

THE ADVENTURES OF EDUCATION IN WONDERLAND

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It is almost four years since A Nation At Risk united growing dissatisfaction with education in America into an educational reform movement. The thirty or more major reform reports that have appeared since are in solid agreement that education in the public schools and in colleges and universities falls short of providing students with what has become known as "excellence in education." Although we tend to embrace all levels of education in sweeping criticism, there are some interesting differences between the recommendations for reform in elementary/secondary education and higher education.

Merit pay, master teachers, and the Holmes Group and Carnegie Forum proposals for teacher training have become popular and controversial issues in the national debate over the improvement of schooling. Reform in the public schools seems to center around the quality of teaching--how to attract and train better teachers--and the quality of the workplace--how to make the environment more conducive to good teaching. In colleges and universities, the major emphasis seems to be on curricular reform. There is more debate about what is taught than about how. The language used in the reports reflects these differences.

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Whereas reports on schooling talk easily about the need to improve teaching; those in higher education are more comfortable talking about the need to improve learning.

Reformers seem especially reluctant to enter the classrooms of higher education for a number of reasons. In the first place, academic freedom is equated with the sanctity of the classroom, and there is a tradition of restraint in probing too deeply what goes on there. Secondly, college teachers are authorities in their disciplines. No one else at the institution knows quite as much as they do about their particular specialties, so there is an understandable reluctance to tell faculty what or how to teach. And finally, there are some age-old questions that have not been answered to the satisfaction of many-- what constitutes effective teaching? Who should evaluate teachers and how? Can good teaching be recognized and rewarded?

The 1980s reform reports for secondary and post-secondary education, however, have one thing in common; both look beyond the classroom teacher for action. The advocates of reform in the secondary schools think that the responsibility for improvement lies with those who train, select, and supervise teachers. There is some fairly alarming language about the problems of poor "training" and poor "supervision"--words that seem to me more appropriate for hotel maids than for teachers.

Higher education too shows some reluctance to place the responsibility for educational reform in the hands of individual teachers, suggesting instead that curriculum committees and the collective faculty need to take action. So far, there has been almost no discussion in either secondary or postsecondary educa-

tion about what individual teachers should be doing to improve learning in their own classrooms.

Yet our organization of education rests on the firm conviction that something important happens when teachers meet students in the classroom, and the major portion of any institution's budget is allocated to the costs of instruction. Why is it then that we are so hesitant to address the reform of instruction, and why is it that the classroom is so rarely the locus of the reform efforts? While governors, legislators, academics, and state agencies are all issuing reports and wondering out loud what they should be doing about educational reform, classroom teachers wait to see what happens.

So far, the solution to the problem of finding out what students learn in school is to regard classrooms as the mystery boxes of education, bypass them and go directly to assessment--school-wide, college-wide, state-wide, and nation-wide. Since assessments will tell us what students have learned, we need not trouble ourselves about how they learned it. The charges are that elementary/secondary teachers are weak on subject matter and strong on teaching methods, while higher education faculty are just the reverse--strong on subject matter and weak on the skills of getting it across to students. Institutional assessments won't confirm or disconfirm those suspicions, but they will give us the bottom line of what students have learned. And a lot of people are interested in that bottom line. The National Governors' Association, for example, entitled their report on school reform, Time for Results. In this report, the governors talk tough. They promise to "provide the leadership needed to get

results..." on the "tough issues that professional educators usually skirt." They are ready to insist, they say, on assessment to find out what and how well students are learning.

There is substantial agreement among educators, as well as governors and legislators, that assessment is an idea whose time has come. Education Week (November 26, 1986, p.5) reports that discussions about national assessment at last month's meeting of Chief State School Officers were "a far cry from the acrimonious debates of three years ago...." They note that this year's recommendations for assessment procedures passed with "minimal discussion and no opposition."

Similarly, higher education is in substantial agreement regarding the need for assessment. According to the latest Campus Trends report issued by the American Council on Education (El-Khawas, 1986) three-fourths of all college administrators favor assessment, defined for the purposes of the ACE survey as "any measure--other than end-of-course grading--by which the college evaluates its students or programs" (p. 5). But there is even stronger support for using assessment as a tool to improve practice. Ninety-one percent of the college administrators said that assessment should be tied to instructional improvement. Most authorities on the subject of assessment share that conviction. Bill Turnbull of Educational Testing Service (1985, p. 25) observes that "the overriding purpose of gathering data is to provide a basis for improving instruction, rather than keeping score or allocating blame." And the report just issued by the Education Commission of the States (1986, p. 32) asserts that "Assessment should not be an end in itself. Rather it should be

an integral part of an institution's strategy to improve teaching and learning...."

In the jargon of educational measurement, the call for formative evaluation is loud and clear. Ironically, practically all of the proposals and practices in assessment today involve summative evaluation, which emphasizes the collection of bottom-line data to "sum up" what happened. Formative evaluation, in contrast, collects data with the intention of improving the educational process while it is in formative stages. If the purpose of assessment is to improve education, how can we use the results of assessment to do that?

It may be important to remind ourselves at this point that the current reform movement was brought about largely through assessment. A Nation At Risk used all sorts of summative evaluation measures--international comparisons, measures of the extent of illiteracy, declining scores on standardized tests, and the like--to demonstrate that the failure of the American public schools had placed the nation "at risk." None of this extensive collection and compilation of data told us how to improve education--just that things were bad and needed attention. That is not an insignificant nor unimportant message. It has indeed galvanized the nation to attend to the quality of education.

The question now is what to do about it. Almost everyone advocates collecting more data--almost all of it summative rather than formative. In general, extensive data collection is defended on the grounds that it is time for self assessment and self regulation. But strangely enough "self" in these instances usually turns out to be "big brother." The National Assessment of

Educational Progress (NAEP) collects data to compare educational performance by states. States collect data to make institutions accountable. Institutions collect data to make decisions about strong and weak programs. Accreditation associations want data to determine whether the school or college is meeting acceptable standards.

There is a more charitable way of looking at current assessment efforts and that is to cast them in the diagnostic mode, i.e., we need to find out what is wrong so that we can correct it, and equally important we need to find out what is good so that we can reward and encourage it. Fair enough and commendable.

The learning that educators can be held accountable for, however, is that which takes place in the classroom. Why is this critical unit of the educational enterprise generally passed over in assessment programs? How can we improve education if we have to infer what goes on in the classroom, which is, after all, the teaching/learning unit of education? Moreover, is the accountability rationale for assessment compatible with the self improvement rhetoric?

Rest assured, I am not going to propose that we take our tests and other assessment measures into the classroom and reward, or more likely punish, teachers for their ability to teach to the test. While that action would put classrooms at the heart of the educational reform movement, which is where I think they should be, it would violate almost everything else that we have learned about organizational change and educational reform.

What I do want to propose is that we think far enough

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Open-ended questions such as these will provide teachers with important, and sometimes surprising, insights into student learning. Ultimately, of course, teachers are going to want to know whether students are learning what the teacher is trying to teach. In any school or college, there are a variety of teaching goals, depending on the nature of the subject matter, the teacher, and the students. To get concrete about this, let us assume that one of the goals of a class in economics is to help students understand and apply the concepts of economics to current issues. One way of finding out whether that goal has been achieved is to ask students to apply the day's lesson to an article clipped from a recent newspaper. That can be done in writing or orally at the end of the class period. The feedback takes on intellectually engaging dimensions as the research questions become more intricate. In a class with multiple sections, for example, the sections make ideal control groups. We might ask students in one section to apply the concept at the end of the class period, another section to tackle the question after a two-week lapse of time, and another after a month. If the ability to apply the concepts of economics to current issues drops off sharply with the passage of even such short periods of time, then the goal is either fleeting or unrealistic, and the teacher is challenged to find new ways to teach for better retention and application. Sections might then become the comparison groups for experimentation with more effective teaching strategies. My guess would be that the section that wrote an analysis immediately following the presentation in class would have a better grasp of the concept a month later than the section that was

The purpose of classroom research is to help teachers ~~at any~~ ~~level~~ evaluate the effectiveness of their own teaching. Most teachers don't really know how effective they are as teachers, and many, especially at the college level, have not even articulated very well what they hope students will learn from them, let alone how well they learned it.

My formulation of classroom research is designed specifically for college teachers, but there is no reason why it is not equally applicable to all classroom teachers. I think it is safe to say that elementary and secondary teachers are somewhat better informed than most college teachers about what constitutes effective teaching. Most college professors, after all, have never been exposed to any knowledge about teaching--a rather sad commentary on how well we prepare college teachers for their profession. Actually, the majority of college professors (70% across all types of colleges and universities) say they are more interested in teaching than in research (Chronicle of Higher Education, Dec. 18, 1985, p. 26), but almost all are self-taught with respect to teaching.

now some, tottering on the edge of extinction, seemingly exist in order to provide jobs for faculty and administrators. Others, a little healthier, perhaps, scramble for students by advertising the latest market-driven curriculum, while still others, perceiving themselves at the top of the heap, aspire to modest research reputations through encouraging and rewarding faculty research over teaching. Indeed, the current surge toward rewarding faculty research and publications in colleges that traditionally emphasized good teaching has the dubious distinction of trying to turn some excellent teaching colleges into quite mediocre research universities.

I have entitled this article "The Adventures of Education in Wonderland" because we seem to have so much in common with Alice. Let me relate Alice's queries to the Cheshire cat when she was trying to find her way in Wonderland:

"Would you tell me please," said Alice, "which way I ought to walk from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.

"I don't much care where..." said Alice.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you walk," said the Cat.

"...so long as I get somewhere," Alice added as an explanation.

"Oh, you're sure to do that," said the Cat, "if you only walk long enough." (p. 85)

There are those in the current reform movement who think that if we work hard enough and collect enough data, we will get somewhere. I am inclined to think that in planning our assessments we should first decide where "we want to get to." If we want eventually to get to the classroom, which is where the action must take place for the improvement of instruction, then we may as well start down that road now if we can.

There are several ways to travel that road. One is to start in the classroom with the teachers who are there. Much has been written about the poor morale of teachers everywhere. Young people don't want to enter teaching; the best and the brightest leave the profession; 20% of all college teachers wish they had entered another profession, and more than a third think they may leave college teaching within five years (Carnegie, 1985). Many reasons are given for the poor morale of teachers, among them poor pay, poor students, poor working conditions, low prestige, and lack of opportunity for advancement. We've also heard a lot recently about "burn out" and boredom. The route to promotion and revitalization for teachers lies not in the classroom, but in escape from it--to administrative posts or to the library or laboratory to do research that will result in recognition and the hoped-for mobility.

The challenge of teaching seems to be gone, and we can't seem to figure out how to get and keep teachers involved and growing as teachers. Teachers complain that they are doing the same thing at age 50 that they did when they were 30. That says something about the lack of career ladders, but it also says something about the advancement of knowledge in the profession. Doctors certainly aren't doing the same things they were doing twenty years ago--nor are businessmen, engineers, or lawyers. There is always something new to learn and perhaps most importantly some indication of personal and professional progress. A doctor can tell whether the new treatment works; an engineer can do things with a computer that were never possible before, a lawyer has the constant challenge of coping with social change.

What's wrong with teaching as a profession? Why do we seem to make so little progress? An obvious answer is that we don't have the advances in knowledge that characterize medicine and engineering, but more important to the individual is that we don't have the satisfaction of knowing whether what we do works. Assessment, as it is promoted and practiced today, will help the profession--maybe--but it won't provide the sort of feedback on effectiveness that individual teachers need in order to get involved in the intellectual challenges of teaching.

The NIE report entitled Involvement in Learning (1984) concluded that out of all of the research that has been conducted on learning, three critical conditions for excellence emerge: first, students must be actively involved in their learning; second, we must hold high expectations for their performance; and third, we must provide adequate feedback on their progress. It strikes me that those three conditions are equally critical for excellence in teaching. Teachers must be actively involved in the process of teaching. They cannot be following someone else's dicta, no matter how authoritative, and hope to grow and to be continually challenged by their profession of teaching. Teachers must have feedback on student learning. It is not enough to know how students in the school or state are doing; teachers need to know what difference they make as teachers. And society, including parents, principals, deans, and legislators must hold high expectations for teachers as professionals, able to exercise professional judgment about both the content and process of teaching. If teaching is a profession in which it is possible to grow and develop, then teachers are learners, and the research that

applies to learning applies equally to teachers as lifelong learners.

It seems to me that the three critical conditions for excellence identified in the NIE report are violated regularly in our secondary schools, and widely ignored in higher education. Classroom research is one unexplored avenue that has the potential for getting teachers involved in the profession of teaching. We need to provide teachers and potential teachers with the skills and tools to grow in their profession. It would make sense for the graduate schools to take the lead in the design of a new course in the methods of Classroom Research. This is something quite different from the standard course in research methods or teaching methods. It should be specifically designed to give every graduate student who plans to teach any subject at any level the skills to assess his or her own effectiveness as a teacher.

There are other things that can be done as well. If we valued good teaching as much as we say we do, teaching institutions would be sending out scouts to locate outstanding teachers. The myth that we cannot tell an excellent teacher from a mediocre or poor teacher is as pernicious as it is false. Researchers have very little trouble walking into a school building or onto a campus and within hours, gaining high agreement on the identification of the best teachers. Giving local awards for outstanding teaching is fine, but such awards will attain real value when they are actually used in recruitment, promotion, and inter-institutional competition for outstanding teachers.

Recruiting good teachers and holding onto them through

adequate reward is one approach to putting teaching on the same competitive basis that has made research so popular in higher education, but most institutions are also interested in making good teachers better. Faculty development programs abound, and most educational institutions now have some form of assistance available to teachers who want to do a better job of helping students learn. But there are now some trend-setting institutions that are beginning to institutionalize the improvement of education through tying assessment to the improvement of instruction. Let me describe briefly how two very different colleges are approaching the job of improving instruction. As you will see, there is nothing in either of the examples I am about to give that is not equally applicable to secondary and elementary education.

One of these colleges is well along in its quest for teacher involvement in assessment; the other is just starting. One is a small four-year Catholic women's college--Alverno College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The other is a huge urban multi-ethnic comprehensive community college--Miami-Dade Community College in Miami, Florida.

Many in higher education know something about the Alverno college-wide assessment program. Alverno does more than involve faculty in the assessment procedures. Faculty are the assessors, and they have become keen observers of student learning as it is taking place in the classroom. The mission and instructional goals of Alverno College are spelled out in considerable detail, and every teacher knows what outcomes Alverno hopes to achieve. Thus Alverno's assessment is strongly forma-

tive; the assessment itself is an educational process. Teachers find that their feedback to students on college-wide goals frequently "offers the teachable moment" and "takes the elements of assessment...and turns them into learning" (Loacker, et al., 1986, p. 52).

While the heart of the Alverno assessment lies in the unique educational interaction between teacher and student, the outcomes of liberal education transcend what is learned in individual courses, and collaboration and integration among faculty in departments and across the college are also built into the plan.

The unique and important contribution of the Alverno plan is that connections are specified from the beginning-- between instruction and assessment, between teachers and learners, between courses and the total college experience, between feedback on performance and student development, between external assessment and self-assessment. Teachers use assessment to educate. At Alverno, assessment is more than the bottom line, more than "a report with implications," more than "proof" to parents and students that their money is well spent, more than a one shot or even annual shot at self-evaluation. It is an on-going process that is never finished for students, teachers, and the college.

While many people admire Alverno's comprehensive and integrative assessment process, there is considerable skepticism that it can be transported to campuses which are larger, more diverse, less a community and more a collection of individuals, curricula, and courses.

Miami-Dade Community College is at the opposite end of the spectrum of higher education from Alverno. Its 110,000 students interact with faculty in some 65,000 credit courses and 35,000 non-credit courses on four campuses. Its student body consists of a majority of minorities in one of the most rapidly changing urban communities in the United States. But Miami-Dade too is moving to tie assessment to instructional improvement, and since Miami-Dade has an enviable record of accomplishing what they set out to do, people are watching with interest their proposals for institution-wide attention to the quality of instruction.

The Miami-Dade goal is perhaps the first clue. The goal is not to conduct an assessment; it is to improve instruction. True, Miami-Dade is ahead of most of the rest of higher education in that they already have a pretty good assessment program in place. They use measures of student learning to place students, to offer guidance, and to assess progress through the curriculum. Unlike Alverno's highly personal, teacher-based assessment program, Miami-Dade's approach to assessment is technologically sophisticated, making heavy use of computers and expertise external to the classroom. Collectively, the faculty at Miami-Dade now know enough about the performance of their open admissions, incredibly diverse student body, to be able to demonstrate that education can make a difference in the lives of their students. Their task now is to maximize that difference through improving the quality of instruction.

Miami-Dade has an advantage, which incidentally it shares with Alverno and with all high schools, and that is that

it is a teaching institution. Their mission is to teach students as well as they know how. No one argues that faculty have research responsibilities or that the goals of improving teaching are wrong-headed, nor I think can anyone argue any longer that the improvement of instruction is an unrealistic or unattainable goal.

Miami-Dade has on the drawing board an ambitious program outlined by President Bob McCabe (see McCabe, 1986) to help classroom instructors move students toward those learning accomplishments that are valued by the institution. The first task is to obtain institution-wide agreement on what students should know and be able to do--in short, to define in measurable terms the desired outcomes of student learning.

At the same time, efforts will be made to promote recognition of classroom teachers as a primary and valued resource that the college uses to accomplish its goals. "Teaching chairs" will be established, and selection, promotion, and tenure will require teachers to demonstrate their teaching competence. One way of doing this will be through classroom research conducted by teachers in their classrooms on topics of their own choosing. As part of tenure review, faculty will be asked to provide data and information about what their teaching contributes to the learning goals valued by Miami-Dade Community College. Teachers will have an opportunity to take graduate level courses, offered on the Miami-Dade campuses, on classroom research and teaching effectiveness. The course on classroom research will emphasize techniques for collecting systematic feedback from students on what they are learning in that class. The feedback devices may

be oral or written, group or individual, soft data or hard, reactions or accomplishments, immediate or long term. The point is that the teacher's attention will be directed to what students are learning, and the goal will be to maximize that learning through whatever methods and techniques can be shown to work.

It is not an easy challenge. It is still too early to tell whether the learning goals of Miami-Dade will be so comprehensive that individual teachers may pick and choose the learning goals to which their teaching contributes or whether the emphasis will be on certain core goals to which all teachers contribute.

The point of these examples is that both Alverno and Miami-Dade have made or are making major efforts to bring assessment into the classroom. If the majority of educators in America's colleges and high schools are convinced that assessment should be tied to instructional improvement, here are two creative, but vastly different, models to challenge them.

In conclusion, the two issues that are at the top of most agendas in education today are assessment and the improvement of instruction. While the two are intended to be inseparable, there is a tendency to conduct assessments too far from the scene of the teaching/learning action. This presents the quandary of how to use the results of assessment to improve classroom teaching. I have addressed that question by urging:

1. That teachers be directly involved in conducting classroom research to evaluate the effectiveness of their own teaching.

2. That formative evaluation accompany summative evaluation in all assessment plans.

3. That institutions formulate realistic missions and that each teacher be urged to contribute in specifiabale ways to the learning goals of the school or college.

4. That good teachers be actively recruited and that outstanding teaching be a significant factor in promotion and in inter-institutional competition and faculty mobility.

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