

HOW DO WE KNOW THEY ARE LEARNING?

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There is a lot of talk today about assessing i.e. measuring what a student has learned. The basic question is “What particular areas of knowledge do you intend to assess?” Up until recently, you could count on most people agreeing that schools exist and are funded to teach children the three C’s ... Communication through reading, Communication through writing, and Calculation. (If you are really quite ancient, you’d probably call these the three R’s for reading, ’riting, and ’rithmetic.)

Make Believe Evaluation

Some educator theorists believe that children (and parents) must be shielded from any negatives; to them ‘failure’ is a bad word; ‘honors’ belong to everyone. *“What a child knows is not as important as his/her self esteem.”* *“A portfolio of tasks completed has more value than test results.”* The attitudes reflected in these statements are based on half-truths, wishful thinking, and a big dose of unreality. Parents owe it to themselves and to their children to take a realistic look at schooling.

Evaluation Facts

- No one likes to be labelled deficient or a failure but everyone has limitations whether in math, golf, singing, visual acuity, physical strength, reading comprehension, or a million other endeavors. To reduce a standard of performance to the level that everyone is ‘superior’ is to have no standard at all.
- In any field someone is always the first, the top, the best. In any race everyone is ahead of someone else except for the last one; some have to be in the top half and some in the bottom half. Like it or not, that’s the nature of life, of competition, of comparison, of recognition, of business, of sports, of nations.
- No system should injure a child’s self esteem. But, neither should it give the child a warped picture of his or her abilities. It cannot shield every child from disappointment, cannot award first place to all, should not pretend that every person is equal in everything, and must not equate participation or mere attendance with excellence.
- The reality of a child’s emotional or neurological makeup can limit his/her learning.
- There is more to school performance than test scores and grades. Study habits, cooperation, endurance at a task, competitiveness, truthfulness, creativity, dependability, task completion, are all important in the overall assessment of a person. *But* ... these should not replace the measure of what the child knows and what skills he or she has.
- The mission of the school is to prepare all students to enter the real world where they will be rated, where they may be honored or not, where their self esteem is of little concern to many others, *but* where their ability to read, to communicate, to

calculate will be valued as it contributes to their life's work.

Realistic Evaluation

So then, how to assess learning? Typically, a student is measured (a) against himself, (b) against his peers, and (c) against the population at large.

He can be measured against himself by first establishing a limited and feasible expectation within his ability, e.g. memorizing the spelling of a list of ten words, or the basic addition facts for single digits, to be tested on tomorrow. The test will expose his own personal level of mastery of the facts. It is assumed that the task is not beyond his ability.

In class he can be measured against his peers by test scores and by report card grades. Grades are normally based on multiple tests plus other completed requirements (term papers, projects, experiments, assignments, etc.) Making the honor roll, being chosen student-of-the-week/month/year or class valedictorian are all based on peer comparisons.

The student's achievement is also measured against a large group of other students by using standardized testing which we will discuss later on.

The "Lake Wobegon" Effect

The town of "Lake Wobegon", creation of author and radio entertainer, Garrison Keillor, is touted as the place "where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and the children are all above average." We smile at the switch in phrasing regarding women and men. Most people are probably just a little mystified by the item about the children. All above average in what?

Perhaps people take this humorous claim to mean academic achievement but of course it might also be related to intelligence, physical development, maturity, good looks, or social poise, or all of the above. Whatever the reference is, for an entire group to be above average is statistically impossible unless some deliberate control were being exerted, e.g. only adults who are above average are allowed to move to "Lake Wobegon", or infants who are below average or likely to be below average are deported at birth from the community.

Averages

Averages are funny things. Whether it is about weights, touchdowns, test scores, or stock values an average will:

- (a) be somewhere between the highest and lowest number, and
- (b) have some items above and some items below the average.

The only exception is when every item in the group being averaged is the same, e.g. the average of *any* number of 5 pound bags of flour is ... *5 pounds!*

As you increase the number of items being averaged the number above and the number below the average *tend* to be about the same. If five six-year-old children weigh 50, 52, 55, 48 and 100 lbs respectively, the average weight is 61 lbs with only *one child* above the average and *four children* below the average. However, if you weigh 100 six-year-olds you will have *about* half above and *about* half below the average weight.