

The Tangled Web of Standardized Test Culture

by Amber Vayo

The era of the standardized test will not be remembered as the driving force behind the improvement and equalizing of public education. Rather, it will be defined by an academic culture rife with sloppy thinking, a lack of critical analysis, and a disconnect between students and their own education. It is today's obsession with high-stakes assessment and the educational culture it breeds that are the major barriers preventing a seamless transition from high school to college. I have taught as an adjunct at a community college, state college, and private religious college; throughout my varied adventures teaching, I have found one similarity among freshmen who fail: They are not prepared for college academically and have long since lost a passion for critical inquiry. After a series of workshops aimed at explaining to professors how we could help college freshmen make the transition to college-level writing and academic life, I decided to ask my students what their high schools could have done to better prepare them and what they thought college could do to help them make their transition easier. This stroke of frustration led me to an interesting conclusion: Students are failing because they have almost no idea what to expect in a college classroom or how to react in a college environment.

From the beginning of their education, students have been trained to lay low and not stand out, to regurgitate facts rather than integrate knowledge; and they

Amber Vayo teaches critical thinking and writing, English composition, and introduction to literature courses in Massachusetts. Her true loves are children's literature and the transatlantic nineteenth century. Because so much of her work involves freshmen and their writing, she takes a special interest in curriculum design in high schools and feels that colleges and high schools need to work together to help students be truly prepared for college. She is a product of Worcester State College and Clark University.

have been told when assignments are due, practically negating any need for organization or personal responsibility. When we tell students to suffer through the boredom of high school for the sake of their diploma rather than the sake of their education, is it any wonder that they no longer see learning as an end unto itself or even a worthwhile pursuit? In the article, “I Just Wanna be Average,” Mike Rose explains the attitude as, “keep your vocabulary simple, act stoned when you’re not or more stoned than you are, flaunt ignorance, materialize your dreams.”¹

Rose describes this as a defense mechanism that “neutralizes the insult and frustration” students feel when schools and communities categorize them by test

We have reached a crisis point when standardized tests have ‘turned into something where the measurement tool is an end in itself.’

scores.² We have reached a crisis point when standardized tests, “a system that was originally created to identify problems has turned into something where the measurement tool is an end in itself.”³ The use of test scores has seeped into all aspects of life as evidenced by the way “parents and real estate agents typically use the evaluations to locate neighborhoods with the most desirable schools.”⁴ When schools and students with the highest test scores become the most desirable, we have created a climate where teachers are teaching to the test rather than teaching the students how to succeed.⁵ The result of this disastrous experiment is frustrated teachers and class after class of students who are unprepared for the transition to college.

The focus on quantifying every student’s education into an easy-to-read index, devoid of much actual meaning, stems from a government that is itself not particularly known for critical thinking or nuanced approach. Regarding the No Child Left Behind Act, the Bush Administration’s guidelines “sound more like dictates: ‘Raise the bar of standards.’ ‘Give schools the flexibility to meet them.’ ‘Measure progress.’ ‘Insist on results.’ ‘Blow the whistle on failure.’ This simple-minded view of education, with testing at its core,”⁶ has deluded many into believing in the magical abilities of the standardized test to explain, if not solve, all our educational problems. But if teachers were encouraged to blow the whistle, we would find that there are failures in crucial areas of education as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act not readily explained by test scores. The type of classroom management this fixation with tests insists on seriously hinders the ability of teachers to prepare their students for college because “time devoted to testing and test preparation is swallowing the time teachers spend dealing with students directly.”⁷

This type of teaching—forced upon many of our colleagues in primary and secondary schools—has warped students’ perception of education and grossly affected their expectations of the classroom. By sophomore and junior year, when students are taking these tests, they have tuned out of their own education, and teachers are hard-pressed to tune them back in. Students who have swallowed the standardized Kool-Aid test cannot decipher what information is important or synthesize that information into a meaningful statement. One of my students said that he thought high school students need “more reading, listening, and note-taking skills.”⁸ Because “professors don’t always write on the board what you need to

By sophomore and junior year, students have tuned out of their own education, and teachers are hard-pressed to tune them back in.

know. It is important to be able to extract the information needed and not worry so much about the filler information.”⁹ The emphasis that stems from *ad nauseam* testing and test prep creates students who really have a problem identifying the main point of a lecture or synthesizing the important aspects of a conversation. I have asked students for a simple response to an article, and many are unable to tell me what the point is, let alone their response to it.

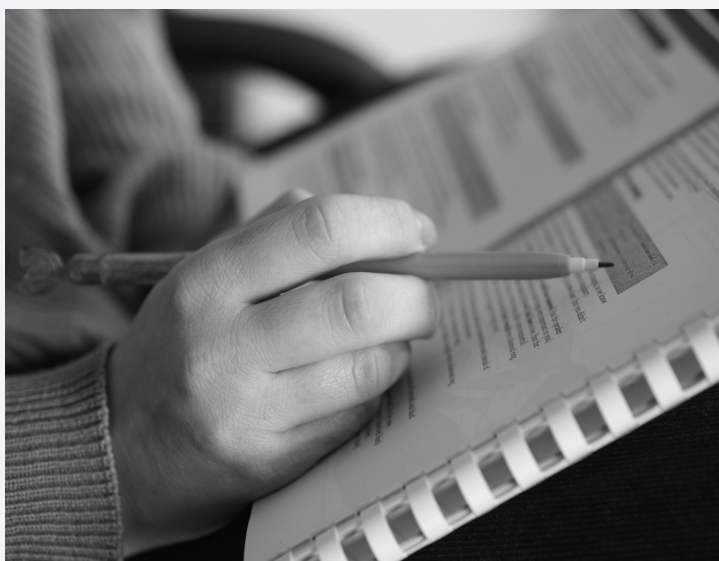
The lack of critical thinking skills and ability to analyze—possibly the most dangerous by-products of assessment mania—are a direct cause of failure to thrive in college. In many cases, teachers lack the ability to help students develop these necessary skills because, due to the No Child Left Behind Act, “public schools today are less in the direct control of those who spend their days in them, of those immediately affected by them, than ever before.”¹⁰ Our tax dollars have gone from helping children to creating an environment where teachers cannot help them and are subsequently penalized because their students fail to do well. If you find this a little disconcerting, you are not alone. A Texas teacher, upon observing this dilemma, stated, “Those of us who care about public education in our democracy need to start talking about the responsibilities of policy makers instead of merely crossing our fingers and hoping for the best.”¹¹ The time for trusting in hope alone is long since passed; it is time to act on behalf of our students.

Students do not ask for this watered-down education, with its unrelenting focus on test scores and teachers who find their classroom procedures being dictated by politicians who see them as babysitters with college degrees. This lack of academic freedom is in direct opposition to democratic principles and, on a more basic level, seriously injures or kills creativity in the classrooms that could otherwise have been encouraging a lifelong passion for learning.

At its earliest roots our schools were more than consumerist boot camps: Thomas Jefferson saw school as a training ground for citizenship and democratic leadership.¹² Today, however, students are not encouraged to take part in their own education when they are told that their way of getting through school is to pass a test composed of ambiguous questions and binary answers. It is not in the interest of education to promote binary answers and thought patterns, yet that is what has been left to our students of the standardized test era. This dumbing down is aided and encouraged by high-stakes assessments that do little more than “encourage our best and brightest [teachers] to become cynical grade collectors and, in general [develop] an obsession with evaluation and assessment.”¹³

The emphasis on high-stakes testing that monopolizes classroom time in high school leads to students entering college generally unprepared to deal with the self-discipline that they need to navigate college classes successfully. A vast majority of students in all of my classes were unable to immediately grasp the concept of a syllabus. Many of my students complained that they were used to being reminded about assignments and that they did not realize it was “important to be independent and not have someone over your shoulder all the time telling you what to do.”¹⁴ They argued that the general high school atmosphere was sheltered: “To come from someone reminding you to do work by deadlines to not having that anymore, it is hard to always remember.”¹⁵

While high school students are and should be sheltered to an extent, by their senior year, they should be given more autonomy. Administrators, politicians, and parents blame teachers from kindergarten to high school if students fail to excel. However, this blame-the-teacher-first policy has resulted in a class of students



who seem completely unfamiliar with time management. Of course, the true irony is that—despite our culture’s over-testing—in 2003, American eighth-graders ranked 15th in the world in terms of mathematics achievement.¹⁶ The “relentless emphasis on raising test scores, rigid policies of non-promotion and non-graduation ... an oftentimes fanatical insistence upon uniformity of teachers in their management of time”¹⁷ are stripping students of their right to both childhood and education without creating any positive results. These students are still lagging behind in tests scores, while the time to acquire even the most basic college survival skills is rapidly passing them by.


In college and high school classes, there is a sense that being loud and adversarial or quiet and invisible will get them through in classes.

Students can usually catch onto the college routine within a semester or two, but breaking down this barrier in high school would make an easier, more effective, and seamless transition to college a reality for many students. Students are hurt in high school when they are given multiple choice tests, asked to read aloud, and have class discussions that serve only to sum up the homework. These students come to college thinking that this will be acceptable and is the norm. In college and high school classes, there is a sense that being loud and adversarial or quiet and invisible¹⁸ will get them through in classes. Students are asked to debate or repeat facts; rarely are they asked to discuss ideas.¹⁹ Our educational culture puts such a focus on being right, competing, and holding firmly to a binary system of thought, that no learning is actually taking place.²⁰ Indeed, “throughout our educational system, the most pervasive inheritance is the conviction that issues have two sides, that knowledge is best gained through debate.”²¹ Standardized testing encourages this by forcing school districts to compare themselves to others, rather than allowing them to stand on their own merits of progress. It manifests itself in the students by creating what Deborah Tannen, in her article, *The Roots of Debate in Education and the Hope of Dialogue*, calls an “argument culture.”²² Students are told to take sides, which immediately pushes them away from scholarly dialogue and locks them into the binary mode of thinking that is incompatible with the kinds of thinking they will need to make a positive contribution to a scholarly discussion.

The focus on test scores and GPAs encourages a neurotic concern for good grades by confusing grades with actual knowledge. I asked three of my classes how many of them had GPAs of 3.3 or better from high school; a majority of them raised their hands. Of those, I asked how many felt their schools had challenged them; two raised their hands. This do-just-enough-to-get-by attitude likely comes as no surprise to teachers. These students try to maintain their same level of coast-

ing in college. As many college professors can attest, it is perfectly possible for a student's essay to be "grammatical, well-organized, and coherent without being well-reasoned, thoughtfully developed, or effective in any way"²³—a by-product of blurry writing prompts and the belief that an acceptable essay can be composed in thirty minutes.

To make a better transition from high school to college, students need to spend their senior year recovering from the nursemaid mentality that stifles them. They need to be told that college professors are not going to remind them when assignments are due. Honors and advanced placement classes aid in this endeavor—at least giving students a feel for the level of work in a college class. As long as we allow our curricula to be co-opted by test-prep and the standardized test mentality, we will continue to have students who stumble or fail upon entering college.

Politicians with little to no experience teaching are spearheading changes that rob our children of their right to an education. In this culture, children become no more than future consumers, a market sample to be softened up for easier persuasion. It is time for teachers to band together and refuse this sort of intellectual thuggery in order to secure a worthwhile education to our younger students and a manageable transition to post-secondary education for our older students. 

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Mike Rose, "I Just Wanna Be Average," 166.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Terrence Stutz, "Focus on Standardized Tests."
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ George Hillocks, "Fighting Back," 63.
- ⁷ Terrence Stutz, *op cit*.
- ⁸ Steve Weigel, e-mail to author, February 2008.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Chris W. Gallagher, "Democratic Policy Making," 2.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Gary Colombo, Robert Cullen, and Bonnie Lisle, "Rereading America," 116.
- ¹³ Mike Rose, *op cit*, 170.
- ¹⁴ Steve Weigel, e-mail to author, February 2008.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Gary Colombo, Robert Cullen, and Bonnie Lisle, *op cit*, 114.
- ¹⁷ Jonathan Kozol, "Still Separate," 246.
- ¹⁸ Deborah Tannen, "The Roots of Debate in Education," 220.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 223.

²² Ibid., 224.

²³ Deborah Tannen, *op cit*, 235.

WORKS CITED

- Colombo, G., Robert Cullen and Bonnie Leslie, *Rereading America: Cultural Contexts for Critical Thinking and Writing*. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2007.
- Gallagher, Chris W. "Democratic Policy making and the Arts of Engagement: If the Public Schools are the Primary instruments of Transmitting and Preserving Democratic Values Shouldn't They Themselves enjoy Freedom and Self-determination? Mr. Gallagher Reports on Nebraska's efforts to buck the tide of outside control and Test-based Accountability to Keep Democracy in Public Education." *Phi Delta Kappan* 89, no. 5 (2008):340-347.
- Gatto, John Taylor. "Against School." In *Rereading America: Cultural Contexts for Critical Thinking and Writing*, edited by Gary Colombo, Robert Cullen, and Bonnie Lisle, 152-160. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2007.
- Hillocks, George Jr. "Fighting Back: Assessing the Assessments." *The English Journal* 9, no. 4 (2003): 63-70.
- Kozol, Jonathan. "Still Separate: Still Unequal." In *Rereading America: Cultural Contexts for Critical Thinking and Writing*, edited by Gary Colombo, Robert Cullen, and Bonnie Lisle, 239-258. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2007.
- Rose, Mike. "I Just Wanna Be Average." In *Rereading America: Cultural Contexts for Critical Thinking and Writing*, edited by Gary Colombo, Robert Cullen, and Bonnie Lisle, 161-172. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2007.
- Stutz, Terrance. "Focus on Standardized Tests Harmful, Texas Teacher Unions say: They Press State Panel to Recommend Easing up on Exams, Ratings." *The Dallas Morning News*, February 19, 2008. www.lexisnexis.com.
- Tannen, Deborah. "The Roots of Debate in Education and the Hope of Dialogue." In *Rereading America: Cultural Contexts for Critical Thinking and Writing*, edited by Gary Colombo, Robert Cullen, and Bonnie Lisle, 219-238. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2007.

