

How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Standardized Testing



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Ever since then-governor, national color coder, and patron saint of Pennsylvania's educational renaissance Tom Ridge forced through mandatory state testing for all public schools, my fellow teachers across the state have been complaining. Standardized testing, they say, takes away from individualized instruction. It does not allow for creativity. It does not measure true progress or advance critical thinking. It does not result in improved teaching; it results in teaching to the test. It does not motivate; it demoralizes. It limits; it does not include. It is not about education; it is about politics.

We have heard much about the success of the No Child Left Behind Act. Among other forward-thinking innovations delivered by a president who once looked back wistfully at his C-studded academic record, this act increases standardized testing. We are sure to hear more grumbling from the nation's teachers.

My advice is this: Stop whining. It is time to focus not on the students but on how much easier this has made your job.

As a teacher of high school English, I am thrilled by all of this new testing. For the first ten years of my career, I worried incessantly—Was I challenging students enough or too much? Was I instilling in them a sense of excitement at the beauty of the written word, while still impressing upon them the need to work hard? Was I truly teaching them, through the study of literature and writing, to be better thinkers? Was I helping them to develop minds that could solve problems? Was I helping them to develop minds that could be useful beyond the schoolhouse walls? Was everything designed to get them to think, express their thoughts, and support their expressions?

It was a heavy burden.

But now, thanks to the intellectual Prozac of standardized testing, that albatross is no longer around my neck—forgive the allusion, but I make it while such things are still possible. I feel great. I call on all teachers to take their medicine and jump on board the happy bus with me.

The hardest thing in teaching is to force students to think on their own, to trust their reasoning. Curiosity and opinions they have; they're young. But they also want to "get the right answers." Bringing students along while balancing these opposing forces is draining. We don't want them to merely engage in rote memorization—although there are times when this is necessary—we want them to be able to apply knowledge.

In the teaching of writing, it is easy for a teacher to tell the student holding a blank page what to write for a given assignment. But the teacher who does so fails the student. Instead, the teacher has to draw the student along, force him or her to think, to risk, to fail, to repair, to try again, to fail again, to revise, to succeed and, ultimately, to discover. It is hard. It takes time. And I do not think it can be tested en masse.

Or at least that's what I used to think when I was a worrier. But I've learned to embrace these reforms. The politicians say this is what's best for education. They ought to know.

Standardized testing gives me focus. The draining nature of making the students think or of my actually adjusting to the differences in the group in front of me are gone. I used to worry about preparing students for things like college, work, and *life*. What a fool! Now I must merely prepare them for

the test. My doctor says my blood pressure and cholesterol are at their lowest in years. I've noticed fewer hairs in the sink when I comb. My hemorrhoids have dissipated, and my posture has improved.

Singularity of thought is essential to all that we hold dear in America. And that's why I believe in the flag, apple pie, and standardized testing. The whiners out there will decry any policy that stems from seeing the world in black and white. But look how well single-minded thinking has been working. And it is exactly this type of "thinking" that standardized testing measures. The future looks bright. F. Scott Fitzgerald said, "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function." He was a drunk. That balancing act is too hard for teachers and for students.

So my fellow American teachers, I say to you, stop whining, stop worrying, jump on board the happy bus. We're being taken for a ride. Let's enjoy it together.

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