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Illuminating and Challenging Specious High Stakes Standardized Test Preparation Methodologies

Even with scandalous cheating on standardized tests, results of the 2009 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), an international assessment that measures the performance of 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics, and science every three years, U.S. students rank fourteenth in reading, twenty-fifth in math, and seventeenth in science compared to students in other industrialized countries (www.cfr.org). All of the tests that Barbara Jordan had taken in primary school through college and to enter law school had not prepared her to learn. In her work, *A Self Portrait*, she articulates a heart wrenching recollection of her entry into Boston University School of Law. Insightfully she recalls her self-assessment:

. . . if I was going to succeed at this strange new adventure, I would have to read longer and more thoroughly than my colleagues at law school had to read. I felt that in order to compensate for what I had missed in earlier years, I would have to work harder, and study longer, than anybody else. I still had this feeling that I did not want my colleagues to know what a tough time I was having understanding the concepts, the words, the ideas, and the process (30).

Yet, Jordan, the master student, welcomed the unknown even in herself. Indeed, she was open to changes in her environment and changes in herself. At Boston University, Jordan recounts, “You had to think and read and understand and reason. I had learned at twenty-one that you couldn’t just say a thing is so because it might not be so, and somebody brighter, smarter, and more thoughtful would come out and tell you it wasn’t so. Then, if you still thought it was, you had to prove it.” While this novel learning environment presents challenges and evokes a great deal of emotion, Jordan views on learning and growth are expanded: “well, that was a new thing for me. I cannot, I really cannot describe what that did to my insides and to my head. I thought: I’m being educated finally.” A marriage between genius and creativity is for Jordan, persistence and hard work. By design human beings are learning machines. We have an innate ability to learn and all of us have room to grow and to improve. Carl Rogers goes so far as to say that anything that can be “taught” to a human being is either inconsequential or just plain harmful. What is important in education, Rogers asserts, is learning. And everyone has the ability to do that” (Ellis, 31).
Educators, parents, and politicians often agree that many negative predictions about students’ ability and performance have not only been proven invalid but is without question a testament to unethical practices in education. As far back as 1973, Milton E. Larsen’s provocative work, *Humble Cases for Career Counselors*, chronicles the failures of notable geniuses in an attempt to persuade counselors as well as educators to stop attempting to predict who would succeed and who would fail predicated on limited assessment perspectives. It is difficult to overestimate the impact of such failed predictions and the validity such nefarious practices. Quite wittingly, Larsen unmaskes predictions of failures of people whose very names are equated with excellence in their chosen fields. Simply acknowledging the following:

Creative and imaginative people are often not recognized by their contemporaries. Even more often, they are not recognized in school by their teachers. History is full of examples:

*Einstein* was four years old before he could speak and seven before he could read. *Isaac Newton* did poorly in grade school, and *Beethoven’s* music teacher once said of him, “As a composer he is hopeless.” When *Thomas Edison* was a boy, his teachers told him he was too stupid to learn anything. *F.W. Woolworth* got a job in a dry goods store when he was 21, but his employers would not let him wait on a customer because he “didn’t have enough sense.” A newspaper editor fired *Walt Disney* because he had “no good ideas.” *Caruso’s* music teacher told him “You can’t sing. You have no voice at all.” The director of the Imperial Opera in Vienna told *Madame Schumann-Heink* that she would never be a singer and advised her to buy a sewing machine. *Leo Tolstoy* flunked out of college; *Wernher von Brawn* flunked ninth grade algebra. *Admiral Richard E. Byrd* had been retired from the Navy as “unfit for service” until he flew over both Poles. *Louis Pasteur* was rated as “mediocre” in chemistry when he attended the Royal College. *Abraham Lincoln* entered the Black Hawk War as a captain and came out as a private. *Louisa May Alcott* was told by an editor that she could never write anything that had Popular appeal. *Fred Waring* was once rejected for high school chorus. *Winston Churchill* failed the sixth grade” (qtd. in Ellis 3).

In his seminal essay, *The Personal, Technical, and Public Spheres of Argument: A Speculative Inquiry into the Art of Public Deliberation*, G. Thomas Goodnight posits that, “[i]f public argument can yield no probable answers to questions of preferable conduct, it can offer no less than an alternative to decisions based on authority or blind chance” (198). The public policies governing standardized tests as the key assessment tool and the resulting responses of learned educators suggests an educational argumentative model predicated on “blind chance”. The yearning, then, must be to fret out nonlinear and non-deliberative arguments on teaching the
test and teaching to the test, what Goodnight terms “the semblance of deliberative discourse”, and “to attend to the creative enterprises of argument”. Building on Goodnight’s views of argument and constructivists’ theory, this critic understands argument as deliberative-embracing a constructivist view of learning and doing, but argument is creative because it can also be designed collaboratively to create solutions to policies that often appear untenable. The United States Department of Education No Child Left Behind Policy, “substitute the semblance of deliberative discourse” (Goodnight, 198). Because there was no actual deliberation with educators on all academic levels and from all regions from the nation, implementation not only diminished but unethical test preparation practices were crafted to allay attention. My objective in this essay is to analyze selected arguments on teaching to the test and teaching the test and to develop a collaborative argumentation educational model that will attend to the learning needs of policy makers, parents, students, administrators, and teachers, and will avoid the corruption, data manipulation and cheating that has wreaked havoc on our education system and most important our students.

The non-deliberative arguments that prevail on teaching to the test and teaching the test do not adequately steer us towards a strategic plan for solving the very serious problem of educating our youth. The privileged continue to be well educated, and predominately lower income and minority schools continue to be under educated. Students from socially advantaged groups (i.e., middle- and upper-class white students) often receive more demanding interactive instruction that emphasizes critical thinking, problem solving, and active participation in learning (Barr and Dreben 1983; Clark and Peterson 1986; Gamoran 1986; Smith, Lee, and Newman 2001) and provides access to “social power and reward” (Anyon, 67). “Most prior work has suggested that high stakes policies exert a major influence on instruction for better or for worse. Some research has found that these policies improve students’ outcomes by motivating educators to emphasize more rigorous content and by leading teachers to use interactive pedagogical approaches that enhance wealthy and upper middle class students’ learning outcomes (Benveniste 1985; Bishop and Mane 1999; Bishop et al. 2001; Borko, Elliot, and Uchiyama 1999; Coleman et al. 1997; Kelly, Heneman, and Milanowski 200; Shouse 1997; Wise 1979).”

While the interactive model focuses on conceptual understanding, active engagements by the students, and problems solving, John B. Diamond, in his thought provoking article Where the
Rubber Meets the Road: Rethinking the Connection Between High Stakes Testing Policy and Classroom Instruction, argues that low income and minority students are educated using a factory model that exacerbates inequalities to insure assimilation because it leads teachers not only to narrow their content but also to marginalize low performing students. It emphasizes “obeying rules, memorization, and learning decontextualized knowledge,” thus preparing these students for manual, clerical, or low wage service sector work. “Other work has indicated that accountability policies exacerbate inequalities by leading teachers to narrow the content they teach; marginalize low-performing students; or emphasize didactic pedagogy, characterized by lecture, seat works, memorization, and recitation – particularly in the lowest performing schools (Diamond 218).”

**Test Preparation Controversies Suggest a Need for Linear Approaches**

A direct corollary of high stakes testing is that educator cheating on standardized tests across the United States of America has without question reached epidemic proportions. Scandals in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Washington D.C., Baltimore, and Atlanta public school systems; ten major university standardized test scandals, the most preeminent among them the Harvard University scandal; dental colleges’ scandals; and most recently the Montana Nuclear Air Force base exam cheating scandal reveal the corruptive influence of high stakes testing. According to Dennis Van Rockel, National Education Association President, “suspect scores on standardized tests have been found in school districts across the nation (NEA Presidents Viewpoint). At the core of testing is to use the results to improve teaching and learning, a noble idea. Indeed, Gail Thompson & Tawannah G. Allen (218) argue in their article Four Effects of High Stakes Testing Movement on African Americans K-12 Students:

From its creation until the present time, there has been an on-going quest to improve the U.S. K-12 public school systems and promises of reform have been a foundation of many political campaigns. Nevertheless, the school systems have continuously failed to live up to their potential (Spellings, 2012). Consequently, some students receive a quality education that prepares them for college or to enter the workforce, and others receive an education that prepares them for low paying jobs or perpetual unemployment (Hale, 2001).
One of the most far-reaching reforms began in the 1980s after "A Nation at Risk..." This report revealed that U.S. students were not performing as well academically as their counterparts in other nations. A flurry of educational reforms followed, to include: the 1987 High Schools That Work Reform (Smith, 2005), 1993’s Success For All (Smith, 2005), and the Comprehensive School Reform of 1997 (Smith, 2005).” The trend of educational reforms continued well into its latest iteration of the amended 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act and created the No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Its explicit purpose was “to ensure that all children...obtain a high quality education and reach a minimum proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (U.S. Congress 2002, p. 15). These goals would be accomplished through a twelve-step process that included:

- meeting the educational needs of underperforming students from historically underserved backgrounds; closing the achievement gap...especially...between high – and low-performing children and their more advantaged peers; and significantly elevating the quality of instruction by providing staff in participating schools with substantial opportunities for professional developments. (U.S. Congress, 2002, p. 15)

Even though the intention of NCLB outlined a multifaceted approach to school reform, the implementation became synonymous with one ultimate objective: producing high test scores. Consequently, the current high-stakes testing movement has made standardized test scores the main criteria by which student knowledge, teacher efficacy, and school quality are assessed. An even greater problem has been that although the authors of NCLB had good intentions, a decade after the reform was enacted, most of its goals have not been met (Hightower, 2012, Klein & Rice, 2012).

It is true that lower income minorities as well as lower income Euro Americans, in general, do not perform well on what many in the academy label as high stakes standardized tests. What do standardized tests really predict about the future success of individual students? Rooted in the eugenics movements of the early twentieth century, the accountability movement claims as its objective the development of assessment driven systems designed to determine student achievement and teacher effectiveness as Jennifer A. Geno argues in her article Using Tests to Improve Student Achievement (50). In a recent interview with David Letterman, Bill
Cosby admitted that he made below 600 on the SAT. He also articulated how the lack of standardized test preparation negatively influenced African American test outcomes. Like teenage Cosby, the parents of many low income African Americans, Euro Americans, and Latinos have experienced the one line test preparation session: “When in doubt mark answer C”. A deeper investigation into the high stakes testing debate requires a close analysis of the policies of teaching to the test and teaching the test. There is no question that assisting students with performing well on tests must be addressed. There are many approaches and opinions on how to help the aforementioned populations perform well on tests. Two arguably questionable approaches are teaching to the test and teaching the test.

Two critical arguments have ensued, the teaching to the test argument and the teaching the test argument. Led by Educational Testing Services (ETS), who allege that coaching can be no more than marginally effective, they suggest that student performance gains were no higher than 25-30 points on standardized tests. On the contrary, in his article *The Case Against Standardized Tests*, Chris Carter argues that, “This figure bears no relation whatsoever to the impressive gains from coaching reported in several independent studies. J.P. Zuman presented a paper at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, using research from a Harvard University doctoral dissertation, he substantiated a 110 point average increase in SAT scores after test coaching by the Princeton Review. Another study by the Federal Trade Commission found an average 50 point increase in scores from coaching, and concluded the ETS and College Board material for students did not accurately describe the real possibility of meaningful score gains from coaching.” John Katzman, founder of the Princeton Review, concurs. He states that “Most of our kids are wealthy. Those are the kids who have an advantage to begin with. And we’re moving them up another level”.

Further, Carter notes that ETS and its parent organization the College Board, “now sell over 218 books and manuals on test preparation, such as *10 Real SATs* (“the only book with real SATs!”), *The Official Guide for GMAT Review* (“The Official Guide for GMAT Review is the starting point if you are serious about being a competitive MBA candidate” the back cover reads), the *GRE: Practice to take the General Test*, and many others. While ETS calls itself a testing service and not a company, and enjoys a non-profit organization status, its revenues are in the billions, and its executives are among the highest paid in the nation.
WHAT IS TEACHING TO THE TEST?

The level of scholarship dedicated to defining teaching to the test ranges from simple pointed definitions to more nuanced classifications of teaching to the test. In some circles proponents of high stakes testing define reviewing the test and aligning the curriculum to the test as teaching to the test. A more nuanced definition replaces the term teaching to the test with the words curriculum alignment. Hence, the term curriculum alignment often replaces the teach to the test phrase. As Kevin Bushweller contends, it speaks directly to teaching components covered on standardized tests. Because teaching to the test has become a pejorative term, curriculum alignment seeks to alienate concerns of academic malfeasance (1). In general, curriculum alignment is the result of the push for tighter links between instruction and standardized test in an effort to reach academic benchmarks. While this definition remains accepted by many scholars, a vocal contingent submits a deeper view calling the practice into question.

According to a 2007 opinion survey generated by Phi Delta Kappan a definition for teaching to the test is framed in the following question: “Will current emphasis on standardized tests encourage teachers to teach to the tests, that is concentrate on teaching their students to pass the tests rather than teaching the subject, or don’t you think it will have this effect?” The qualifier rather than denotes an assumption by many critics that test preparation and good teaching are mutually exclusive (Phelps, 38). This skepticism is noted by UCLA assessment expert, W. James Popham through his detailed description of teaching to the test. In his article, aptly named Teaching to the test?, Popham asserts: “teachers who organize their instruction either around the actual items found on a test or around a set of look-alike items engage in item teaching. However, curriculum teaching requires teachers to direct their instruction toward a specific body of content knowledge or a specific set of cognitive skills represented by a given test. In curriculum teaching, a teacher targets instruction at test-represented content rather than at test items (16).” By parsing the practices commonly associated with this instructional method an argument is created for teaching to the test that runs parallel with an argument for teaching the actual test. In his important essay, The Study of Argumentation, Frans H. Van Eemeren argues that speakers or writers who advance argumentation defend their standpoint to listeners or readers who may doubt its acceptability, or who may have “. . . a standpoint of their own” (109).
Proponents’ Arguments for Teaching to the Test

Research conducted by Richard Phelps, in his work also titled *Teach to the test?*, provides a persuasive argument for the instructional strategy using the late 1970s case of *Debra P. vs. Turlington* in the state of Florida (40). This specific case involved the denial of high school diplomas to a group of ten African American students who failed Florida’s graduation test three times. Deliberations revealed a wide disparity between what was taught in classrooms to meet state curricular standards and the curriculum embedded in the test questions. Before *Debra P.*, Florida and most other states that administered graduation tests purchased the exams “off the shelf” from commercial publishers, leaving responsibility for curricular standards management in the hands of school districts. However, Phelps further notes the following:

Florida’s schools had been teaching state standards, but the standards underlying the graduation test were from somewhere else. *Debra P.* revealed a conundrum: In learning the Florida standards, students were not prepared for the graduation test, but if their teachers taught to the test, students would not learn the official Florida curriculum. The court declared it unfair to deny students a diploma based on their performance on test content they had no opportunity to master (40).

An additional strong case for teaching to the test methodology brings the experience of former Baltimore County School District elementary school principal John Hutchinson into focus. Bushweller retells Hutchinson’s first hand account of embracing curriculum alignment after being enamored with creative teaching methods. Even though the latter methods were well meaning, they slighted core academic skills such as reading, writing and math (2). To counter this growing trend, Hutchinson implemented an experiential learning program which emphasized teaching lessons that apply to real life and that are linked to skills tested by the state. An example follows:

The students in Carla Harner's fifth-grade class, for instance, were responsible for running the Fullerton school store last year. When business lagged and the kids suggested designing advertisements, Harner assigned them to find written advertisements and study them. Which advertisements were persuasive? What was it about how they were written that made them persuasive? One of the skills tested by the MSPAP is persuasive writing. So after analyzing the impact of real advertisements, Harner's students were required to write short persuasive essays about the store. The essays had to be grammatically correct, and general statements had to be supported by examples--just the things MSPAP test graders look for. The MSPAP has no multiple-choice questions (2).
Proponents of teaching to the test often view it as a practical means to align curriculum and assessment (Bushweller, 1). Supporting this rationale, University of Pittsburgh’s Co-Director of the Institute of Learning, Lauren Resnick, compels teachers to embrace curriculum alignment and “create exercises so powerful as exemplars of a domain, that honing one’s ability to solve them represents generalizable learning and achievement . . . viewed in this light, teaching to the test is no longer vaguely disreputable because the skills and knowledge are themselves general and are the very things we wish students to acquire” (Bond). As one of the visionaries behind the ambitious New Standards Project, an initiative aimed at bringing teachers together to learn techniques for integrating instruction and assessment, Resnick’s assertion runs parallel with Popham’s distinction of teaching to the test. In his view curriculum teaching, if effective, “will elevate students’ scores on high stakes tests and more important, will elevate students’ mastery of the knowledge or skills on which the test items are based (17).” This expanded view of teaching to the test gives the teacher greater room to create exercises that incorporate critical thinking while addressing state curriculum standards.

**Opponents’ Arguments against Teaching to the Test**

Despite proponents’ evidence in support for teaching to the test, those in opposition typically view the practice an act of heresy. Bushweller frames the opposing side of this argument in the following way, “teaching to the test or curriculum alignment fails to display the teaching of critical thinking skills, stifles creativity and ultimately encourages cheating in some form (1).” Furthermore, Phelps proclaims, “complete alignment matches the content of the curricular standards, the test, and instruction as well, which means that every teacher in the state must teach the same content in a given grade level and subject area. That notion is anathema to many education professors and others who take the romantic view that every teacher is a skilled and creative craftsperson who designs unique instructional plans for unique classrooms. In this view, standardizing instruction ‘de-skills’ teachers. Therefore, teaching to the test must always be wrong (40).”

In the article, *How Standardized Tests Damages Education*, the National Center for Fair and Open Testing (Fairtest.org) concurs with the argument against standardized testing and curriculum alignment, touting its negative consequences:
... curriculum alignment actually narrows the curriculum itself. Equally important, it undermines student engagement, and school climate while neglecting to promote the knowledge, skills and habits needed for success in college or skilled work. Many advanced students are discouraged and push aside for the sake of teaching struggling learners. Likewise, students from low-income and minority group backgrounds, English language learners, and students with disabilities are more likely to be retained a grade, placed in a lower track, or unnecessarily put in a remedial education program through misdiagnosis of student learning needs. This further exacerbates the achievement gap while aiding a “school to prison pipeline (1).

It is important to note that some critics view curriculum alignment aides and abets a misguided accountability structure. Instead of being accountable to parents, communities, teachers and students, schools who utilize curriculum alignment become “accountable” to an unregulated testing industry. “Score inflation” results when narrow test preparation replaces more in-depth and comprehensive instruction. Not only do students get an inferior education, but the public gets the mistaken impression that education is improving (Fairtest.org). Although it may honestly work in the short term, the consequence of this method creates invalid inferences about student performance. An even less lauded method of teach preparation is teaching the test.

Proponents Argument for Teaching the Test

The recently published article Using Tests to Improve Student Achievement by Jennifer Geno, assistant principal at the Bay Arena: ISD Career Center in Bay City, Michigan purports the success of her colleague, Amy Dore’s teaching the test methods. As a veteran teacher of the Health Technology/Medical course, her students had the opportunity to earn college credit if they received a minimum of an 80 percent average on all medical terminology tests during the school year (Geno, 50). Initially, direct instruction did not yield the results Dore had expected. A significant number of her students failed. With the approval of her school’s teacher consultant and curriculum supervisor, a prescriptive plan was designed to boost scores, and to aide in students understanding the material. The following scenario articulates her path to teaching the test pedagogical shift, teaching the test.

Dore deconstructed the assessment, looking at all components from the content to format to method of administration, and she compiled content and constructed clone practice tests. According to Dore, medical terminology tests are basically vocabulary and morphology tests...
dealing with meanings of word parts without context. Students who took the clone practice tests scored 80 percent or higher. They asked for more clones and she agreed to construct more online practice test of the content students were to be assessed on each week. Towards this end, she agreed to construct online practice tests of the content students were to be assessed on each week. Meshing the online delivery system, Moodle, allowed students to retake the practice test for each unit as many times as they wished while receiving instant feedback in the form of a grade. Students found the immediacy of results received through this medium a huge plus in helping them increase their confidence in understanding the content, as well as feeling adequately prepared for the actual test, thus resulting in a more relevant testing experience. Geno claims the following:

the integrity of the actual assessment was not compromised through the practice tests. To remedy that potential issue, she compiled tests covered the actual content, but not the in the exact manner as they would receive it on test day. The ensuing results indicated that many students who did not score 80 percent or higher on the actual medical terminology exams did not take the practice tests (52).

While Geno claims her colleague, Dore, did not arrange questions in the exact manner as they would appear on the actual test, she neglects to clarify her practice test design paradigm. As Dore reviewed the data from each test, she became convinced of the validity of this approach and incorporated these practices into the remainder of her assessments for the school year, providing her with data from 10 out of her 18 exams. The data indicated that 72 percent of the students who did not take the practice tests scored below the 80 percent necessary to earn college credit. Conversely, eighty-nine percent of the students who took the practice test clones scored above the requisite 80 percent (Geno, 53).

Without question it is true is that learning vocabulary is often taught at the rote memory level. However, because these students would be given college credit for this course, I would have recommended a method requiring a system more sophisticated, better reasoned, and goal directed. For example, I would have require students to assess their ability and to develop prescriptions such as the following: students could have been encouraged to work collaboratively to deconstruct the test and to design their own practice tests; to organize study groups and to shadow medical professionals, thus observing the terminology being used in action; and students
could share peer feedback and make recommendations on techniques that they employ to learn the vocabulary – for example, mnemonic devices. The activities proposed here would have moved students from being passive learners to becoming active learners. Silverman and Smith, experts from the Teaching and Learning Services at the University of Minnesota cogently argue the following:

Researchers have found consistently that interaction among students in the form of well-structured group discussions plays a central role in stimulating critical thinking. Discussing course material and its applications allows students to formulate and test hypotheses, practice asking thought-provoking questions, hear other perspectives, analyze claims, evaluate evidence, and explain and justify their reasoning. As they become more sophisticated and fluent in thinking critically, students can observe and critique each other’s reasoning skills.

If Dore had employed such an approach students would have been able to ask themselves, “Why do I have difficulty with medical terminology, and how do I solve this problem?”, and to engage a deeper questioning of that knowledge. Thus, demonstrating an ability to think through and design solutions collaboratively. Although her colleague Geno openly questions, “Has anyone ever taught students how to study?” she falls short in offering that online practice tests as an effective solution. While it is alleged that Dore varied her format to ensure that students learn the word parts versus merely memorizing there is no evidence to support the claim. Instead, Dore, her teacher consultant, or Geno should have recommended the 20 memory techniques explained in *Becoming a Master Student* by David Ellis. First, Dore could have taught student how to organize their study notes. Second, she could have taught students how to use their body, indeed learning is an active process and students could have been taught how to actively get their students involved. Skits are particularly effective in developing this strategy. Indeed students could have written a scene that included active use of the medical terms in a hospital setting. Using the brain is yet another strategy.

In addition students should have been taught how to reduce interference, like turning off television sets, stereos, finding a quiet place to study, studying the most difficult subjects during the daylight hours. Experts agree that early morning hours can be especially productive. Another way to fight mental fuzziness is to learn more than is required. Students often learn just enough material to pass the test. Students could also be taught how to distribute learning, rather than
conduct a marathon session, they could have been taught to study each day during segmented time periods. Indeed one gets more done when they take regular breaks. Students should be taught to work on their attitudes. If you tell yourself that something is boring or difficult you are less likely to learn it. Awareness of a negative attitude can aide in deflating an attitude that blocks memory. Students can also be taught to befriend difficult subjects by relating them to something that they are interested in. Students can be taught to adopt attitudes that say: “I never forget anything, I may have difficulty recalling something from my memory but, all I have to do is figure out where I stored it” (Ellis, 83). Indeed, Van Eemeren is correct when he suggests that standpoints put forward in support of arguments can also be used as alternative defenses against the very argument that they were designed to support. The standpoints articulated by Dore, the teacher consultant, and Geno constitute, “a ‘parallel chain’ of reasons” for teaching the test. Sometimes referred to as a “serial change”, the argumentation structure is not clear. Finally, the identification of fallacies within the argument refers to a non-deliberative structure that results in the collapse and gets confirmation of ethical practices purported in the claims of Dore and Geno.

**Opponents’ Argument Against Teaching the Test**

Teaching the test, also referenced as item teaching, is using actual questions or clones of actual questions to prepare students for high stakes standardized tests. Let us consider an opponent of teaching the test views. A synopsis of Popham’s hypothetical example of item teaching or teaching the test follows:

Dee C. Ving. A 5th grade instructor in a school mostly serving low-income youngsters, Dee has consulted the descriptive information accompanying national standardized achievement test that her 5th graders will take in the spring. She finds those descriptions inadequate from an instructional perspective: They are both terse and ambiguous. Dee simply can’t aim her instruction at the knowledge or skills represented by the test items because she has no clear idea about what knowledge or skills are represented. Frustrated by the overwhelming pressure to improve her student’s scores, Dee engages in some full-scale item-teaching. One of her friends has access to a copy of the test that Dee’s students will take and loans it to Dee for a few days so that Dee can understand what content your students will really need to know. Dee, having covertly made a copy of key sections of the test, devotes one or two days each week to what she rationalize as test-targeted instruction. In her explanations and practice exercises, she uses either actual items taken from the test or slightly modified versions of those items. Not surprisingly, when Dee’s 5th graders take the standardized achievement test in the spring, most of them score very
well. Her students last year scored on average in the 45th percentile, but her students this year earn a mean score equal to the 83rd percentile (17).

Analysis

Indeed, there is no valid measure to apprehend item-teaching, as Popham notes, Accountability systems are equally flawed. Teachers self-reports even if they are anonymous, are not likely to get teachers who engage in item-teaching to admit that they employed unethical didactic pedagogy. Teacher collected materials on test preparation items would also fail because educators most likely will destroy unsanitized clones and actual test items. Pre-announced classroom observations will result in an equal fate because the item focused teaching method will be replaced with high-quality instruction, using pedagogical approaches crafted to enhance student performance. What should be effective is the unannounced classroom observations, but it proves equally ineffective. Popham cogently argues that such a detection procedure fails for thee critical reasons:

First, it casts the unannounced visitor in a negative “Gotcha!” role. Few school-site administrators enjoy playing police officer. Second, forcing a school principal or other administrator to undertake this surveillance duty will diminish that person’s effectiveness as an ally for a teacher’s improvement. And reduced effectiveness, in the long run, is certain to harm the quality of instruction for students. Third, visiting teacher’s classrooms to ensure that no inappropriate test preparation is underway is enormously time consuming. The administrator’s other responsibilities may suffer (19).

While Popham does not believe that instructional improprieties will magically disappear, he does believe that assessment literacy training for teachers would result in most teachers abandoning item-teaching. Such training, he also believes, would help them realize the impact that it has on their students.

In a heart wrenching plea, Popham calls upon educators to act. To solve the problem of item-teaching, Popham posits that “teachers should direct their instruction toward tangible targets, and should have clear descriptions of the curricular content assessed by a test. They should also have some reasonable assurances that good teaching will pay off in improved student test scores (19). Hawaii State Department of Education agreed and hired an established test design company to specifically design a test “suitable for ascertaining students’ mastery of the
revised content standards. Each item measured one of the state’s content standards. After the contractor designed the test items and identified the designated content standard for each item, committees of Hawaii educators reviewed each item’s quality (19). Further, Popham argues this model would help policymakers understand what kinds of high stakes tests they should use. Some teachers succumb to item-teaching because, if they truly believe they are obliged to raise test scores, they think they have no alternative. More often than not, those teachers are correct. Hawaii education officials attempted to create a test that would allow teachers to engage in curriculum-teaching, rather than item-teaching, by targeting the state’s content standards. If Hawaii teachers can focus their instruction on curricular targets, yet feel confident that student test scores will rise with effective instruction, they will have no need to engage in rampant item-teaching (20).

A Modest Proposal for Collaborative Learning and Assessment Paradigms: Culturally Inclusive Perspectives

If we are truly sincere about education reforms that actually work, the effort must be a collaborative one between the United States Department of Education, State Departments of Education, Teacher Certification Commissions, college and university education departments, State Departments of Family and Children Services and parent-teacher organizations.

Throughout our evolution from hunter gatherer days to the technological present, we have sought to establish communities, forms of communication and thus cultures as an adaptive mechanism. We attempt to survive collectively rather than individually. We procreate, communicate and teach our young. Have we not allowed, even invited an intellectual narcissism so vile, so intent on preserving economic hegemony that clothed in accountability garb designed by policy makers with little or no insight on the abilities of today’s parent, learners, or teachers.

The answer is not as complex as many in the academic community has tried to portray it. Revisiting the Booker T. Washington model, parents, students and teachers must be partners in the education process. Perhaps Peter Sacks says it best in his telling article, *Standardized Minds: The High Price of America’s Testing Culture And What We Can Do To Change It*, Sacks laments, “If social engineering had set out to invent a virtually perfect inequality machine,
designed to perpetuate class and race division . . . those engineers could do no better than present day accountability systems already put into use in American schools” (158).

Undergirding the proposal that follows are some selected concepts from constructivism. Constructivism is a theory about knowledge and learning: it describes both what “knowing” is and how one “comes to know” as Fosnat explains, emanating from psychology, philosophy, science and biology, “the theory describe knowledge not as truth to be transmitted or discovered, but as emergent, developmental, nonobjective, viable constructed explanations by humans engaged in meaning-making in cultural and social communities of discourse” (ix). With this insight, learning is a self-regulatory process. For the construtivist, we struggle with conflict between existing models of the world and discrept and new insights, constructing new representations and models of reality as a human meaning making venture with culturally developed tools and symbols. As learners, we further negotiate such meaning through cooperative social activity, discourse, and debate in communities of practice. Learning is not the result of development, learning is development. With this idea in mind it is important that we provide opportunities for policy makers, parents, teachers, and students to learn from culturally inclusive perspectives.

**Step One**

In developing culturally inclusive paradigms policy makers to have on their consulting teams. Culturally diverse psychologists, teaching and learning experts, school administrators, parents and teachers, such a cadre of advisors will aide in ensuring that learning models, teaching paradigms, and assessment methodologies attend to the needs of our culturally diverse learning population, and that assessment data, is used as it was originally intended, is used in instruction and learning rather than to promote the criminal trends. The pervasive cheating scandals that has resulted from spescious reasoning.

**Step Two**

The second step in our plan will be to develop learning opportunities for parents to aide them in developing positive home learning environments. Studies in Scotland, and the United Kingdom suggest that developing positive home learning environments has a positive long term
impact on children emotional and cognitive development. Children who were hugged, read to, taken to the parks, and on field trips, talked to, listened to, encouraged to create were reported to have better social and cognitive development. In England the Sure Start program in disadvantaged areas reflected positive benefits of developing home learning environments. Home visits to early headstart program participants show that creating positive home learning environments increase both the quantity and quality of parents’ interaction with children, as well as childrens’ social and cognitive development. One observes that these tips are crafted to appeal to diverse audiences. During the early years, parents might consider the following tips that the Minister of Education in Singapore shares with parents:

**Create a positive home-learning environment for your child**

To create a positive home-learning environment and experience for your child, you can try the following ways:

**Some useful tips**

- Praise your child’s good efforts, and not only his/her successes.
- Don’t dwell on mistakes and academic marks. Rather, always encourage your child to strive for improvement.
- Give your child the confidence to seek help from his/her teacher

**Build a strong relationship with your child**

- Develop parent-child relationships that are loving, warm and responsive.
- Listen, respond and talk to your child from birth.
- Engage in shared thinking as a normal part of daily life. You can do this by explaining, speculating, describing making connections and open questioning.

**Create opportunities to explore and learn**

- Give your child ample opportunities to explore and develop independence, while offering support when needed. Your encouragement is vital to build his/her confidence.
- Provide real-life experiences to help your child make sense of his environment. One way you can do this is to include him/her in everyday routines and engage in conversations with him/her about these environments.

**Focus on the child**

- Encourage your child to share ideas based on his/her interests.
• Allow and encourage your child to lead when playing together.
• Build your child’s self-esteem and confidence by recognizing his/her efforts and not just his/her successes.

**Develop your child’s literacy**

• Chat with your child as much as possible as part of daily life.
• Have oral storytelling sessions with your child by taking turns to share stories about everyday life or past experiences.
• Sing songs and rhymes.

Another thing parents and teachers can work collaboratively on to help students learn to learn is to provide recommendations during the early years, during the adolescent years, and during the high school years on how to study. On the secondary level through the college level this researcher strongly recommends David Ellis’, *Becoming a Master Student*. Shared websites on preparing children for tests should be considered. Websites for purchasing culturally diverse children’s books should be shared.

**Step Three**

Education departments at both private and public colleges and universities must develop courses that teach teachers how to teach students to study, how to teach teachers to prepare students for standardized tests, and teacher prepared tests. In a case study conducted by the Perfect Learning Corporation, 70% of Edward White Elementary School’s total enrollment were classified as at risk students from 2004-2008. After undergoing test taking strategies that emphasized utilizing content clues to find correct answers on vocabulary in context tests; and analyzing two or more reading selections to answer a synthesizing question, 96% of their 5th grade students scored in the highest percentile on the reading portion of the TAKS exam (5). Furthermore, the case study reveals 21% more of Hispanic 4th graders at New Temple Elementary of South El Monte, CA, began to display proficiency in mathematics after receiving test taking instruction compared to their peers in the 5th grade who did not receive test taking instruction. These departments should also provide workshops to retrain practicing teachers on tests preparation. It should also include ethical issues that surround teaching to the test and teaching the test – or item teaching. Ethics in education courses should also include: ethical issues and the illegality associated with fudging test data and tampering with answer sheets.
Step Four

From the United States Department of Education to the local school boards, culturally inclusive textbooks should be required across the curriculum. Textbooks, visual aides, and films can positively or negatively impact learning. Here, I speak from personal experience. There is nothing more disconcerting than reading textbooks year after year and never or rarely seeing people who look like you. Children’s interests in learning and in reading increased when the imagery in textbooks as well as the subject matter is inclusive. Parents and teachers should also supervise the use of technology including television, computers, and cell phones. Equally as important parents should demand that their children be issued textbook. The latest research confirms that reading on the computers changes how our brain functions. I have longed argued this view. Computer textbooks also damage students’ eyesight.

A Vision of Courage and a Quest for Joy and Happiness: A Plea for Help from Our Children

Why are our schools not places of joy? That so few children seem to take pleasure from what they’re doing on a given weekday morning, that the default emotional state in classrooms seems to alternate between anxiety and boredom, doesn’t even alarm us. Worse: Happiness in schools is something for which educators may feel obliged to apologize when it does make an appearance. After all, they wouldn’t want to be accused of offering a “feel-good” education (Kohn, 40). Not much chance of that, though, those in poor neighborhoods can count on having to sit through prefabricated lessons, often minutely scripted, whose purpose is not to promote thinking, much less the joy of discovery, but to raise test scores. Countless adolescents, meanwhile, face the prospect of a dishonorable discharge from high school purely on the basis of their performance on a state test (Kohn, 41).

Now imagine that children were eager to go to school because they were going to have opportunities to learn, to create, to share ideas with friends, to argue about an issue, to counter argue. Imagine further, students from different backgrounds collaborating to write a play, or song, or poem. Now I want you to visualize working parents, excited about the books they exchange, and about saving money; excited about the stories they would get to read to their
children. Imagine still a mothers/fathers’ warm embrace when their child comes home excited about what they learned in school that day, or about what they taught their friends. The former is the vision of desolate minds, the later the vision of creative minds. Families, fellow educators, students—you our greatest gift, come with me let’s color this picture, yes! Yes, I can see in our children’s voices. Yes, I can visualize it in our policy makers’ voices. Yes, I can visualize it in our educators’ voices. Yes, I can visualize it in our parents’ voices. We must have the courage to see, and to visualize it together.

**A Call for Courageous Action**

Do we in the academy have the courage to help cultivate a novel approach to high stakes testing? Communication scholars have retreated into the comfort of the academy. We are indeed the experts on how humans communicate, and we have an obligation to be courageous proponents of change by helping policy makers, educators, and families learn collaborative strategies that will free us from the shackles of destructive labels that make our children wince when they hear themselves being described in those terms. We must join, and in some cases, start the conversation.

We have mentioned the various test scandals that have resulted from high stakes testing policies, the teaching methodologies—teaching to the test, and teaching the test, and have proposed collaborative and reflective learning as interpretive, recursive, non-linear building processes. A former high-school, and college champion debater, and scholar, Congresswoman, Barbara Jordan recalls when she embraced a collaborative method of learning:

Norma Walker organized a black study group . . . we blacks had to form our own . . . because we were not invited into any of the other study groups. There were six or seven in our group . . . and we would talk it out and here ourselves doing that. One thing I learned was that you had to talk out the issues, the facts, the cases, the process. You couldn’t just study alone . . . and you couldn’t get it all in the classroom. But once you had talked it out in the study group, it flowed more easily and made a lot more sense . . . I was really learning things, really going to school. I was getting educated (10).

When we read Jordan’s story, we hear the richly textured voice of that globally beloved old jazz singer, the man who dared to make his trumpet sing to our spirits. His trumpets sings,
hearing Jordan’s story, “school, what a wonderful world” Is this not the song we want our children, all children, to sing when they paint their self-portraits and write their memoirs about learning to learn.

What can we as educators do? First, we must stop labeling our students as affluent Euro American, low income Euro Americans, low income minorities, and view them as learners. Secondly, we must stop segregating students with different academic abilities. Integrating students with different ability levels will allow them to learn collaboratively from each other, as Jordan’s testimony clearly affirms. Third, we must empower ourselves through sustained professional development. Fourth, we must embrace the fact that standardized tests will remain a part of formal assessment procedures. Aligning curriculums to standards is not only the practical thing to do, but the ethical thing to do. Fifth, we can develop collaborative parenting groups, working with churches, Department of Family and Child Services, and educational specialist; we can promote discussion and share opportunities for learning with parents from all socio economic groups. It is particularly important for parents to learn how to make the home a positive and nurturing environment. Sixth, when parents register their children for pre-kindergarten classes, we can share a list of ideas for making the home a positive learning environment. During that registration day, we can also encourage parents to start book clubs so that they can share books and save money. Working parents can take turns reading to children. Thus ensuring that children that are read to frequently. We can also engage high school and college students in service-learning projects that are designed to tutor children as well as to read to children.

Seventh, policy makers, educators, parents, and students need training on ethical standardized test preparation. Departments of Education, and university and college deans should lead the way in developing courses that aide teachers in preparing students for, and informing parents about standardized tests preparation. The aforementioned educators should also develop courses that teach children how to study at the preschool, elementary school, middle school, and high school levels. Equally important, they should require that portfolio assessment be considered as an additional evaluative tool. Despite critics concerns about the time required to assess such practices, portfolios provide deeper insights into students’ abilities.
Finally we can consider and expand Hollingworth’s (2007) recommendations by working collaboratively on how to prepare students for high stakes test without sacrificing the instructional program:

- Check state’s curriculum standards and ensure they align with respective school’s instructional programs and make needed adjustments to ensure that material is properly taught.
- Set goals with students and use informal assessments to regularly monitor their progress.
- Engage students in authentic literacy activities so that they become capable readers and writers.
- Explain the purpose of the tests and how the results will be used, without making students anxious.
- Utilize a balanced approach that combines explicit instruction and authentic application.

Let us remember, as inaugural poet, and imminent scholar, Maya Angelou challenges us to learn, “History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again”.
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