Sergeant Friday Meets The Taxonomy:
We Need More Than Just The Facts Ma'am
By
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The load of data poured in a typical high school year is staggering. Just because the facts roll out, of course, does not mean they are either understood or retained. Most are ignored. A few may be deliberately identified as vital for the various tests, but many, if not most, of these facts mean little to the student.

(Theodore Sizer, Horace's Compromise)

... while students learn to read a wide range of material, they develop very few skills for examining the nature of the ideas that they take away from their reading. Though most have learned to make simple inferences about such things as a character's behavior and motivation, for example, and could express their own judgments of a work as 'good' or 'bad,' they generally did not return to the passage to explain the interpretations they made.

(National Assessment of Educational Progress, Reading Thinking and Writing)

Ready to check your answers? Mr. Arthur has constructed a comprehension item for his students by translating book talk into student talk ("words you and your friend would both understand"). Students successful on this task will demonstrate knowledge that has a personal dimension. Mr. Barron has devised a sophisticated measurement task calling for cognitive evaluation. Students in her class apparently have also studied cliched use of language, have learned that fresh comparisons are normally preferred, and now will try to show their ability to distinguish between the two.

In contrast, Mr. Cinch plans to measure student learning at the most basic level, that of knowledge. Even in the examples, his sophomores will cite those "we discussed in class." Miss DeBono is concerned with application, reasoning that a student's success in framing a simple simile and a metaphor indicates understanding of each concept.

Ms. Edwards has formulated an exercise which sends students on a metaphor hunt calling for analysis of newspaper headlines. Unfamiliar with the examples...
Confronting the Taxonomy

In the local sports page, her students will ferret out the poetic nuances of "Lions Devour Saints" and "Vikings Pillage Raider's Camp," thus demonstrating their feel for figurative language in popular media.

Mrs. Fox, finally, has devised an activity at the synthesis level through which, indirectly at least, she will find out how well students can use what they know of the basic elements in creating an original commercial. Her students won't necessarily know they're being tested, an arrangement which has both advantages and disadvantages.

Which do you say, are superior measurers? Your answer depends on the relative weight you give such elements as objectivity, efficiency, the student's prior learning and testing experiences, and instrumental purpose.

Certainly Mr. Cinch (knowledge) and, to a lesser extent, Mr. Arthur (comprehension) and Miss Debono (application) can size things up pretty quickly, put a few numbers in their grade books, and move on. Mr. Cinch will feel good, perhaps, about his objectivity, despite the view of many professionals that such test items, precisely framed though narrowly conceived, are as basically subjective as essay items. Miss Debono (application) should be able to check off rights and wrongs with reasonable accuracy and speed.

The other three teachers, by choosing classroom measurement which many would regard as subjective, may open themselves to criticism from those who value exactness more than a test situation in which learners use facts to complete tasks at a higher cognitive level. If nothing else, the marking and grading process may become sticky. Miss Barron (evaluation), for example, may find that what is cliched to her seems original and clever to several of her students; too, students may select the right passage but offer weak explanations as to why.

Without a rubber yardstick, or because of one, she may have trouble justifying her grades even when she is convinced of their soundness. If Mr. Edwards' (analysis) students have worked with headlines before, especially headlines as metaphor, they may accomplish the task she has set; if not, she'll spend as much time explaining what to do as the kids will in completing their work. And Mrs. Fox's (synthesis) students... well, there's no telling what direction they'll take. If she assigns specific criteria for judging their commercials (three elaborations of the basic comparison, for example), she could gain some standardization of their creations but would probably sacrifice spontaneity at the same time. She also may have trouble coming up with letter or numerical grades she is comfortable with, and she should be ready to defend her product-oriented measurement both to her students and her principal.

But there is a paradox in all this. Despite the foregoing testing "problems," the Barrons (evaluation), Edwards (analysis), and Foxes (synthesis) are providing superior measurement. Many times good measurement is messy, involving as it does professional judgment of complex, varied behaviors. Much to their credit, the testing of Barron, Edwards, and Fox, for one thing, bespeaks a clearly intellectual intent and classroom environment. Facts, to these teachers, appear to be the raw material of learning -- elements to use in other activities -- rather than ends in and of themselves. What is more, through their testing, these teachers engage students in processes valuable in their own right.

A generation ago, the romantic critics claimed that children, ultimately, learn what we test. A more accurate way of putting this idea is to say that they learn how we test, and, when our tests are consistently and needlessly low level, our students respond in kind. In a sense, therefore, our classes are "about" both what and how we test, and the tests we use mirror our true objectives more accurately than either the system's curriculum guide or our individual lesson plans. The point is this: that learning simile and metaphor

--Confronting the Taxonomy

well analyzing unfamiliar material, such as Ms. Edward's headlines, as they do parroting soon-to-be-forgotten definitions and examples. Thinking hurts. But this is only to be expected; no one does as well on the unfamiliar as he or she might on the commonplace. The obvious point is that lack of success in carrying out analytical tasks provides a powerful case for giving students more opportunity for analysis, not less -- even when they fuss about it, as fuss they will.

Thus, as we worry about how external testing programs shape and misshape what we can do in English and language arts classrooms, we mustn't ignore the need to improve our own approaches to evaluation. Moreover, we must be increasingly sensitive to evaluation's effects on what our students learn. When Sergeant Friday, Dragnet's laconic detective still richly seen on late-night re-runs, asked a witness for "just the facts, ma'am," his television audience knew he could put those facts together into larger patterns and meanings. While many of our students will grow up to be hit players, just witnesses, we must keep Joe Friday in mind. The hyperbolic world of the coming century will be led by men and women who learned more than "just the facts." My bet is that Joe Friday knew in his generation and the twenty-first century's leaders will have known in theirs, teachers like Mrs. Fox, Mrs. Barron, and Ms. Edwards. And maybe you.

WORKS CITED


National Assessment of Educational Progress. Reading, Thinking and Writing: Results From the 1979-80 National Assessment of Reading and Literature. Denver: Education Commission of the State, 1981.