

Learning, Connections, Assessment, and Testing: Voices from the Inside

by Bonnie B. Mullinix

“The thing I don’t quite get about my classes here is how all the teachers can teach these very different subjects in exactly the same way.”

—Scott McCurry, an eighth-grader recently relocated from Namibia to New Jersey

And there you have it, wrapped neatly in a little package: a comparative analysis of the impact of educational approaches on one student’s own learning. The truth is: students know what helps them to learn. They may not always know precisely what they need to know, but they know what good teaching is and the characteristics of an effective teacher. They can tell us how to reach them, if we just take the time to ask and listen.

What We Can Learn about Learning

This is exactly what I have started to do on a regular basis. I spend about a half an hour at the end of a school year asking students, “Who was your best teacher?” Although we might expect this open-ended question to produce responses about the “funniest,” “nicest,” or “easiest” teacher, in my experience it doesn’t. The “best” teacher is invariably the one they feel they learned the most from because of the way that teacher connected with and engaged them.

This should be our starting point for research and educational reform: the voices of the students; the view from the inside—not that of academics and educators, and certainly not that of politicians. All should be heard and considered, but some voices that should be central to the reform process are the ones most readily discounted as those with the least experience or knowledge: the learners.

Let me clarify. I do not support extreme positions. I do not support the contention that education is best run as a business, identifying learners (or their parents) as “customers” and then

Why Do Most Schools Stay Away from Teaching Everyday Issues?

Ever wonder why most schools stay away from teaching everyday issues? I know that’s something I think about every day. The teachers are so concerned with teaching us math, history, and English, when we have never been educated on things we face each day. A huge number of teens suffer from depression, stress, eating disorders, drug abuse and problems at home. Being a teenager today is harder than it’s ever been. We are faced with so much peer pressure and can’t always say no to it. Every middle and high school should consider having a class that would teach us everyday issues, and that would be interesting to us. This is something that could help teens and save a lot of the problems in today’s society.

—Courtney Albert
Grade 10
New Jersey

buying into the concept that “the customer is always right.” Neither do I believe that an extreme postmodern interpretation of individual perspective as an ultimate truth is helpful in transforming education or any other socially contextualized

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Caring Teachers

Do you ever think that teachers care too much? Some kids need help, but when the teacher gets out of control, and keeps asking if they get it or not. Some teachers will even come get you from your other period and escort you to their period. Do you think that's right? A lot of students don't like all the attention. . . . I think it's great that teachers want to help, but they shouldn't keep hounding the student. We all need space in life.

*—Joe Pinter
Grade 10
New Jersey*

system that is dependent on agreed and common visions. Indeed, I am hopeful that the day will soon come when we manage to derive the ultimate benefits of interdisciplinary interpretations and recognize the commonalities of messages that are informed by and exist in the spaces between divergent disciplines; when business concepts and practices can be tempered by social science dynamics and social justice, rather than driven by simple profit orientation; when post-modernism can be identified by a term that acknowledges “what it is” rather than “what it is not,” so that it is accessible and useful to a broader audience. What both of these perspectives do offer, and what I believe we have learned in many settings, is that it is important to consult with and listen to the individuals most affected. In this case, the students are the most affected population and often the most capable of telling us what works and what doesn't.

Don't believe me? Try listening to yourself. One of the more effective self-reflective activities I include in my sessions on learning theory involves inviting participants to think back on various learning situations and ask themselves: What do I remember? Why do I remember it? How did I learn it? Invariably responses revolve around relevance, performance, and connections. Over time, people don't remember what someone talked “at them.” As for the information and whether they learned anything, they remember what they themselves did, what they used, the

information they found meaning and connection with. As for teachers, they remember the ones who cared, the ones who had a passion for their profession, who took the time to connect with them, to care about what learners thought, and to reach out to them.

None of this is new information; we have known it, we do know it, and we are in the process of rediscovering it. From Dewey (1916) through adult learning theorists of the 1960s–80s (Freire, 1984; Knowles, 1970; Kolb, 1984), to the reemergent understanding of constructivism

What Do My Teachers Do That Helps Me to Learn?

I have this teacher. She teaches me English and is the funniest teacher I have ever had. She makes English fun and exciting. I have never known a person in my entire life that made English come alive. Her class is almost like a conversation. We get what we need to finish, but the class always strays away and ends about talking about other things.

I learn a lot of information in English class besides English.

English is hard to make fun, but once it does become fun, it is also easy to learn and understand. My English teacher makes her class fun because she talks about other related subjects. Still, I am learning what I need to learn. I have been able to understand English ever since I have had her as my teacher. What she does that helps us learn is to mix in other material with stuff we are supposed to know. She has made English class really interesting. I never knew that English could be fun until this year. . . .

*—Jennifer T.
Grade 9
Hawaii*

My School

School time! Walking to school I am not scared or disappointed, I am actually quite excited! This is because learning catches my interest and I want to learn. I hated school and learning a couple of years ago, but now I realize learning isn't something your parents make you do as torture, it is actually fun; not only that but it can be beneficial for your future. I think if you look at school as a creative way to have a blast and learn you will be very successful in life.

My favorite subject is probably science. I think it is interesting to learn about anything related to our world. I also enjoy science because in my classroom we get to do hands-on experiments. It's one thing to listen to someone talk about a subject, but to actually feel it and observe it is quite another.

My teachers make learning easier because they make it fun. They make it fun by not just having a plain old lesson. We do plays, skits, and one time we even made commercial jingles!

We can learn about one thing quickly, because all of our subjects revolve around the same topic. For example, when we studied explorers we had posters and timelines all over the classroom, as well as helpful books to read, and our writing and (sometimes) our math also revolved around explorers. We each had a folder to keep all of our notes in.

I feel that my teachers are always available to help me. It helps that we have 10 of them! They all have very good and helpful qualities. There is always someone that I can go to for help. This makes my classroom comfortable, not boring or stressful.

My teachers also have fun activities planned for us. We sometimes have fun doing games and puzzles. It is safe to say that my classroom is a perfect place for me to learn and create. I am proud of my teachers, my work, and, well, me!

—Emma Pampanin
Grade 5
Massachusetts

(Bandura, 1986; Vygotsky and Kozulin, 1986), the importance of experience, meaning, and connection to learning has been clear.

So why do we have educational structures that remain static and tied to outmoded theories of learning? Most likely because it is what we have personally experienced; what we know and therefore feel comfortable with. Still, if we take the time to listen to students, to engage them and make them partners in constructing their own meaningful learning, we will be able to move beyond our own experience and transform learning away from the drudgery and survival mode noted by the Kentuckian sixth-grader Brandon Smith: *Tests, quizzes, and reports . . . abbb! Those are some of the things that make you want to dislike school, but whether you like or dislike school, you have to go to school and get it over with. . .*

We will be able to provide learning spaces like those described by the fifth-graders in Massachusetts. Or as some of the students in my

research suggest, we can go from the “normal” classroom situations where “. . . *we just work out of the book. They show you how to do it, give you worksheets and test you on it*” to interactive classrooms where “*They always change what we are doing and how we do it. I can't wait to get to class and see what we're going to do next.*”

Standards, Testing, Assessment, and Learning

Our current popular confusion with the relationships among learning, standards, assessment, standardized testing, and accountability structures distracts us from what is important and fuels many of the problems we are experiencing.

In the April 30 first-run “Boston Public” episode, one character (Jackson, a black junior in high school) delivered a powerful and memorable commentary on standardized testing's incompatibility with learning. After providing a series of facts regarding the cultural bias that remains

What My Teachers Do That Makes Me Want To Learn

My teachers make me want to learn, and make learning enjoyable. There is a unique format in the way we learn. . . . Many guests come to our class once a week. Mr. Letch is a retired science engineer. He comes in every Thursday and we break into groups to conduct a science experiment. Also on Thursdays, kids from Melrose High School come and teach us about plants. On Tuesdays, Mrs. Griscom comes in and prepares for our Thursday experiment. She will also answer any work questions. Mrs. Patterson is teaching the Enrichment Program. Sometimes field trips come to our class. Captain Lawrence Mahan built a ship in his backyard. He brought slides and showed them to us. His ship "Larinda" was made totally from recycled items except for the sails. I enjoyed learning from all the different people!

I have learned a lot this year. I owe the credit to hard work, studying, and to the inspiration my teachers have given me. It is a lot of hard work but the results are WONDERFUL!!! My teachers have put in time and energy into making sure we are learning. I have always wanted to get a good education and I knew it wouldn't always be easy or fun. [Ms. Hinkley and Mr. MacQuade] say work is never easy, but in the way they teach, makes learning more fun. I appreciate that. . . .

—Rebecca G.
Grade 5
Massachusetts

Our current movement toward increased testing for the sake of "increased accountability" is one move in this direction of separating education from learning. We know by now that one's ability to answer easily corrected questions (multiple choice, matching, true-false) has more to do with the construction of the questions, the background of the individual, knowledge of test-taking strategies, and ability to store information in short-term memory than it has to do with whether someone actually learned something. As screening devices for keeping people in a specific social stratum, such tests are great tools—especially when norm referenced (as we have perfected our ability to construct and grade tests to ensure that we differentiate the best and brightest from the worst and dimmest).

As tools for documenting and facilitating learning and content mastery for all, standardized tests are extremely limited. Is it not strange then that we are currently promoting standards that identify content and skills that should be mastered by all students while simultaneously assuming that a system of "high stakes" standardized national and state testing can assess this? Why would we turn to tests that focus more on which content bits students remember and whether they can guess someone else's formulation of an answer than on their ability to articulate what they have learned and what they can do with that knowledge?

This situation is especially ironic when one considers the need to reevaluate the importance of memorized knowledge in a Web-connected, Internet-powered educational environment. Although standards and testing strategies and tools may each have a place, they are being mismatched and misused by current educational reform efforts. Shepard (2000) tracks the discrepancies among learning, authentic assessment of learning, and the high stakes testing movement. She clearly maps the origins of our current testing structure; then, linking it to an outdated understanding of what learning is and how it happens, she notes that current effective instructional practice and assessment are based on a new and emergent paradigm drawn from a solid research base.

The result: the mistaken assumption that content-focused testing of recall can effectively hold schools and teachers accountable for whether students have mastered standards that are designed to move us toward a process- and application-oriented understanding of learning and

embedded in these tests, he concludes: "When the three R's become Read, Remember, and Regurgitate, education ceases to be learning."

Untitled

Hi! My name is Tayler Hill. I will talk about how the statewide ISAT test affects my learning.

First, I am always at gifted when we take our ISAT tests in the afternoon. We take them in the morning (which I get to take), and the afternoon (I miss). That gets me behind on all of my work and I have to rush through my work! When I rush through my work, I get it wrong.

Second, when we take the test, all of us get behind on our work. We'll miss out on our math and science. I'm not very good at math so I need to do math most! And science, is what I miss every month for gifted. I'm writing this paper in gifted so I hope that I continue to be in it!

Third, the things we learn in class would help determine my grade level instead of our ISAT tests. We could take our tests on what we learn everyday in class instead of filling in circles (O) on our ISAT tests. I'd think that would be easier!

To sum it up, I, Tayler Hill, just told you how the statewide ISAT test affects my learning!!!!!!

THE END!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

—Tayler H.
Grade 3
Illinois

forcing teachers, parents, and students to direct their attention toward protests and momentarily away from their desired goal: creating the types of educational environments that will engage learners and result in lasting learning.

If we are truly interested in supporting learning in our schools, we too must remain learners. We must listen, we must document, and we must share. Accountability and assessments of learning are indeed important, but we must discover, along with our learners, how to best assess in order to support learning. We need to discover how to share our assessment techniques and findings with a broader audience so that they can understand and appreciate the depth and nuances of the learning taking place in our classrooms and schools.

The good news is that this is not something that we need to wait for others to do. We can begin right now to initiate change as reflective practitioners and action researchers. Start by listening to these students, then listen to other learners around you. Use their insights and your own analysis to guide you as you change your practices and transform the educational environments you are associated with to engage and connect with learners. Be vigilant: transformation is a continuous process. Document and share your successes and failures so that others can learn. Spread the word and spread the learning. And remember: the "power of one" in an educational revolution is significant, for it carries forward with each learner that we manage to touch.

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teaching. This mismatch, while apparently invisible to policymakers, is glaringly clear to anyone working directly with education and our schools. It results in wasted time and interrupted learning,