

Teaching “Smart” instead of Teaching “Hard”

By
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Scenario

A young man approached his first job interview thinking “I’ve got this” because he thought he knew what the questions that would be asked and he had memorized his responses. He was stunned when the first question was not what he anticipated. The interviewer asked, “You and I are in downtown Seattle, if you had to wash every window in the city, how would you go about determining what it will cost how long it would take?”

I recently received the honor of being selected by Governor Terry McAuliffe to sit on his Standards of Learning (SOL) Intervention Committee for the Commonwealth of Virginia. This committee will of twenty will provide input into the revamping of the SOLs. Virginia is one of five States who did not adopt the Common Core. The Governor and Secretary of Education, Anne Holton, are committed to developing standards that involve the type of problem solving needed to be successful in *the above interview scenario*. The goals of our workforce have changed. Like the above employer they are looking for problem-solvers, not people who regurgitate information. I was pleasantly surprised to learn that the Secretary Holton and Governor McAuliffe’s real objective for this committee is to create a learning environment where problem-solving will be an integral part of the internal fabric in our schools as early as the elementary grades. In order for this to happen, our instructional assessment must change to meet those needs.

I support the goals of this committee but also support the Common Core Standards (is not a curriculum), an idea that came from governors, not the federal government. In my twenty-year experience as a principal in northern Virginia I had the challenge of dealing with students from all over the United States. They came to me with different levels of competencies for the same grade level because some had attended as many as five schools in their elementary careers. Each of those school system had it’s own list of standards for each grade which complicated things for my staff but more importantly for the students. One of my friends who was not a military or government employee but whose husband worked with a corporation that moved from state to state said her daughter was never taught the concept of “percentage” because it either had been taught before she came to the school or was scheduled to be taught as they were leaving. Some of my friends laughingly referred to the IBM acronym as “I’ve Been Moved.” One set of nationwide standards would have solved this transiency issue in my estimation. States would be comparing apples to apples.

I have often heard Robert Marzano’s, an expert in our field, statement that our present curriculum is “A mile wide (too many objectives), and an inch deep” when the opposite should be true. He and other experts go on to say, “In order for teachers to teach all of the objectives outlined in most curriculums in the United States, we would need to expand our K-12 curriculum to K-21. Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond

another noted expert in our field and whose work is highlighted in this article, and spoke to the committee has lamented for years that the emphasis needs to be on teaching depth instead of breath. The goal is for students to have deeper understanding so students leaving elementary will have such a deep foundation that they will be able to move at a different pace. Our emphasis should be on the “depth” of critical thinking instead of the “breath” of rote learning. We want a curriculum and corresponding assessments that are thoughtful, yet lean. The assessments in my mind must inform instruction or as indicated by many teachers, become a waste of time or “just another thing to do.”

Three reasons why we must develop a sense of urgency about the above:

1. RAND studied 17 states and found only two percent of the math and 21% of the English Language Arts items assessed higher-order skills. In our desire to meet the No Child Left Behind mandate, assessments testing of higher order thinking was phased out.
2. Business spokesmen, higher education leaders, and others have been urging schools to pursue skills that are in increasing demands in this complex, technology and rapidly changing global economy. Universities are also concerned that numerous students need an additional year of remedial classes in order to complete college. This is neither cost effective for them or the students. Businesses report that our students lack the skills needed to access the workforce. The new gap in town is the “Skills Gap.” According to economists the routine skills used in factory jobs that once fuel our economy have declined dramatically over the past five decades, as automation, computerization and outsourcing have accelerated in the U.S. Jobs are changing from the “Routine Manual of the 1960s to “Non-routine Analytic” (Darling-Hammond).
3. Global Competition: Do the math! The U.S. has been on a downward trend compared to other countries since 2000. In 2000 our math score on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) was 493 but dropped to 481 in 2012. Reading was at 504 and dropped to 498. Science dropped by only one point from 499 to 498. The bigger problem is that other countries are improving and at a faster pace. As a result we are ranked 21st in reading, 23rd in science and 32nd in mathematics. I have heard all sorts of explanation for our low rankings to include the pool of students in China, class size and teacher training when comparing international benchmarks but at the end of the day...It is what it is! Our young adults will be competing with students around the world, not just those in Virginia.

What does the above have to do with our testing program and curriculum? According to Dr. Darling-Hammond and other experts other nations teach and assess the full range of college-career readiness skill. High achieving countries use: Open-ended essay and problems to be solved and explained. Some require graduation portfolios and oral presentations before panels. Performance task require students to design and collect data, analyze and present findings in writing,

orally and with technology. Ask yourself, which student learned most, the student who demonstrated mastery by designing and building a house or the one who passed a fill in the blank or multiple choice test. We also know that teachers already can or can be trained to score these assessments reliably and that this process enables teachers to learn more about the standards and curriculum (unwrapping the standards-L. Ainsworth). However time, training and resources must be provided.

During my thirty-five years in education I have had the pleasure of working with some of the most outstanding teachers in the nation. I recall being classrooms with teachers who demanded that when a child gave an answer, he or she had to “defend or justify his answer to the class.” Students had to do the same on SOL testing day. Consequently, testing often took the entire day, and busses had to be held. Our test scores soared when we focused on thinking rather than the test itself.

The question most people, especially teachers and some parents want to know is whether there will be a reduction in the number of tests? If you understood what was being said in this article you would know that there will be a reduction merely by designing tests that are what some authors (L. Ainsworth) call “Power Standards” and/or Essential Outcomes. It is about teaching smart instead of teaching hard. During our initial committee meeting in Richmond we learned that other nations teach fewer standards and integrate some of the smaller objectives.

Our goal is to make our students more competitive, involve teachers in the development of on-going or formative assessments but also realizing that like in any profession we must be held accountable. That accountability for teachers cannot be in the form of student performance on one test, multiple variables need to be considered. This will require a great deal of quality professional development for teachers. Those 45 states that have adopted the Common Core with have multiple opportunities for teachers to attend workshops, participate in online lesson plan collaboration and sharing of resources. Commercial materials are everywhere for them. The Commonwealth’s decision means that we must provide those opportunities ourselves. To achieve this goal of deeper testing requires deeper teaching. The latter means changing how and what you teach. If we can’t ask students to be responsible for something we have not taught them. This certainly applies to teachers also.

I applied for and was selected to be on this committee as an individual but I know and embrace the fact that I represent this county. I will be working with our educational community to obtain input once more information has been obtained.

In closing, I have used the Seattle scenario during workshop sessions and found there is no single “right” answer but there are more “thoughtful” ones. Merely counting the number of windows is important but not the most thoughtful answer. Try it at home or with friends and see what you learn (smile).