

The Teacher

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We Are Not Machines

"Mr. Smith is a great, innovative teacher, and he got a low evaluation."

"District X had 80 percent of their teachers exceeding expectations, but you have to be a saint in our district."

"I told my evaluator he didn't know anything about my course!"

These and similar sentiments could often be heard in teacher lounges during 1987-88 as the Texas Teacher Appraisal System (TTAS) first went into effect. This year I note less dismay, although teachers are still under considerable stress as they strive to climb the career ladder. The state has revised the evaluation instrument, required additional evaluator training to improve reliability, and issued each of us a 101-page *Teacher Orientation Manual*. (It takes four pages just to explain the scoring.) Clever entrepreneurs, as well as our own district, now offer workshops on the "instrument." We seem to be adjusting; teachers are very resilient and adaptive people. Unfortunately,

Unfortunately, because the TTAS is a deadly assault on the teaching profession. Of course, teachers should be evaluated, and public schools should be held accountable. The Texas system, however, is dangerous because it demonstrates faith in what Neil Postman (1979) calls the "technical thesis." The technical thesis claims that "only through objective, formal, and precise standardization can we control our lives. In other words, through machinery" (p. 91). To reduce a human act as varied, complex, and context-bound as teaching to a standardized checklist is dehumanizing.

A machine model of teacher evaluation demands the same behavior of all teachers. Our manual, to be sure, claims that no single teaching model is imposed, but I'm not convinced. We

lose one point, for instance, if we do not "close instruction appropriately" (p. 37). Says the manual, "The teacher may briefly summarize or ask students to summarize main points and explain how learning will be needed in the future" (p. 62). No matter if your instructional goals for the lesson do not fit into this tidy abstracting. No closure, no point.

In addition to subverting pluralism, the TTAS encourages a mechanistic view of teaching and learning. The manual declares, for example, "Effective teachers present material in small steps . . ." (p. 84). No room here for a holistic view or for variation from the lock-step plan. Worst of all is the notion that such a mechanistic view is objective and efficient. Effective teachers are effective because they fit the

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"instrument," and what they do then is clearly observable and measurable. Neil Postman says it best: such an evaluation system "requires a belief that a system which supplies precision is, by that virtue, objective and hence, real. It requires above all a belief that the technical system can do your thinking for you—that is to say it requires that calculation supersede judgment" (p. 89).

In all fairness, I admit the TTAS does have value as a heuristic tool that suggests areas teachers need to be reminded of or need to explore. I have received useful feedback from my evaluators. I would maintain, though, that good evaluators are good because they are experienced and sensitive, not because they have memorized a 71-point checklist. Given time, resources, and trust, evaluators and teachers across the state might be able to develop truly meaningful evaluation methods—ones that would allow for diversity, recognize the limits of behaviorist technique, fit the contexts of individual classrooms, and encourage the capability which humanizes education—human judgment.

Well, for now we will have to live with the TTAS. I only hope that we do not make peace with it. I miss last year's sense of outrage. □

References

- Postman, Neil. *Teaching as a Conserving Activity*. New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1979.
- Texas Education Agency. *Texas Teacher Appraisal System Orientation Manual* (1987-88). Austin: Texas Education Agency, Division of Management Assistance and Personnel Development, 1987.

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