

# Putting Myself to the Test

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In college, I pumped my fist at a rally against standardized testing. I'd never seen the exam I was protesting, but stood in solidarity with educators and labor organizers who felt the testing movement was an attack on teachers, particularly those working in poor public schools. My opposition grew when I became a teacher in the South Bronx, one of America's poorest communities. I wanted to uplift my students and resented the weight of a looming high-stakes test.

Besides, I thought good teachers should be left to their own devices. And, I was certain that I was a good teacher. For the most part, my students were punctual, respectful, and engaged. It wasn't until my second year in the classroom that I began questioning this assumption.

In a routine evaluation, my principal praised my organization, management, and facilitation, but posed the following question: "How do you know the kids are really getting it?" She urged me to develop more-rigorous assessments of student learning. Ego and uncertainty inspired me to measure the impact of my instruction. I thought I was effective, but I wanted proof.

In my third year of teaching, I put myself to the test. To formally link my instruction to quantifiable student outcomes, I decided my sophomores would take the state Comprehensive English Regents Examination a year early. As I deconstructed the test — which was a blend of reading-based questions and essays — I appreciated its ability to efficiently achieve what I could not.

Writing rigorous and comprehensive test questions is a meticulous and laborious science. The New York regents' exam was based on the science of assessment and aligned with state curriculum standards, core curriculum, and federal mandates. The state education department oversaw testing, ensuring questions were written and vetted to be "statistically and psychometrically sound," and published an online archive of exams, rubrics, and sample student essays. Rather than reinvent the wheel, I decided to learn from these tools. What I learned was surprising and empowering.

I discovered holes in my curriculum. I once dismissed standardized testing for its narrow focus on a discrete set of skills, but I learned that my self-made assignments were more problematic. It turned out they were skewed in my favor. I was better at teaching literary analysis than grammar and punctuation. When I started giving ongoing standardized assessments, I noticed that my students showed steady growth in literary analysis, but less growth in grammar and punctuation. I was teaching to my strengths instead of strengthening my weaknesses.

The test also compensated for the inherently subjective act of grading. I was designing the quizzes and projects

# Viewpoint

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used to evaluate my students and, by extension, my instruction. My intimate knowledge of students and the bonds we forged in the classroom influenced my perception of their performance. I knew Michael was a talented, but lazy, writer. I admired the dogged work ethic of Lian, a Chinese-born student, who struggled to master English. Naturally, I was emotionally invested in the success of my students — their grades were my grades.

The test provided me with fresh perspectives on my work. I was not allowed to assess my students' writing. Colleagues from my English department used detailed rubrics to grade each essay. These peers had emotional distance from the work and could scrutinize essays for evidence of achievement.

Most of the teachers I've worked with over the years don't share my newfound enthusiasm. The 2010 Scholastic-Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation survey of 40,000 educators nationwide found that only 27 percent felt state standardized tests were essential or very important in measuring student performance. I'm now convinced that these sentiments are the product of a testing movement that has become more about fear and politics than pedagogy. Teachers, I believe, are pumping their fists for the wrong reasons.

Fear is at the heart of this backlash. My colleagues fear the proliferation of drill-and-kill instruction. This outrage, though understandable, should be directed at the policies and school leaders that use standardized testing as a replacement — rather than a measurement — for inspired instruction. These drill-and-kill practices demoralize teachers and warp the aim of assessment.

The most powerful opposition comes from the teachers' unions. At a recent convention, the National Education Association insisted that it “will always be opposed to high-stakes, test-driven evaluations.” This rhetoric is a distraction from the underlying problem. Standardized testing reflects the curricular priorities of a state's education agenda. Blaming the test for the shortcomings of that agenda is like blaming the barometer for the weather.

That's not to say there is no room for improvement. On the whole, testing must become more innovative, technologically advanced, and better at identifying skills essential for college and career readiness. But the same is true of our public school systems. We certainly wouldn't do away with America's noble, but deeply flawed, experiment with public education.

Sadly, the actual merits and shortcomings of standardized testing often get lost in this stalemated debate that positions the test as either a scourge on teachers or a panacea for reform. In truth, the test is nothing more than a tool. It will not singlehandedly turn around swaths of failing classrooms or be the death of public education.

Only policies, leaders, and, most importantly, teachers wield that kind of power over school performance. Like any assessment tool — including the ones teachers regularly generate and assign — standardized testing has strengths and limitations.

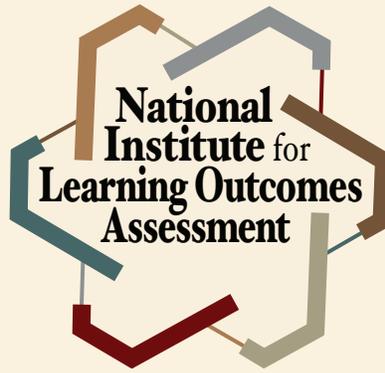
When I “depoliticized” the test, I found a useful and flawed ally. The exam excelled where I struggled, offering comprehensive and standards-based assessments. I thrived where the test fell short, designing creative, performance-based projects. Together, we were strategic partners. I designed and graded innovative projects — my students participated in court trials for Shakespearean characters — and the test provided a rubric that guided my evaluation of student learning.

My intimate knowledge of students and the bonds we forged in the classroom influenced my perception of their performance.

All of my students who took the exam passed. Most earned high scores. I also found a correlation between improved test performance and growth in reading and writing ability. Grammar and punctuation were still my students' weakest areas, but there was evidence of growth.

The test didn't make my students smarter. It made the teacher smarter. I learned that my job wasn't simply to encourage students to relentlessly pursue knowledge. I needed to constantly test what I thought I knew about teaching.

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