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The Significance (and Insignificance) of Projects and Assessments in the Bigger Picture of Life

Quick question: on what day did the French Revolution start? To be honest, I don't remember, though a quick Google search yields May 5, 1789. For many people, questions like these litter their history tests with obscure facts and dates—even if they forget them right after. Not to say the French Revolution is a useless piece of history that should never be taught in classes; its overarching themes like liberty and equality stay relevant even in today's world. However, using a test sheet filled with insignificant facts to determine someone's grade is not the right way to go about it. Tests and quizzes, if done right, can be a helpful way to snapshot and gauge a student's progress in the classroom. Tests and quizzes, however, will not ever be used in the workplace, whose importance and relevance in one's life will eclipse that of primary and secondary education. This goes for standardized tests too—especially standardized tests. It may be hard to envision in high school, but there is something beyond the SAT and AP exam scores that people rack up and stress over. Collaboration, presenting your points and exchanging ideas with others are commonplace occurrences in the workplace. By incorporating more collaborative assignments in the classroom and grading students not just by test scores but also life skills, students can be well prepared for life beyond school while still learning course material.

One of the biggest ways to misinterpret how well a student is doing is to feed them tests and use solely those scores to determine their grade. Likewise, the abundance and weight of standardized testing presents a narrow scope through which students' abilities are viewed, so they are not always the most effective. This leads to students being motivated to learn for superficial reasons, or even being completely unmotivated in the classroom. Factors like GPA and standardized test scores are commonly associated with a student's intelligence, and subsequently their ability to succeed in top-ranked universities. However, a study showed that GPAs and entrance exam scores "predict only 20 to 25 percent of a student's college achievement" (Goodwin, Hein 77). This means that 75 to 80 percent of achievement in college is not predicted by grades or test scores. The ineffectiveness of this way of measuring suggests that there certainly are other factors that come into play when it comes to a student's success, and one of those factors is the motivation to learn. Beyond achieving high grades and test scores, students are oftentimes unmotivated, thus inhibiting their ability to truly learn the material. Author Lee Ann Jung articulates this point in an *Educational Leadership* magazine: "Many educators struggle with how to engage students in learning without attaching that effort to a grade" (Jung 35). This "gaming-for-grades" mentality that students have is unhealthy, as students easily forget the facts they memorize for their tests as time goes on. Once they forget, they have essentially learned nothing. Rather than being measured on trivialities that will easily be forgotten afterwards, learning should be measured on the ability to understand and retain the bigger concepts, as well as the ability to apply them in a multitude of scenarios.

A common argument for standardized testing is that they can provide tangible measures for improvement in the form of test scores. In addition, some people may argue that without using grades and test scores, there will be even less motivation to learn; that is not necessarily the

case, nor does it have to be. As mentioned by Jung, “...decades of research has taught us that, in fact, feedback is an effective motivator in the absence of a grade” (ctd. in Jung 36). Through feedback, students can be given ways to constantly improve their work. Yet, standardized tests like the SAT and AP exams simply present a score but never give any other comments. Without knowing where you went wrong, how can you know where to improve? In addition to providing an outlet for the student to improve, giving feedback also creates more student-teacher interaction, which is something that many students do not have enough of and would benefit from; the personalization of education to suit each individual’s needs would also be developed this way. Additionally, a common misconception is that test scores can effectively display mastery of the subject. If you took the SAT for the first time and got a 1250, and then took it again and got a 1460, it could easily be said that since you improved. While using points to measure growth has an element of objectivity, it does not necessarily display mastery (Feldman 39). Tests like the SAT have an element of predictability, and as long as people can figure out how to “play the game,” achieving high scores becomes so much easier; this takes away from the emphasis on developing comprehensive knowledge of the material itself and instead leads to developing comprehensive knowledge of the test structure.

Something that often gets forgotten throughout secondary education—particularly high school—is that school is just the beginning. Beyond high school, there are a plethora of paths that someone can take, each requiring proficiency in different fields of knowledge. What these paths have in common is that they all require some of the most fundamentally important life skills for someone to succeed. Yet, so many people end up unprepared to deal with what comes next. A large part of this issue lies in what is expected and encouraged in the classroom, where students are often not equipped with the skills necessary to deal with what their futures bring. As author

Richard Arum says in his article *Navigating College*, “Given the pace of economic change and the complexity of our society’s political challenges, increasing students’ capacity to think critically and deeply about problems is imperative” (Arum 45). It is one thing to know concepts and plug in given values into a formula. It is another thing to make use of these concepts and formulas to solve real-world problems when there are higher stakes than just a number on the corner of the paper. Knowing all the diseases in the world would not matter if a doctor did not know how to make a proper diagnosis.

Not only do students need to learn how to think critically in situations, but they will need to convey the ideas that they have; that is where communication skills are necessary. Since the beginning of civilization, the ability to present different ideas to others has been a vital skill. Today, it matters just as much in the workforce, if not more, as “Employers are increasingly seeking conscientious employees with communication skills and the ability to work productively in groups” (Krachman, LaRocca, Gabrieli 32). Instead of having students compete with each other in one big Darwinian competition, there needs to be more of a focus on working with others. After all, no matter where students may go after finishing high school, they will always have to work well with others. For some people, college may invoke the image of large lecture halls and hours upon hours of scribbling down notes to rambling professors. If that was entirely the case, skills pertaining to cooperation and rhetoric would be less important. However, many high-level courses in top universities are project-based instead of lecture-based. For instance, courses like the Applied Physics 50 course for undergraduates at Harvard are entirely project-based (Larmer 8). Having experience with working on bigger projects with peers would prepare students for even the most rigorous of courses. Whether it be college, the workforce, or

whatever students may find as their calling after graduating high school, the skills that students learn in the classroom should reflect significant aspects of their future endeavors.

As an alternative to relying on tests, it would benefit schools to incorporate more project-based learning to measure students' progress. Doing so would broaden the scope and create a more holistic view of a student's capabilities. Rather than discounting the importance of learning key knowledge, it integrates the concepts taught with key success skills. It's hard to imagine a system that can effectively incorporate all of these benefits without excessive use of standardized testing and need for memorization, but there are countries today that can serve as examples. Finland consistently ranks among the top nations for reading, math and science, and yet their only mandated standardized test is at the end of students' senior year (Hancock). They focus on a mentor-pupil relationship between teachers and students, so each student is able to get constant feedback on their strengths and weaknesses. What this also demonstrates is that standardized tests and competition do not have to be primary motivators for studying. Rather, the environment that the teachers create in the classroom can either spark the passion to learn or extinguish it. While Finland does have a much smaller population and a smaller class size, there are still some takeaways from their system. It is not unrealistic to stop correlating achievement and academic capabilities with just a score on a paper. It is not unrealistic to incorporate more feedback in the classroom so that students can clearly see where they need to improve. It is also not unrealistic to teach students how to work with others instead of against others in preparation for what they will face in the future. With a system like this, what is there not to like?

Works Cited

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