

The Theory of Worthy Accomplishment

Respecting the Boundaries of Education and Human Individuality

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Assessment? Testing? Grades? Evaluation?

When approaching educational issues we should keep within our gaze the most central, the deepest, and even the most troubling questions. Otherwise we may find our time and our attention diverted to the peripheral, the insubstantial and even to insignificant demands that confront us at every moment in our work.

The most central questions are always:

What are the capabilities that we seek to develop in the learner?

and

How can we help these to be realized?

In recent years a third question has, rightfully, come to the fore in the field of education and that is:

How do we know the extent to which we are succeeding in developing the capabilities that we intended to develop?

This third question has been associated with great acrimony as well as with ambitious expectations. And it must be admitted that we have not yet found the way to make this information function a truly productive component of our educational practice. Indeed the question of assessment, testing, evaluation and grades is more of a wound in the fabric of our institutions than a source of creativity and productive renewal.

But this should not be surprising because even though the question of educational information is at the center of most contemporary controversies in the field, educational assessment is still in its infancy as a discipline and the nature of the information question and the implications of the answers have not yet been sufficiently thought out. This, to a great extent, is why there is so much controversy and so little successful practice.

Recognizing that we must fulfill the function of finding out whether our efforts to develop the capabilities of learners are succeeding we must also take steps to make this information function more humane as well as more productive and efficient.

The first step must be to clarify our thinking on the subject. At present the concepts *assessment, testing, evaluation* and *grading* co-exist in education without a clear understanding of how they are to be distinguished and indeed of their very nature as social actions. As it turns out, this is a central part of the problem. By carefully distinguishing these processes we will have taken many steps towards solving the problems associated with them.

The Demands of our Times

Post secondary institutions ask secondary schools for grades as a basis for deciding who to admit to their programs. This drives schools, if they did not have the inclination to do so already, to assign grades to students in each class or course that students take. This request, which seems to many to be a requirement, is an almost unquestioned feature of contemporary educational systems. And yet we will see that this is not even a truly educational activity.

What is an educational activity in its essence? It is the development of human capabilities. My colleagues and many others in the field, over the years, have categorized these capabilities as:

- Understanding (knowledge and concepts)
- Skills, and
- Dispositions (values, habits, attitudes, etc.)

But here I believe that the times demand that we progress in our expectations, and so I propose that we consider another human capability that I will refer to as *creativity*. Creativity as a goal of education -- clearly it is a worthy goal and clearly it cannot be subsumed under the other three categories. Let us be ambitious and dare to say that we can develop such a capability in our educational programs.

When we target a capability for our students we are setting a goal for learning – we create a *learning goal*. The so-called ‘standards’ promulgated by advisory groups, state agencies and professional associations of educators (e.g. National Council of Teachers of Mathematics) are nothing else but learning goals!

It is at the heart of the educational process to set goals for learning and to devise means for helping learners attain these goals. To not do so would be to operate unintentionally and unconsciously with our students!

Just as central is the effort to find out whether the goals are being attained. This is necessary in order to know whether our teaching is having the desired effect. You might ask, isn't this what tests do? Would that it were. The conventional test elicits and rates student performance on a range of capabilities (e.g. concepts in biology, facts and principles in history, communication skills in Spanish). The number of “correct answers” is summed (often weighted in some fashion) and a test score is generated. With the production of a test score we have crossed an actual but invisible boundary. We have moved from essential educational processes to a non-educational activity. This is because the aggregated test score masks the information

on the extent to which the individual learning goals have been attained. The aggregated test score cannot be used to plan or improve teaching and learning because the essential educational meaning of the information has been lost in the process of aggregation (summing). The resulting score can at best be a cause for rejoicing or dismay. But worse! Something else can be done with that test score. It can be used to compare students, to rank and scale them according to their degree of success and failure regarding the set of test items.

Such scores with perhaps other pieces of information (e.g. behavior, attendance) are aggregated to produce grades for a course. *Tests* are aggregations of items typically representing diverse learning goals. When information from tests and other sources (e.g. attendance, behavior, homework, classwork) is aggregated over the totality of a course we get *grades*! If educational usefulness was lost even in a simple test, how much more so is this the case for grades?

Grades become a basis for granting or denying access to privilege, a way to characterize students and make decisions about their lives. We find ourselves travelling further and further beyond the essential educational process, we are crossing boundaries and increasingly leaving the true purpose of the enterprise behind.

One of the deeper problems with grading is that it takes the attention of both the teacher and the learner from the learning process. Always present in the background of every educational event or activity there lurks a concern for how the event will be translated into a grade. When the concern becomes sufficiently intense the learner begins to strategize on what to do in order to get a high grade. Then the very relationship between teacher and learner has been corrupted.

Aren't grades needed to motivate learners? This might be so in the case of an 'ideal' student one who is eager to do whatever is asked in order to receive a high grade that will please parents and/or impress institutions of higher learning.

But imagine, that there are students for whom the subjects as presented are quite easy, too easy in fact. They can receive high grades without making much of an effort or learning very much. These students may find their participation in class, unchallenging and even boring, and yet they seem to be the 'successes' of the system even though their learning may be minimal.

There are other students who would like to get high grades but are far behind in the pre-requisite skills needed to succeed. Even if they make extraordinary efforts and succeed in learning and making real progress, performance on tests may result in them being identified as inferior and they will receive lower grades. They may give up trying to learn to consider leaving school rather than suffer the continued humiliation that the environment fosters.

Countless other scenarios of this sort can be related, and in the end they have one thing in common. Attention has strayed from devotion to the learning process, the joy of learning and a mutually respectful relationship between teacher and learner.

Indeed do we wish to consider the student for whom grades are motivating as an 'ideal' in any true sense? Many years ago such scenarios were characterized as examples of the 'hidden curriculum', that is, on the surface our schools are directed to develop valued human capabilities, but in reality they support an environment in which learners become, docile, passive recipients of orders from the formal institutions of society.

Is it possible to get back to the essential educational activity? Can we disentangle from activities that are almost omnipresent and seem unavoidable but that clearly can undermine our highest aspirations for learners, activities that are in fact a non-educational intrusion into educational programs?

Educational Assessment and the Realm of Human Capabilities

It is possible to return to the essential process of education, because by contrast with the scenarios associated with conventional testing and grading, we can have what we can call truly *educational assessment*. That is information on the extent to which learning goals have been attained, and the strict use of that information, for only one purpose, to support learning by aiding in the design, conduct and improvement of teaching. Such information can inspire ideas for instruction and tell us something about the effects of our instructional efforts. This is truly educational information and for this we reserve the term *assessment of educational assessment*.

We may conclude that while it is necessary to have information about the extent to which students are achieving the goals for learning, and that this information is of interest to students, parents, and the school community, that there is no educational necessity for tests and grades. Educational needs can be, and are best served by information on the extent to which students have attained learning goals. The use of this information for purposes other than to support learning takes us outside of the essential educational process and into areas where we can find ourselves engaging in questionable social activities. Moreover while other schools (e.g. institutions of higher learning) can rightfully ask for information on what students have learned and accomplished, we find that conventional grades and the process by which they are generated do not necessarily serve well the student, the school community and even the agency requesting the information.

What can we do in the face of this formidable social and moral problem?

We have seen that clean and precise distinctions, i.e. regarding the terms *assessment*, *testing*, *grading*, has helped us to think incisively about normally confused educational issues and problems.

To address the problems of grades we must make another critical distinction, a distinction between *capability* and *accomplishment*.

We may simply distinguish between the two by recognizing that a capability is something that is *potential*, while an accomplishment is something that is real (i.e. has been realized). In the broadest sense we can think of *capabilities* as all of the

wonderful things that human beings could potentially become. When successfully developed we may consider them *actualized* or *attained*. Only certain of these capabilities are actualized in any individual. Regarding *accomplishment* on the other hand we may consider what has been realized or brought into the world – a painting, a house, a well formed formula in logic, a sonata, an essay, a dance, a persuasive utterance in Japanese.

Capabilities are by their very nature not observable by our conventional senses, while accomplishments by their very nature are. A capability may be partially or fully actualized. An accomplishment may be a more or less satisfactory realization of a human intention.

What an extraordinary discovery, that at the heart of the educational enterprise, we find that the goal of that enterprise is invisible, not observable in the ordinary sense! Educational assessment is the science of inferring from observable evidence the extent to which human capabilities have been actualized. Assessment lives in the realm of inferences from evidence, and like all scientific inferences they are characterized by uncertainty.

Is there anything that we can do with assessment information that stays squarely within the essential realm of education? Actually the possibilities are quite rich. First of all we can use the information to help the student to attain the capability or to consider next steps in the case where the student has already attained the capability. Assessment information along with knowledge of student interests, sensitivities, aspirations can be applied to help students attain targeted capabilities. Indeed this can become a collaborative process. Teachers, parents, fellow students can join in the endeavor to help learners to attain capabilities. We can also use assessment results to evaluate and improve teaching, to identify needed resources and to identify needs for professional development of teachers.

Information on the extent to which a learning goal has been achieved (i.e. a capability realized) is the most central, the most critical piece of information on which to base educational decisions. Through educational assessment we can establish a relationship between the learner and observable events, and in so doing open a field of constructive educational action. If we are to be respectful of the human and educational boundaries involved we must limit the judgments we make based on these inferences. We must use them strictly to help learner learn and to help teacher teach. We must also work to continuously hone our assessment tools so that our findings concerning the attainment of learning goals become increasingly reliable and valid.

The Theory of Worthy Accomplishment

If we turn our attention to the other pole, the fully observable realm of accomplishments, the realm of created products, performance, presentations by the students a number of possibilities emerge as well. We find here a field in which the learner can exercise capabilities, a field in which to develop understanding and its application, skills, mastery, creativity and joy in all of these.

In his book *An Ethic of Excellence: Building a Culture of Craftsmanship with Students*, (2003) Ron Berger recounts how educational programs can be built around projects that become productive venues for building school culture and developing human capabilities. In these projects students work to create a product or event characterized by efficacy and excellence where:

...the classroom is the hub of creation, the project workshop. (p. 70)

A central part of each project is ongoing, iterative, collaborative evaluation of the project by the teacher and students:

The *overall* quality of work that emerges from the workshop is a concern for every member in it. If *any* student is failing to succeed or producing work without care, it is a concern for every student. There is a sense of whole class pride in the quality of learning and products in the workshop, and there is a sense of peer pressure to keep up with the standard. (ibid.)

Students learn to work hard and strive to attain mastery in their endeavor. They *all* do this. Berger offers that,

Once a student sees that he or she is capable of excellence, that student is never quite the same.

This suggests some of the possibilities associated with work in the sphere of accomplishment.

I have used the term *evaluate* several times now and must own that I use it in a somewhat unusual way. I hope that you join me in this usage, at least for the time when you are considering the ideas presented in this paper. When I speak of *educational evaluation* I refer simply and strictly to *the use of information to increase the value of an educational program*. For example we can evaluate student work in order to help the student better attain the targeted capabilities. We can evaluate teachers' work to help them become a better teachers, to sharpen their professional capabilities or help them attain new ones.

So also in the realm of accomplishments we can evaluate accomplishments to increase their value. This can all be a collaborative activity from vision, to design, to realization, to refinement with evaluation supporting each step along the way.

Reporting information on Student Attainment and Accomplishment

With the permission of students and their parents we can present information about their attainments and their accomplishments publically and to other requesting institutions (schools and even commercial enterprises). We can present students' level of attainment of learning goals (capabilities attained) in many different ways. Regarding accomplishments we can present descriptions or samples student projects associated with a course or main lesson block, (e.g. designed and supervised a dramatic presentation, composed and performed a piece of music, conducted research on water quality of local systems, invented a new mathematical notation, programmed an application which solves a persistent data problem). The description can list the capabilities were needed to complete the project and what specifically was accomplished. A report may also contain an indication of the judged *level of quality* of the project. Teachers and peers (students), and qualified outsiders (e.g. artists, scientists, public officials, craftspeople) may all contribute to such a judgment. The student can work iteratively to refine her work to satisfy her standards of quality and these will surely be influenced by the judgments of peers and supervising adults.

The value of these judgments will depend on a number of features:

Transparency – the criteria used to make a judgment of quality are stated clearly and understood

Fairness – The expected accomplishment is one that the learner is considered to be capable of performing, indeed one in which the student has the possibility of attaining the highest level of judgment through appropriate efforts.

Objectivity – qualified individuals make the same judgment of quality

Worthiness of the project – What makes a student project a worthy endeavor? This must determined in every case, but one feature should be that the project presents opportunities for students to exercise and develop valued human capabilities (e.g. to consolidate what has been learned and apply it to novel situations). From the point of view of the student the project and its associated accomplishments will be worthy if it is challenging and inspiring and provides opportunities for personal initiative and artistry.

In the sphere of accomplishment then we have the possibility to engage in collaborative social ventures where we develop and apply criteria of quality, success and value to the various features of a project. Such projects also present opportunities to infer the presence of capabilities. But as always we must remember that with assessment of learning goals we work in the sphere of inferences. We must steadily question whether our inferences are sound and work with our colleagues to improve them.

Respecting the Boundaries of the Human Being

Here I wish to wrap up this presentation, although clearly there is much more to discuss, and indeed the purpose of the presentation has been to support conversation on the rightful need to know, and how to share what a student has attained or accomplished. I have suggested that this can be done without violating the purity of the educational process, the sanctity of the relationship between teacher and student and the individuality of the learner.

Not only is it critical that we get back to the essential educational process but it is necessary to safeguard the relationship between teacher and student. The theory of worthy accomplishment presented here directs our aspirations towards this end. I hope that through these concepts I have contributed not only some clarity to the underlying questions but a renewal of educational concepts that can lead to a healing of the deep wound in our educational institutions that is associated with assessment, testing, grades and evaluation.

In working in the field of educational assessment we can do little better than to heed the words of the founder of Waldorf education. In the following passage Rudolf Steiner (1947) speaks of a 'student'. The term 'student' here refers to anyone who would undertake the challenge of attempting to understand the nature and actions of individual human beings. This is a challenge that thoughtful teachers can hardly avoid, and one that demands a new set of professional capabilities as we enter this new century. Truly we must become students in this respect.

By such observation of his fellow-creatures the student may easily lapse into a moral fault. He may become uncharitable. Every conceivable effort must be made to prevent this. Such observation should only be practiced by one who has already risen to the level on which complete certainty is found that thoughts are real things. He will then no longer allow himself to think of his fellow-men in a way that is incompatible with the highest reverence for human dignity and human liberty. The thought that a human being could be merely an object for observation, must never for a moment be entertained. Self-education must see to it that this insight into human nature should go hand in hand with an unlimited respect for the personal privilege of each individual, and with the recognition of the sacred and inviolable nature of that which dwells in each human being. A feeling of reverential awe must fill us, even in our recollections.

Berger, Ron (2003) *An Ethic of Excellence*. Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH.

Steiner, Rudolf (1947, originally 1918) *Knowledge of Higher Worlds and its Attainment*. Anthroposophic Press, Gt. Barrington, MA.