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An Existentialist Appraisal of Standardized Testing

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EDUC 9460, Philosophic Theories in Education
Fall 2005
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For thousands of years humankind has tried to codify knowledge and knowing. It's been said that our preoccupation with this task is what defines us and makes us unique: one of our most precious beliefs is that we are the only self aware organism, that we seek out and attempt to isolate Truth. If so, we are left with a thorny problem when we consider the acquisition of knowledge: *What* do we know? *How* do we know that we know it? How do we *measure* what we know? What do we *do* with this information once we have it? And ultimately: who *benefits* from such data ...and how?

Our search for truth and meaning often generates more questions than answers.

As the twentieth century drew to a close, educators could quite satisfactorily claim to have nailed down much in the way of understanding the quantification of assessments through such things as reliability quotients, bell curves, and other measurement *minutiae*. If a curricular activity could be articulated, written, calculated, pontificated, distilled, synthesized, run, jumped, or otherwise cognitively manipulated, someone had found a way to size it up, compare it, evaluate it, and neatly categorize it. At the time, many felt this is the way schools should act: by necessity and function, schools are interested in learning more about students. And one way educational bodies acquire such information is through standardized testing.

Standardized tests, lofty and majestic “yardsticks” of student aptitude or achievement, are designed and written by specialized commercial publishers of tests and are generally represented by the better part of the English language: SAT, ACT, ITBS, CAT, and, here in Missouri, MAP. The stated goal of most such procedures is to acquire

a snapshot of a school system, a particular student demographic, or even of an individual student. Quite naturally, august bodies of learning want to know whether or not school programs are succeeding.

Standardized tests are used by administrators and teachers in deciding how to plan future instruction, determining the effectiveness of previous instruction, and to evaluate where the organization and student population stands with regard to curricular objectives. To that end, each test serves different purposes. Aptitude tests are “predictors,” in which “criterion-related evidence ... is collected only in situations where educators are using an assessment procedure to *predict* how well students will perform” (Popham, 2002) in future school work. Achievement tests measure what learners already know about a given subject.

Standardized tests are not recommended as the sole indicator of a learner’s placement within the classroom because of their limitations – for example, such tests are imperfect “yardsticks” for measuring what each individual can or cannot do and may be designed under such restrictive time constraints (Henriques & Steinberg) as to have little supportive evidence of scrutiny with regard to alternate-form reliability. Regardless, W. James Popham (2002) notes there is substantial evidence that “standardized tests (especially standardized *achievement* tests) are often misused”; as a result, learners are frequently – and inappropriately – categorized based upon the results of a single assessment device.

Use of standardized testing

Educators and school administrators most commonly utilize standardized test results for:

- ❑ The evaluation of educational programs;
- ❑ The reporting of an individual learner's progress;
- ❑ The diagnosis of the strengths and weaknesses of a student body;
- ❑ The selection of students for special programs;
- ❑ The determination of placement of learners into special groups;
- ❑ The certification of student achievement, i.e., the promotion of students from grade to grade or, in some states, graduation from high school.

(Bagin & Rudner, 1994)

Typically, standardized testing is a gauge of *group* abilities, *group* achievements, and the comparison and rank-placement of the individual within the *larger body*.

“Standardization” of curriculum, as well as “standardization” of assessment, is a manifestation of larger societal bodies setting the agenda for public education. In a commerce-dominated Western culture, great emphasis is placed on producing competent students, prepared to contribute to society in positive ways as employable young adults. In such an environment, added prominence is given to core subject areas of math, science, and language skills – hence the emphasis upon measurable evidence of learners having attained competency in those areas. “Standardization” is the net result of commercial enterprise exerting pressure upon the community to establish student benchmarks. Such a stance is not entirely altruistic: arguably the greatest beneficiary in

this scenario is Commerce. Leaders of enterprise profit from the continual creation of students educated to be future employees and consumers.

What gets taught and how?

Aristotle asked us to consider “whether training should be directed at things useful in life, or at those conducive to virtue, or at non-essentials...Men do not all prize most highly the same virtue, so naturally they differ also about the proper training for it” (Hobbs, n.d.). Aristotle raises the questions of what knowledge is most worthy of being taught and how should it be taught. Entire traditions have evolved from the early philosophical ideas of Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates; each subsequent generation of philosophers learning from the wisdom of the previous group of thinkers, each pondering how people learn and what the relationship between teacher and student looks like (Hobbs, n.d.).

Some teachers of philosophy break down the views and values of educational institutions into categories of belief systems that can be identified with five basic educational philosophies:

- ❑ Perennialism
- ❑ Idealism
- ❑ Realism
- ❑ Experimentalism
- ❑ Existentialism (Kurtus, 2001).

It is this last philosophy – Existentialism – that we will use as a lens through which to examine the phenomena of standardized testing.

In education, Existentialism places at its core a focus on the *individual*, seeking out a personal understanding of the world. Through this interpretation, each individual characterizes for him or herself the concepts of reality, truth, and goodness and “as a result, schools exist to aid children in knowing themselves and their place in society” (Kurtus, 2001). This world-view approach is at odds with traditional educational philosophy attitudes that don’t adequately address the plight of each individual:

Existentialism rejects the existence of any source of objective, authoritative truth about metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. Instead, individuals are responsible for determining for themselves what is “true” or “false,” “right” or “wrong,” “beautiful” or “ugly.” For the existentialist, there exists no universal form of human nature; each of us has the free will to develop as we see fit (Hobbs, n.d.).

Sprouting from John Paul Sartre’s blueprint – that “*existence precedes essence*” – the educational philosophy of Existentialism views the student first as an individual, responsible for their own thoughts, beliefs, and ways of behaving. Understanding takes precedence over preordained subject matter or curricula; the role of teacher is to provide pathways for student exploration: “creating an environment in which they may freely choose their own preferred way...the existentialist demands the education of the whole person, not just the mind” (Hobbs, n.d.).

An Existentialist point-of-view.

Students immersed in an Existentialist curriculum are presented with diverse options from which to choose. Curricular structure tends to provide students with greater freedom and autonomy in their selection of subject matter. In contrast, the phenomena of

standardized testing tends to result in the *narrowing* of the curricular spectrum. By placing greater emphasis on specific areas of student assessment, the advent of standardized testing has created a culture valuing knowledge of math, science, and language over other areas of study. Even more troubling to Existentialist thought is the idea that the constriction of knowledge may also be applied to these so-called “core” areas of study: Some math, science, or language skills are more highly prized than others, resulting in a further narrowing of the curricular focus. Existentialists would argue that a broader range of opportunity for acquisition of knowledge would afford students greater occasion for personal growth and expression. Moreover, “in contrast to the humanities, math and the natural sciences may be de-emphasized, presumably because their subject matter would be considered ‘cold,’ ‘dry,’ ‘objective,’ and therefore less fruitful to self-awareness” (Hobbs, n.d.).

With regard to Existentialism, Noddings (1998) writes, “what meaning there is in life, we must create.” While traditionalists might argue that standardized testing is one way of measuring student knowledge, one must recognize that what is being measured is *standardized* areas of knowledge, i.e., formulated and pre-ordained areas of study are being addressed by such testing – a minimum baseline framework is presumed for all students. *Individual* student choice is taken out of the equation, to be replaced by rules of what *all* students should know. The Existentialist ideal would be to provide models for students to consider for their own potential conduct, to explore facets of their own potential rather than rote preparation for business, trade, or occupation.

In an article published in *Education Week*, human behavioralist and educator Alfie Kohn (2004) is critical of standardized testing, in the way that “scores often

measure superficial thinking.” Because standardized tests have become so important to educational institutions, educators are forced to “teach to the test” – often at the expense of broader curricular content. Faced with the prospect of losing funding or students – or both – with the publication of low test scores, educators have little choice but to focus on “high stakes” knowledge. The unfortunate net result is *not* the Existentialist ideal of a student who acquires relevant knowledge that is authentic to his or her world. Rather than a nation of problem-solvers, interested for personal reasons in finding multiple *best solutions*, standardized testing has fostered generations of learners interested only in finding a single *right answer*. Existentialists might very well believe that students are not encouraged to acquire knowledge resulting in personal understanding but, rather, knowledge best applicable to game show trivia.

Existentialist thinking does not discriminate on the basis of gender, race, or socio-economic status. Knowledge is created and manipulated by the individual. Yet standardized testing is often described as biased toward those children coming from economically privileged backgrounds. Furthermore, Kohn (2004) notes “the quality of instruction declines most for those who have least.” Given that such testing often determines student placement or ranking within the larger group, the individual loses social capital and, therefore, freedom of choice.

In the United States, a country where a hundred year old house is considered “old,” we’ve developed an inferiority complex from the rest of the educated world. We’ve only been around for a couple hundred years but we feel it necessary to be recognized as “number one” ...the strongest power on earth with the best inventions, the best economy, the best place to live, and the smartest, best educated people. There is an

underlying political motivation to quantify our knowledge in order to impress the rest of the world that we deserve to be called “number one.” Standardized testing is one way to quantify this statement.

Washington state’s top education official Terry Bergeson is quoted as saying “the politicians of this country have made education everybody’s top priority, and everybody thinks testing is the answer for everything” (Henriques & Steinberg, 2001). Testing has become so important, so “high stakes,” that the foundation is often weak. Despite the recommendations of the testing industry that no single test be the basis for life-altering decisions about students, many states use them for that very reason. When mistakes occur – and they *do*, more frequently than one might imagine – students are not permitted to graduate high school, they are prevented from being admitted to colleges, they lose social capital. In short, “choice” is taken from the hands of students. Rather than creating motivation for students to succeed, standardized testing may in some capacity be limiting opportunity.

Traditionalist views point out that teachers and schools must be held accountable for student outcomes, that in order to accomplish this task student knowledge must be measured. The Committee for Economic Development states that

Measuring academic achievement is crucial to transforming education into a performance-oriented enterprise, rather than one focused on inputs and rules...we strongly support efforts to specify academic standards, measure improvements in student learning, and hold educators and students accountable for results”

(Measuring, n.d.).

Conclusions

Supporters maintain that the best device for predicting student aptitude and for measuring student achievement is standardized testing. Actually, what they really mean is that standardized testing is the most *expeditious* means. Existentialist educators – especially those in the fine arts where such things are more commonplace – will point out that other such devices have existed for a long time. Student reflections, teacher observation, performance assessments are better indicators of student understanding than tests that compare students, schools, and districts and are used to identify “winners” and “losers.” However, these more relevant forms of assessment require more time, more training for assessors, and more emphasis on abstract thinking: all of which adds up to more money, a theme that is anathema to politicians and cash-strapped school districts.

The bottom line: clearly standardized testing may be *one* tool for measuring *one aspect* of student potential. Although it is not the only “yardstick” by which students should be assessed, clearly it is used as such. The emphasis upon standardized testing has resulted in a narrowing of curricular focus, a narrowing of individual choice within the public school framework, and replacement of problem-solving with superficial, “trivia-style” thinking. Existentialist educators may acknowledge that standardized testing is here for the duration but will be reluctant to place undue emphasis on the act of “teaching to the test” for fear of undermining personal student inquiry. For Existentialist educators, the primary goal will remain that of authenticity and relevance to the learner. In their view, the role of educator is that of guide rather than autocrat.

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