Testing: What Is a Teacher to Do?

BY PETE SHAEHEEN

MEAP* Tests.

"Now all I want is Facts."
AP.

"Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts."
ACT.

"Facts alone are wanted in life."
PSAT.

"Plant nothing else, and root out everything else."
SAT I.

"You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them."
SAT II.

"This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to the Facts, sir!"

Interpersed between the popular test names are the opening lines from Charles Dickens's *Hard Times.* The novel indicts the utilitarianism of the industrial revolution. But the fact is, Dickens is relevant to our times.

You name it; we have a test for it—all in the name of high stakes and high standards. These useful measures, all external in nature, are designed to drive not only curriculum but how we (language arts teachers) teach that curriculum. If you believe in conspiracy theories, and your political ideology permits you to believe, these external measures currently dictating instruction and its delivery are a result of an insidious plot by teachers and their unions to undermine the foundation of public education. For the benign thinkers among us, the perception of disarray is a tragedy of the commons—public schools are owned by all of us and cared for by none.

The $64,000 question becomes, "How did we evolve into this state of testing, sorting, selecting, and endorsing?" And the $1 million question might then be, "How do we stop the evolution of teacher as test giver and return to the teacher who focuses on students' learning?" The two are drastically different.

Are you ready for answers? Stop reading. I don't have any. Solutions are messy and imperfect. Questions may be more appropriate than facts at this point anyway. Two big questions for me are, "What do we want as teachers of language arts?" and "How do we get it?"

As if we didn't already know, public education is an arena where a host of competing agendas in the debates that are shaping the future of language arts instruction, forcing administrators to speak for us.

The Oakland Writing Project (Michigan) never closed the door and ignored the tumult. We are a grassroots organization. We are teachers coming together to share ideas, study together, and learn from one another. We leave conferences and workshops all the more fortified to face the slings and arrows of outrageous expectations. We behave in a professional manner, and our goal is to promote the language arts. Yet I am not certain that we can absolve ourselves from blame in this predicament either. Our coming together to fortify ourselves in a sort of circling-the-wagons technique is a defensive strategy. I can't help wondering if it isn't too defensive.

The AP is an example of how we as language arts teachers are reacting defensively. Without condemning the College Board, we can question how a multiple-choice test and three 40-minute essays promote what we in the Oakland Writing Project believe to be good writing. When we consider the aggressive expansion and proliferation of AP exams, we can't help but ask how effective this circling-the-wagons approach can be. In a few short years, AP has become the standard used to measure quality schools.

Programs that have large numbers of students taking literature and language tests are defined as superior. There is little or no discussion concerning the validity of this measure. We accept AP because colleges accept AP.

Don't take this the wrong way. There is much to admire, not only about their organization but about their curriculum as well, but if we bend to the pressure of the AP test makers, the sorters and selectors, we will find ourselves in the position of becoming merely classroom managers. We will manage someone else's master plan for how we best prepare students.

If we want a bigger voice in changing the world, we have to be willing to become more active in the debates. We need to look for ways to grow our numbers and ways to grow our involvement. If we want a say in the future of language arts instruction, we must know more about language arts than parents and administrators. We need to expand our commitment to teaching beyond the classroom and the Oakland Writing Project.

administrators, parents, and politicians surface, and those agendas seem to generally manifest themselves as some test or assessment, and these tests end up defining reality.

Real estate brokers quote the MEAP scores to increase property values. Media use APs to define quality schools. Parents often perceive SATs and ACTs as measures evaluating a high school's ability to prepare their child to gain admission into the university of choice. Benchmarks and standards are the state's mechanisms for insuring that schools meet minimum levels of learning.

In the face of these disjointed and sometimes competing objectives, what is a teacher to do? Closing the door has not been an effective long-term strategy. In the past, this strategy has meant simply that we have been denied a voice.

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for someone else’s test. If we circle the wagons and talk only to ourselves, we will be drowned in the growing tide of external measures like the MEAPs and the APs. We will lose much of what we know to be good teaching.

Revision will be devalued along with peer response. Process will be substituted for formula. Ideas will be subjugated to diction. Writing as discovery will be redefined to mean writing to demonstrate knowledge on demand. You can throw the idea of teacher as writer out the window.

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If we want a say in the future of language arts instruction, we must know more about language arts than parents and administrators. We need to expand our commitment to teaching beyond the classroom and the Oakland Writing Project. Our commitment to language arts calls on us to speak out. Those of us in the project must realize we are advocates for the principles of the project and have an obligation to throw ourselves into the fray. We need to use the project as a support group that fortifies us in the face of the challenges we continue to confront. We need to demand this kind of support from each other.

Walt Whitman sat in the audience of a Ralph Waldo Emerson lecture as Emerson called for an American voice to establish itself and sing the praises of a new country. We need to raise our voices in unison to sing out what we know to be true. The proliferation of new ideas about teaching holds much promise and many potential dangers. As teachers, we are best suited to separate the wheat from the chaff when it comes to these new ideas. Frankly, if we don’t act to expand our involvement, the business interests who represent the external measures will take the wheat and we—teachers, our communities, and, most importantly, our students—will get the rest.

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*MEAP: Michigan Educational Assessment Program