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#### The Pitfalls of Standardized Testing

#### Paul DeVries

The problem of effective student evaluation has plagued educators for years. I'm not talking about a cursory glance, but meaningful assessment which provides us with a tangible reflection that genuine student learning was achieved. We probably all have a variety of evaluation mediums, but are we really assessing if our students have learned, or simply following course objectives by insuring that students will "know."

The life of an educator can be turbulent, as well as demanding and with the many time constraints mandated, all too often assessment becomes secondary to instruction. Time between classes or semesters can be so short that we are almost forced to employ assessments that are simple and fast. One assessment that permits the rapid dissemination of grades is the ubiquitous standardized (bubble, multiple guess) test. Standardized tests have been a staple diet of our educational system since World War 1, and do for the most part serve a function in the assessment of student learning. This assessment; however, quickly loses its legitimacy as more and more of a students final grade is applied to it.

Standardized tests are unlike any assessment that is employed during our adult life and is almost never used to evaluate professional development. In fact, if raises were contingent on the results of these tests there would be insurrections at companies all over the U.S. As teachers we are constantly having our performance measured by student evaluations, which in general are constructed using a standardized format. Consider for one moment then how often you have heard the recurrent gripe that echo's around the faculty "green room" about how bias and ineffective these evaluations are. It would seem ironic that the very medium we distrust is the very one we compel our students to complete.

Standardized tests contain many inherent flaws that prevent true student evaluation. They force students to consider just one answer as correct, forbidding any deviation from an absolute. Yet, how many times in reality does just one singular resolution exist? I'm not arguing that standardized tests can't be used to evaluate static facts, but do they evaluate higher levels of learning. Standardized tests also coerce students to focus on "what's on the test" information, rather than focusing on what really matters, learning. Imagine the inordinate amount of time that is spent in education simply reviewing for the test? If I had a dollar for every student who asked "is this on the test," I would be writing this article from a condo in Malibu rather than from a booth in Panera Bread.

Standardized tests also create the assumption that the requisite knowledge for course progression has been reached. Research shows; however, that there is no clear evidence to support the claim that standardized tests are a credible measure of academic achievement or intellectual capacity. The reality is that these tests have been used in compulsory education for decades, yet we still have a steady stream of high school graduates that for one reason or another

spend their entire lives employed in "McJobs." No offense is meant, but if increased standards and increased standardized testing means better education, how do you explain this paradox? We also presume that by passing these exams students are more likely to have a successful career. The reality though is that I still see students failing to possess even the most elemental of skills, which becomes particularly disconcerting when taking into account that each student has probably completed hundreds of standardized tests throughout their educational careers.

It would be simple to propose more and more reasons why we should be reticent to use this type of assessment. This would; however, defeat my intent which is to highlight the problem and recommend common sense solutions. When searching for solutions we must first consider time restraint factors, class size and curriculum content, all of which impact how we test. When teaching in Pittsburgh it was common to test and submit final grades for some two to three hundred students in one day. How on earth anyone can effectively evaluate that many students in a single day is beyond worldly capacity! Yet this is what teachers carry out each and every semester in colleges and schools throughout the U.S.

One simple solution would be to distribute grades over multiple assessments, and limit or eliminate the use of standardized tests all together. This is especially important in view of terminal exams which often carry the greatest weight. Students could also complete projects, portfolios, practical assessments or even essay questions in lieu of a standardized test. I understand these assessments can be both time prohibitive and subjective; however, each one allows students to convey elevated levels of learning, something that standardized tests do not. Why not try testing your students using the same exam questions written in both, standardized and essay format; you might be surprised to discover how differently students score.

As educators we spend our lives trying to inspire students to learn. We have taught ourselves to tap-dance, edu-tain, and incorporate YouTube into our daily presentations. Yet all this effort becomes mute if we are unable to evaluate whether or not our students have actually learned, what we were teaching.