

When Students Talk Back to Tests

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ALL of us have wished that we could challenge test items—with impunity. Many times in the course of our education, we would like to have talked back to tests, but few of us have had the opportunity to question any test item for any reason. We were compelled to accept, on the authority of the teachers, items in their teacher-made tests. Submission was the better part of courage, and the risk was not worth the price. We knew who held the big pencil. This was true of how tests were used in general, whether standardized or teacher-made.

Yet all of us as students knew a good test item from a bad one, and we knew it without an item analysis. As students, we knew when the item was not worth an answer. (Not every question deserved one.) We knew when the question was ambiguous, so that our response became a guess. We knew also when the responses did not actually discriminate, but left us in a semantical tangle unrelated to the stem of the question. We knew that if we were given a chance we could have supported some of our responses with logical reasoning and/or sources beyond the texts. Why do we now, as teachers, forget these test-taking experiences of ours and not put them to work for us in our teaching?

Our very inability to challenge test items has deprived us of an important aspect of learning—the need to question. In effect, that inability to question seems to have conspired against our education, for it is through

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questioning that we narrow our universe of ignorance. It is through questioning that we learn to form quality questions that extend our search for understanding. We only need recall that such obvious questions as, "What is fire?" or "Why does this burning splinter go out when I put it in a jar?" opened wide the paths to modern chemistry and narrowed man's ignorance of the physical world.

The Need To Question

Besides developing our questioning skills, our challenge of test items could have taught us fundamental notions of semantics. We could have looked beyond the printed word, that is, we could have read above the lines, between the lines, below the lines, and the lines of print themselves. We could have soon learned to read for what was not there as well as what was there. Our power of critical reading could have been sharpened and reinforced. Certainly an opportunity to analyze and critique items could have advanced our critical skills of reading and thinking. We would, it seems to follow, have come to appreciate that the classroom is a

place for diversity of thought and not the worst place in the world to have an idea. We would have come to be at ease with ideas, although they were diverse from our own. We would have come to recognize that no matter how ideas are bundled in words, they must still be supported with evidence, both logical and substantial, and that behind the semantical wrap dwells the thought.

If the student benefits from talking back to tests, then how much do we who sit on the other side of the desk have to gain? Surely there must be advantages for teachers as well. Would we not sharpen our teaching by sharpening our testing techniques? Our objectives would have to be more explicit if we knew what we really wanted to measure. Clearly our evaluative process would demand consistency between instrument and objectives. We would have to answer the question, "What do we want the student to be able to do so that he demonstrates that he knows?" In brief, we would have to answer our question, "How do I know that the student knows?" Some answers to those questions would soon tell us that some of our objectives, although fine and noble but not explicit, do not lend themselves to our kinds of test items, our kinds of measurement.

As over-burdened teachers we could use the challenge to help us perform an item analysis. Many times the items on our teacher-made tests go unanalyzed because of the time factor and the continuous pressures of teaching. Yet rare is the test maker who can write an item the first time with a level of difficulty and discrimination appropriate to the instrument and the student evaluation that he attaches to it. Would not our test instruments improve if we could see the items from the point of view of the students we test? Would not our evaluation rest on instruments of greater reliability and validity?

A Change to Openness

But most important of all, would not a change come over our classroom and our own role? Would not a climate of openness soon follow, and our role as a teacher become one to foster that openness? Would not our

classroom be more open, less confining to an interchange of ideas; more accepting of diversity of thought, less conforming to convergent ideas? Would not our classroom be less threatening because we encouraged the student to question and to present his ideas about test items? Would not his thinking be respected and reinforced, and would there not be an excitement in hearing many thoughts on an item, that in all fairness, should itself be tested? Would not the student's cognitive and affective domains meet in "I feel good about expressing my ideas in this classroom?"

To challenge, the student's test paper is returned to him—feedback to apprise him of his progress. He knows how well he is doing, but he also knows that he can test his own thinking. It does not follow, however, that we would accept every challenge of items as being equally worthy, but it does not follow either that students would take advantage of the challenge and game play. A good item possessing a creditable degree of difficulty and discrimination remains a good item. Time, perhaps, would not permit every student to question and advance his own thinking orally about the items of the test, but he could write his challenge beside his answer and re-submit his paper for us to re-examine. We could then read the student's challenge for its reasoning, its knowledge gained from other sources, its penetrating insights. We might do several things—discard certain items of the test, adjust the value we attach to certain items, recalculate a student's score, and even adjust the grades accordingly.

Would we not lessen the threat that any evaluation holds when the student learns that the instrument by which he is measured has limitations that we recognize? Would not that threat be further lessened as the student sees us put his thinking, his integrity above a fallible instrument? Would he not see and remember us as the teachers who nurtured his thinking in a classroom that was open to the power of ideas; as teachers who permitted him to talk back to tests?

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