

Literacy at the Crossroads:
A Pedagogy of Experience or Efficacy?

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INTRODUCTION

In the opening years of the twenty-first century in the United States of America, an unprecedented level of national attention and federal spending are focused on education. Among issues on the national agenda, education is unique, because most American citizens believe themselves to be experts on the subject thanks to their extensive personal experience. In the words of David Warlick, “We assume that classrooms are not enough like the ones in which we succeeded” (2002.) The common classroom experiences of most US citizens can be characterized as “traditional”, predominated by:

1. Teacher directed, lecture-based instruction (especially as students advance further along the educational ladder.)
2. Standardized assessments for which each question has only one correct answer.
3. An ideal vision of the learning environment where students sit quietly at their desks either taking notes or completing an assignment: usually a worksheet or answers to questions from the textbook.
4. The expectation that “academic performance” means regurgitating on cue the facts, opinions, dates and details contained in the textbook and the teacher’s lecture on the assessment examination.

Even for an industrialized age, we know from educational research that this instructional model is poorly suited to long-term learning and lesson retention (Lesley, 2003). For today’s information age and network economy, however, where “flourishing will involve not what people already know but how well they can learn, adapt, solve problems, and

compellingly communicate their solutions to other people,” this traditional educational model is an even poorer fit (Warlick, 2002).

I term this “traditional” model “the pedagogy of experience,” and will contrast it with “a pedagogy of efficacy.” The pedagogy of experience is well known, because it is the instructional model with which virtually every member of our society has extensive experience. Thomas Hoerr characterizes it well in a recent article describing the effective use of multiple intelligence principles to restructure the academic environment and relationships within it. He describes undesirable, well known instructional practices as the “linguistic approach,” defined by the following:

The kids with strong scholastic intelligences are smart
We and the other kids are not.
Teachers create a hierarchy of intellect.
The classroom is curriculum-centered
Teachers help students acquire information and facts.
The focus is on the scholastic intelligences, the 3 R's.
Teachers work from texts.
Teachers assess students by paper and pencil objectives
Teachers close the door and work in isolation (2003).

In contrast, Hoerr describes the desirable instructional environment (framed on a multiple intelligences view of learning, knowledge, and education) as being defined by:

Everyone has a different profile of intelligences;
are all smart in different ways
Teachers use all students' intelligences to help them learn
The classroom is child centered
Teachers help students create meaning in a constructivist way
The Personal Intelligences are valued: Who you are is more important
than what you know.
Teachers create curriculum--lessons, units, themes.
Teachers create assessment tools--Projects, Exhibitions, Portfolios-- which
incorporate MI.
Teachers work with colleagues in using MI, developing collegiality
(2003).

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I use the word “efficacy” rather than “efficiency” to describe the preferred classroom pedagogy of the twenty-first century deliberately. Dictionary.com defines “efficient” as “Acting or producing effectively with a minimum of waste, expense, or unnecessary effort.” Worksheet dominated, lecture focused instruction based on a linguistic, traditional, behaviorist view of education tends to be regarded by educators (both administrators and teachers) as a safe, virtually foolproof method of instruction (Leslee, 2003). In this environment, teachers take on a role more analogous to a “technician” rather than an instructor or coach (Gregory, 2003). The pedagogy of experience may take less effort, but it certainly does not produce the desired results for the twenty-first century. Instead of an “efficient” pedagogy of experience, schools need efficacious instruction. Dictionary.com defines “efficacy” as “power or capacity to produce a desired effect; effectiveness.” In light of both workforce needs within our network economy as well as the results of educational research in literacy and other areas, our choice seems clear. Education in our era of endless curriculum standards and high-stakes accountability is at a crossroads, and our chosen path must be that of efficacious reform.

CONCEPTIONS OF ASSESSMENT AND PUNISHMENT

National standards and corresponding assessment examinations to measure student performance are not new phenomena. In the late 1980s, England had established a national curriculum as well as assessment examination. Researchers estimated that between the ages of 5 and 18 in England, a student would complete “a minimum of 75 external assessments, tests, and examinations” as a result of national-level accountability (Gregory, 2003). Singapore has a similar history of national standards and testing,

however grade promotion and “tracking” into vocational or higher education career paths hinge on examination scores in Singapore, while they do not in England.

Passage of “No Child Left Behind” legislation by the U.S. Congress and President in 2001 brought similar pressures to American students as those experienced by young people in England and Singapore throughout the 1990s. One of the ironies apparent in this discussion of appropriate and “efficacious” pedagogies is the U.S. government’s outspoken commitment to scientifically proven, research based methods. On the government’s No Child Left Behind website, parents are assured that ““Under No Child Left Behind , federal support is targeted to those educational programs that have been demonstrated to be effective through rigorous scientific research.” (NCLB website, 2003).

Yet despite these bold claims, unsubstantiated assertions are made and presented as truth. In a section of the website entitled, “The Facts about...Measuring Progress,” the government authors assert:

The Challenge: For too long, America's education system has not been accountable for results and too many children have been locked in underachieving schools and left behind.

The Solution: Information is power; testing and gathering independent data are the ways to get information into the hands of parents, educators and taxpayers.

Why Testing Will Work: Testing provides information. Until teachers and parents recognize what their students know and can do, they can't help them improve. Testing will raise expectations for all students and ensure that no child slips through the cracks. (NCLB website, 2003).

As Ginette Delandsher has eloquently observed, current assessment methods (including those advanced by NCLB legislation) “resemble data collection about poorly defined phenomena.” In Delandsher’s words, this is “naïve inductive empiricism,” and simply is

not grounded in scientific research as claimed by the Bush Administration (Delandsher, 2002). Because of the American public's extensive personal experiences with "traditional" pedagogy, as well as our almost blind faith in tabular statistics presented as "scientifically valid," a cruel lie is being sold to the American voter and taxpayer. Do American schools need reform? In many cases, absolutely! Is nationwide accountability a panacea? Certainly not!

The NCLB website describes the punitive methodology employed to highlight schools not meeting national standards. According to the website, test scores in each district and state will be aggregated into "report cards."

The report cards must state student performance in terms of three levels: basic, proficient and advanced. Achievement data must be disaggregated, or broken out, by student subgroups according to: race, ethnicity, gender, English language proficiency, migrant status, disability status and low-income status. The report cards must also tell which schools have been identified as needing improvement, corrective action or restructuring (NCLB website, 2003).

High expectations are needed and students must learn literacy skills, in both basic and advanced forms. However, as Marsha Buly and Valencia Riddle concluded in their article, "Below the Bar: Profiles of Students who Fail State Reading Assessments," a predominant tendency is for policymakers and administrators to search for a "silver bullet" to solve literacy problems and address other issues of poor student performance highlighted by testing regimens (2003). The National Research Council's 1999 report, as well as NCLB supporters, concur that "challenging standards" combined with "aligned assessments" will lead to improved student learning. The sad fact is that school districts and teachers have not responded as many policymakers would expect, and the

“traditional” methods generally used to improve student achievement have been counterproductive (Buly 2003).

According to the NCLB website, the U.S. government is spending \$384 million in 2003 for these testing programs. In 2004, President Bush is seeking \$390 million for testing. The costs are high as are the stakes, and unfortunately, the research indicates that when educators resort to “the pedagogy of experience,” the result will be long term failure for students.

RESEARCH FINDINGS ON LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

As previously mentioned, Buly and Valencia (2002) highlight the tendency for policymakers and educators to search for a “silver bullet” to solve apparent learning deficiencies highlighted by accountability measures. Teachers are accustomed to staff development training offered each year, in which a new program or product is touted as being THE answer to student achievement needs. Despite this common tendency, single solutions do not exist. Buly and Valencia conducted studies on students in the state of Washington, studying the profiles of students who failed to pass state reading examinations, and found that “reading failure is multifaceted and it is individual.” (2002). As they conclude, the focus in striving to meet state standards cannot be just “teaching the standards,” it must be on “teaching the students.”

A large degree of rhetoric is put forward by the Texas Education Agency with regard to “student centered approaches” in the classroom. Ironically, Texas classrooms are more often “standards centered” rather than “student centered.” My own experiences as an elementary classroom teacher confirm this observation. District and campus

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administrators rarely encouraged me to take a student-level approach to my instruction, except in cases where a student was identified as having “special needs” by an Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) board. Instead, the instructional focus was almost wholly on grade level standards and expectations. The district’s response to mandated testing was further testing, to make sure that students were ready to take the “real” test at the end of the year. My own observations about the effects of this emphasis were also noted by Kelvin Gregory and Marguerite Clarke, in their studies of students in England and Singapore. They noted the tendencies of a narrowed curriculum, teachers teaching to the test, the placing of students in narrow categories (certainly not inclusive of Howard Gardner’s multiple intelligences,) an unhealthy focus on test results instead of learning, increased stress on students as well as teachers, a lack of cooperation among schools, a lack of time for kids to play and just be kids (2002).

As Donald Graves vividly describes, the development of literacy skills is based on many affective and relational factors which are outside the realm of curriculum standards and cognitive lesson objectives (2002). Students need a safe, secure environment to explore and risk, as they develop their own sense of themselves as authors and “members of the literacy club.” As Thomas Hoerr notes, a truly student centered approach is one in which student strengths and interests come first. This is opposite to the approach advocated by many administrators, where the curriculum comes first and is imposed in a top-down fashion (Hoerr, 2003.)

THE LITERACY OUR STUDENTS NEED

Roger Wagner, creator of the multimedia software program “HyperStudio” popular in schools in the 1990s, has observed that “literacy is in an evolving state that mirrors the changing information needs of our society.” As our society’s access, use, and need for information has changed, so has the very definition of literacy. At one point in human history, the ability to sign your name was the mark of a literate individual. Today, futurists like David Thornburg assert new elements of functional literacy in twenty-first century culture, including “abstraction, system thinking, experimentation, collaboration.” (2003). Literacy is a broad concept, which extends far beyond the visible processes of reading and writing. As Donald Graves notes, every child and human being has a story to tell. The environment in which that individual lives, however, has a tremendous impact on the proclivity and potential for the development of literacy skills. Graves postulates the necessary qualities in the twenty-first century learner include curiosity, initiative, sensitivity, self-regulation, expressiveness, the ability to pose the right problem, and the ability to discriminate (Graves, 2002). Clearly these skills extend far beyond “the three R’s” of traditional, “back to basics” instruction. Yet this pedagogy of experience is exactly what many educators and other educational stakeholders reflexively support when faced with the challenges of universal standards and accountability.

The present means of assessing educational improvement, which rely heavily on computer scoring, “will continue to fail to measure what Americans should prize in their students in order to maintain our number one position in the world. Such elements as initiative and the ability to formulate questions, relate and integrate sources, and engage

in good, long thinking get lost in our rush to measure quickly and cheaply (Graves, 2002.) As Neil Postman eloquently noted in Technopoly, we live in an age where statistics issuing forth from the all-knowing “computer” are regarded as holy and sacrosanct. Test scores for students in schools within a district or in different districts seems to resonate universally with legislators as well as voters. As Donald Graves has noted, “Our politicians believe that all tests are automatically good” (2002.) Sadly, our present era of school accountability is overseen by a public steeped only in instructional methods more appropriate to a bygone industrial age, rather than visionary leaders attuned to the needs and uncertainties of the future. The reflexive response of administrators and teachers to “teach to the test” may produce short term gains in test results, but its long term results are devastating. Not only are these instructional methods counterproductive to the workforce needs of the twenty-first century, but they have also been repeatedly discounted as viable pedagogy by brain researchers, educational researchers, and medical scientists.

Overwhelming documentation and research indicates that primarily didactic, decontextualized, “traditional” classroom instruction fails to help students develop authentic literacy knowledge and skills. Furthermore, it does not promote long term learning and retention, nor the literacy skills many consider “the new basics” of the twenty-first century.

High stakes testing not only have high stakes in terms of the teacher and administrator evaluations which “ride” on the results, or the promotion of students to another grade. The stakes are high because the future of our nation literally hangs in the balance. Left unchecked, our current drive to “leave no child untested” risks making the

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tests themselves the curriculum within our schools: the objective for which all educational stakeholders strive to master. The tail is wagging the dog, the cart is before the horse: we are confusing instrumental and intrinsic goals in education at a fundamental level, and the biggest losers are our children. Rather than look forward to the excitement of school and a lifelong journey of literacy development, students fear the stress-filled environment of the classroom and the tests which have become their apparent reason for being.

GOOD NEWS: SITE LEVEL FLEXIBILITY

Despite the heavy handed characterization which NCLB legislation is generally given, a large degree of autonomy and “site level flexibility” is permitted within the law. Allowing educators latitude in the way they attempt to improve student performance was one of the assumptions built into the 1999 National Research Council report which supported the use of “challenging standards and aligned assessments” to positively impact student performance (Buly 2003).

This should come as good news to educators and parents, because state and national governments do not care as much about the methodologies employed to produce acceptable and improving test scores: they simply want to see the results. Research indicates that students in highly “efficacious” learning environments, as defined in this article, perform about the same or better than peers in traditional learning environments dominated by the pedagogy of experience (Hoerr, 2003). These methodologies include but are not limited to differentiated learning activities, an integrated curriculum, and authentic assessment (Brown, 2002). While student test performance may be about the

same, a multitude of other benefits are realized within a pedagogy of efficacy. These include overwhelming parental support, positive student attitudes toward learning and school, and the development of more sophisticated skills of inquiry (Brown, 2002). These developed skills include those identified by Thornburg, Graves, and others, as the “new basics” of the twenty-first century.

Assessment is not the enemy, it is not even a necessary evil, but it can become an obstacle to the development of literacy and a broader culture of lifelong learning if responded to inappropriately. Claire Helm articulates a positive vision of assessment’s place in the educational environment, noting it is essential to “set high standards and identify outcomes.” She further explains, from the perspective of many Catholic educators in the United States,

We believe that assessment is never an end in itself but, rather, an integral part of the educational process designed to help improve the instructional program. The word assess itself comes from the French word *assidere*, meaning, "to sit beside." Paradoxically, one also can argue that effective instruction begins first with the identification of what we expect our students to know and to do as a result of our instruction--what one writer described as "working backwards." (Helm, 2002).

Assessment is a natural and expected part of the educational process, yet it can be misused with devastating consequences. Ginette Delandshere suggests a shift in focus to assessment methods which support learning rather than methods which are primarily “sorting and selecting students.” (2002). She offers the reasonable suggestion that educators reconnect their educational practice to theory and philosophy, refocusing public debate on education upon fundamental questions. These include basic ideas, like “what is knowledge?” and “what is assessment?” If we take a nineteenth century, behaviorist view of these questions, viewing knowledge and assessment as elements of a

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regurgitative / replicative process, we will confine ourselves to the ineffectual methodologies of the pedagogy of experience. If instead, however, we embrace a research-supported “efficacious” approach to instruction, the result will be both successful and timely for the needs of our present age. Shouldn’t school be fun again, and shouldn’t we encourage kids to be creative, build on their prior knowledge and experiences, and further refine their personal literacy skills utilizing a broad array of communicative modalities? Absolutely! We stand at the crossroads, and we dare not take the path of mere efficiency, which in reality is a false choice doomed to eventual boredom and failure. Our path must be efficacy, for a dynamical learning environment in which all learners can thrive and grow.

We may need a change in assessment regimes. Delandshere calls for a “move away from simple, mechanistic behaviorist notions of learning toward cognitive, constructivist, and situative representations.” (2002). But at a more practical, classroom and campus level, we may need simply a different response to assessment. The crossroads presents a choice: it is up to individual educators to pick the path for themselves as well as their students.

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