Sergeant Friday Meets The Taxonomy:
We Need More Than Just The Facts Ma'am
By
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The load of data purveyed 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)

Theodore Sizer and NAEP are two among numerous authorities that have brought to light an apparent problem with the intellectual climate in secondary schools today. They point to a fact-bloated curriculum where students don't and perhaps can't do much with the facts they acquire, however briefly. Somewhat less apparent but equally telling a problem is the way teachers limit the intellectual demands of their classroom testing.

Before exploring this problem, spend a few minutes taking the quiz which follows. Imagine six classrooms, six teachers of sophomore English. Level 2 have been working with simile and metaphor. Their honest hope is that students will grasp these elemental uses of figurative language well enough to see how they work in both literature and everyday discourse. Now it is time to find out who learned what and how well. But these six teachers of sophomore English, Level 2, despite common curriculum and text materials, elect to measure what happened to their students along the instructional way in six strikingly differ-

English Language Arts Testing

We can infer much about their teaching from their approaches to evaluation.

Teacher A, Mr. Arthur: Assume that a friend does not understand the definition of metaphor on p. 62 of your book. In the space provided, explain what metaphor is in words you and your friend would both understand.

Teacher B, Mrs. Barron: Attached are two examples of writing with several similes in each. Which, in your view, makes the better use of this figure of speech? Why do you think so? (One sample uses cliched similes; the other does not.)

Teacher C, Mr. Cinch: Define metaphor and give two examples we discussed in class.

Teacher D, Miss DeBono: In the space provided, write one simile comparing Ronald Reagan to something else and one metaphor comparing the school football team to something else.

Teacher E, Ms. Edwards: Attached is a xerox copy of page 1 of Sunday's sports section. Using headlines only, find five similes or metaphors. For each, indicate (a) the element being compared, and (b) the element to which it is being compared.

Teacher F, Mrs. Fox: Invent a new product name for a soap, a deodorant, or shoes. Make the product's brand name a metaphor. Then write a commercial which is an extended metaphor favorably comparing the product to something else.

Ready to check your answers? Mr. Arthur has constructed a comprehension item for his students in 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. Mrs. 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

well analyzing unfamiliar material, such as Mr. 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—e.g., 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 increas-
ingly sensitive to evaluation's effects on what our students learn. When
Sergeant Friday, Dragnet's laconic detective still 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 cybernetic 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 Mr. Edwards. And maybe you.

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WORKS CITED

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National Assessment of Educational Progress. Reading, Thinking and Writing:
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