may explore it authentically, but teachers have a responsibility to teach certain skills formally. Still, there is much more to preparing students than having them regurgitate microscopic details or perfunctory facts.

An ideal classroom setting is much like a see saw, where the goal is to balance the evaluations with a more authentic, liberated environment. (As Meg pointed out, some students thrive on tests, so a balanced approach would mean more types of students would have their needs met). The balance may be found by emphasizing emotional reactions to books more and factual responses less. Certainly, Liz’s use of literature circles and book discussions which relied on minimal grading would be a means to support some of the positive aspects of the book club in a formal Language Arts classroom. During literature circles, student groups wrote collaborative poems and made creative posters to “sell” their chosen books, even though these tasks were only graded as a check. Despite the lack of formal evaluations, most students fully embraced these tasks because they were shared with peers and hung up on bulletin boards. Many wanted to entertain their classmates with outstanding, creative poems and posters, even when they were not graded. Ideas about literature circles abound in Harvey Daniels’s book *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups*.

Such public displays of learning without grades reflect some comments by famed psychologist Daniel Goleman, who argues that Social and Emotional Intelligence are imperative for success both in and out of the classroom. He notes: “In the United States many districts and even entire states currently make SEL [Social and Emotional Learning] curriculum requirement, mandating that just as students must attain a certain level of competence in math and language, so too should they master these essential skills for living” (Goleman).

The language arts classroom offers tremendous opportunities to encourage SEL. As Meg observed in book club, often feelings are central to students’ experiences with texts. For example, once, we read *Mockingbird* by Kathryn Erskine, and a few students scoffed at the narrator, who has Asperger Syndrome. Other

students countered, sharing their own experiences with siblings or peers with Asperger Syndrome or Autism. One of the students who most candidly ridiculed the narrator apologized to the group: something that rarely happens in a more formal classroom setting. This type of interaction may not be quantifiable, but a lot of learning happened.

Similarly, at another meeting, we had read *The Other Side of the Sky: A Memoir* by Farah Ahmed and Tamim Ansary. In that memoir, the narrator steps on a land mine in Afghanistan and loses her leg. She eventually moves to the United States with her mother. Some of the teen readers had trouble relating to the narrator’s situation and even questioned her insecurity in her new school setting. Two of the book club members, though, had physical disabilities, so a conversation ensued about being a high school student with physical disabilities.

Such conversations can be maintained in typical language arts classrooms, if a safe, comfortable environment is presented. Certainly, literature circles, discussed previously, allow for more liberated, authentic conversations that veer from the banking model.

Even large-group discussions based on a single novel or story can readily emphasize emotional interactive reading over correctness. As Meg observed, questions about feelings generate authentic discussions. Asking what movie or television show the novel reminds students of or what would motivate a character to make a particular decision can elicit meaningful discussions that can help students’ SEL (and also falls into the Core Curriculum Content Standards under Reading, Critical Thinking, Speaking, Listening etc.). Certainly, listening and sharing ideas seem at least as important to students’ ultimate success in the 21st Century Life and Careers, a goal clearly stated by the Core Curriculum Content Standards (“New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards”).

In sum, what can be most easily tested may be what is least important in students’ personal and even academic growth. If language arts teachers sincerely want students to enjoy reading and writing, we educators must seek to empower students’ own voices and reactions. According to Freire, it is a “revolutionary” move (74), which means it is uncomfortable, changing both the students’ experiences with a typical language arts classroom as well as our own as

teachers. While it may be impossible to impose Freire's full vision in today's rigid educational model, teachers can certainly generate lessons that empower students' humanity in relationship to the texts they read.

Sometimes, this means purposely preparing lessons where there is no correct response, whether it is a full inquiry-based project

or simply providing students with some poems or quotes and asking them to react while considering the assigned novel. How can teachers tell if it's working? Ask the students. Ask them to evaluate the lesson and what they learned. Perhaps this will be the most radical move of all, listening to the students.

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