

**The Standardized Classroom**  
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Recently, in many of the educational journals, local newspapers and conference agendas, state and national standards documents and standardized testing has been given a great deal of attention. There has been an outcry from the media and many political interest groups for improved test performance and higher educational standards. (Berliner & Biddle) This focus on student testing and increased teacher accountability through testing, has lead some school districts to mandate a “teaching to the test” program in order to raise test scores to combat the mounting public concerns with public education (Rothman). States and school districts have been spending countless hours to revamp and/or create standards documents that reflect the growing concern over poorly defined or inadequate, educational expectations (Bernauer & Cress).

Some schools have been using commercial test preparation programs to help students do well on the upcoming standardized tests, such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills’ (ITBS) “Scoring High”. Some of these commercial programs have been partially successful at raising test scores. Parents, the general public and the media seem to applaud these efforts (Wiggins). The scores on these standardized tests, such as the ITBS, are published in many local and statewide newspapers. Schools are evaluated and compared to each other using predominately this test data. If this “teaching to the test” is beneficial for raising school’s test scores, then maybe we should change the whole school environment to become more aligned with those elements that would foster improvement on these tests. If it raises test scores it must be sound educational practice. Can this be accurate?

A map store in Phoenix, Arizona sells a map that displays all of the Phoenix Metropolitan school districts and their subsequent test scores, broken down by geographic location. This map is used by real estate agencies to help prospective home buyers pick out a “good” school. These test scores have become the major determinate of what is a “good” school. If these scores are going to be used as the primary means for the public to evaluate school effectiveness and quality, then why not help children do well on these tests? No one seems to be arguing that helping children score better on these tests is not a reasonable goal. But how far do we go to insure this happens? Do we align the district’s curriculum to match the test? In other words, do we teach to the test (Bushweller)? At first this may sound logical. However, I believe it would have such a negative overall effect on students’ learning that upon closer examination, it would be an educational disaster. In the rest of this article I would like to explore whether this test-driven curriculum makes sense or would it have a reductive, negative impact on the experiences afforded our students.

Standardized tests, like the ones administered here in Arizona, Stanford Achievement Tests, ITBS and the performance based assessment, Arizona Student Assessment Program, have a definite stance towards learning and student/teacher accountability (Serafini). If these tests are being used as the sole indicator of the quality of education we provide our children, then the classroom environment that is aligned with many of the same procedures and philosophies that these tests put forth should help children be successful in these educational scenarios. In other words, if we equate educational quality with test scores, then aligning tests and curriculum seems to make sense. But at what costs?

If the students were successful on these tests and the school districts raised their test scores, would everyone be happy? After reading articles and newspaper columns, it would seem that everything would be coming up “roses” in education if we could just raise the test scores. But what would we lose? What would be left out and who would be marginalized? What kind of classroom environment would support success on these tests? Is being able to do well on these standardized tests a guarantee of a successful academic experience? Is everything of importance included in these tests? More importantly, would you want your child in this type of classroom? Would you like to teach in this type of classroom?

In other words, what would a classroom look like that helped children do well on these standardized tests and ignored other curriculum decisions? I will call this phenomenon the “standardized classroom” . I hope that by describing this classroom, educators can better understand the effects of narrowly defined standards and standardized testing on the school curriculum.

In the standardized classroom, there would only be one right answer and someone other than the students would know what that answer is. The answer manual would provide the “truth” about the way the world works and the way language is structured. There would be no questioning the teachers manual. Not even by the teacher! In the standardized classroom, truth would be found in the answer key by referring to an outside authority. An answer is either wrong or right, not open to debate or rebuttal.

During reading instruction, the primary objective would be to find the main idea. This main idea would have been decided upon by an outside expert long before students had the opportunity to read the selection. The job of the students would be to guess what the main idea is, not to decide what the selection means for themselves. It would be correctness, alignment with the answer manual, not interpretation that would be of primary concern. The reading selections would be short abridged stories and not complete books. These selections would have been created with instruction and assessment, rather than enjoyment, as their primary purpose. These reading selections would use tightly controlled vocabulary and grammar. Each selection would be sequenced to be sure that the

reader was introduced to the necessary skills in the appropriate order. Students would not be allowed to choose which text they wanted to read. Oral discussion would not be necessary and a series of questions would have to be answered after every reading selection. Students are to answer questions correctly, not to ask them. Comprehension would simply equate with correct responses to questions after the selections were read.

Writing instruction would focus more on grammar than content or topic choice. It is not what you say that is important, but how correctly you can write it. Mechanics would be considered at a premium over content or information. There would also be certain vocabulary words that needed to be learned and these would be prescribed in a controlled sequence for all children in the class. As a matter of fact, there would even be an "official" vocabulary and spelling list. The learning of these words would be done by rote memorization. Look 'em up and memorize them for the test each Friday. This would be the only way such large numbers of words could be exposed to children. After the students are tested on these vocabulary words, no further use of the words would be required. Testing would be the final judgment for understanding. Standardization and conventionality is the key in this classroom. Correctness over exploration and approximation will be emphasized.

After students have written essays and other pieces of writing, the students and teacher would send these pieces off to be scored by someone outside the classroom. This means that the only response a student would receive for their writing would be a numerical score. Students would be ranked and ordered by the grades they received and the highly ranked students would receive praise and enrichment activities, while the lower ranked students would receive remedial help. The students themselves may never know why they are receiving these grades for their writing. The assessment of their writing proficiency would be reduced to a number and no one would discuss with them what they have actually written. There would be much more concern over a properly finished product than the process used to create it.

As far as the actual classroom learning environment is concerned, the most effective way to learn would be to sit quietly in rows. Just as in the testing environment, working with other students would be considered cheating. Students would not be allowed to ask other students for help and the teacher would only be allowed to answer certain questions. Only certain things would be allowed to be said and done. Tight controls over what is taught, how it is taught and what is learned is believed to create better schools and better students. The main objective here would be to teach all children the same thing, at the same rate and the same time. If a student couldn't handle the work, remedial classes would exist to get the "slow" student up to level with the others. Summer school or retention would be two options.

Teachers would generally be concerned with how to teach and not what to teach. All that teachers would have to do is regularly consult with the teacher's curriculum guide or teaching manual and follow directions about the content they would need to cover. Covering all of the prescribed curriculum is very important in the standardized classroom. It is believed that if all the teachers said the same thing, and reacted the same way, all students would learn the same thing. The teachers would be told by someone outside the classroom what to teach. Lessons and directions would have to be scripted to help teachers teach the same way and avoid mistakes.

An external agent or textbook publisher will be making the curricular decisions about what is to be taught, with no input from the members of the classroom. Not only will these "outsiders" tell the teachers and students what to learn, but they will tell them how much time they have to learn it. All learning experiences will be timed so that students will be prepared for when the tests are administered. In the decision between coverage or depth, coverage would be of primary importance. It is the students duty to merely absorb what is presented to them without question.

As a matter of fact, students will eventually learn not to question anything in this type of classroom. The students will learn that someone else is in control and that their input is not valued. Someone outside the class will determine what is of value, correct it for the students and evaluate each of their abilities. Control would be a major issue. Teachers would not be allowed to stray from the curriculum that is to be presented. Regardless of the diversity present in the classroom, or the needs of its members, the curriculum would be developed without their input and then just "transmitted" to them. The students would be expected to sit back and be "passive receptors" of this knowledge.

All evaluation done in this classroom is done for purposes of comparison and remediation. The tests are designed to find out what students don't know so that the teachers can go back and fill up these learners with the correct information at a later date. It is a deficit view of learning and instruction. The students would become less and less important as people and treated more like numbers.

A major assumption made in this classroom is that the outside agencies that devise these tests know what every person needs to know in order to be a successful, happy, fulfilled human being. The experts have explored the world and developed a curriculum that will be imposed upon every child. This knowledge is usually based on isolated content material and "facts". Success in school would be measured by their ability to memorize "facts". Very little concern would be given to the aesthetic or artistic development of these students.

Teachers would not be allowed to question the curriculum. It is believed that

teachers can't even give directions properly, so someone else would write them down so the teachers can use them. The teacher would be told what to say and when to say it. No questions or straying from the script would be allowed.

What about the ramifications for pre-service educational programs at the college level? The programs would be more like commercial training sessions. Teachers would only need to know how to do things, not how to think. The college level classes would be more concerned with developing methodology and orthodoxy, than training teachers in a certain philosophy. Classes would focus on direct instructional models and how to correct papers. Maybe one class would be called "Red Pen 101". The teacher of the future would not have to know how to think, only know how to follow instructions and deliver material.

Another major assumption would be that everything taught must be measurable. This seems to be one of the most frightening aspects of this standardized classroom. Do these test designers and curriculum reform groups really believe that all learning is in fact measurable? Do these "measurable" parts of the curriculum take precedent over other events? This is a question each educator must ask themselves.

In schools recently, there has been a push towards standardization and accountability. In most newspaper columns it has been disguised however, as educational reform. This article is meant to be seen as an extreme case, but there are actual classrooms in the United States that aren't too far away from the one described here. We ask for certain things in education and we get them. Are we sure we are asking for the right things? What would happen if we actually got them? I hope that no classrooms would ever look like this. But, as educators we need to be real clear about what we ask for in education and what wishes we want granted, because they may just come true.

Until all people become standardized and the formula for a successful, happy life becomes standardized, the curriculum and evaluation methods used should reflect the diversity of the constituents they are supposed to serve. Identify the standard learner, and then we can begin to worry about the standardized classroom. Luckily, people can't be standardized, no matter what our Department of Education thinks.

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