

Exams are not useful, necessary, or even excuseable

Reprint from the Campus

By SONDR A BROWN

"Let me not mince words. Almost all educators feel that testing is a necessary part of education. I wholly disagree -- I do not think that testing is necessary, or useful, or even excuseable. At best testing does more harm than good; at worst, it hinders, distorts, and corrupts the learning process. Testers say that testing techniques are being continually improved and can eventually be perfected. maybe so -- but no imaginable improvement in testing would overcome my objections to it. Our chief concern should not be to improve testing, but to find ways to eliminate it." --(from John Holt's chapter "the Tyranny of Testing" in *The Under-achieving School*.)

Holt makes exceptions for specific circumstances. We have often heard the example used that there is a need to know the surgeon's qualifications before submitting to surgery. "But", Holt continues, "virtually none of the testing done in schools is of this kind."

To the public and to ourselves -- we teachers say that we test children to find out what they have learned, so that we can better know how to help them to learn more. This is about 95 percent untrue. There are two main reasons that we test children: the first is to threaten them into doing what we want done, and the second is to give us a basis for handing out the rewards and penalties on which the educational system -- like all coercive systems -- must operate. "There is little to add to Holt's perceptive chapter on the test and the student's reaction to it. I am often reminded of McLuhan when beginning a course in which evaluation is to include testing. The material to be learned is the material to be on the test. Lost are the unlimited possibilities to expand the mind in any given course; of prime importance is the question, "Do we have to know this for the exam?"

And with good intentions we make a mental note of the books we will someday read and sacrifice the area which interests us most to the area which the professor feels to be important enough to warrant testing. Circle in red all that will be on the test; all else becomes insignificant.

Charles Silberman says it in *Crisis in the Classroom*: "The procedure thus makes it clear to students that the purpose of testing is not evaluation but rating -- to produce grades that enable the school to rank students and sort them in various ways for

administrative purposes. The result is to destroy any interest in learning for its own sake; what is worth learning, the students quickly realize, is what will be asked for on the exam."

In the beginning, a professor explained to me, testing was done orally. Then students found that professors were being subjective, deciding before the test who would fail, who would pass. There developed the need for written proof of what the student knew. Exams were objective, requiring simple straight-forward answers.

But educators found that a student could memorize answers, get good grades and still not know the material. Thus evolved the essay-type exam.

Nevertheless, memorization is still a factor and subjectivity is again a problem with the grading. At McGill recently one department decided to return to objective exams for this reason. And so we have come full circle.

Educationists have condemned exams for years, and now some teachers are abandoning them in favor of other forms of evaluation. After all, there are few situations in life which call for an individual to give an account without the aid of books or other helps.

There are some professors who use exams in such a way that, given the need for grading at all, it is in the student's interest that they continue; they are fair, grading positively, looking for what the student has learned and not what he has not learned.

But the majority of professors who use exams use them to uncover what the student does not know.

Last year when the final exam (it would be an interesting study to find the psychological effects the word "final" has on students writing exams) was being discussed in one of my classes, I suggested that students simply write everything they had learned in the course. The professor dismissed the suggestion abruptly.

Holt says that in such a case the students run out of time before they run out of things to say. And the teacher "will have no way to mark them except to give them all the same mark, which his bosses will not like...he must seek out ignorance so he can 'objectively' decide who gets the rewards and who gets the penalties."

Students need not submit to exams. We have the option to refuse, to ask for, to insist on alternative. There is no rule that we must be tested by exam; the

rule is only that the professor must hand in a grade. If we find that the exams we are taking are being used in any way but a positive way we have to option to refuse them; we should refuse all negative means of education.

If we believe the exams of some professors are good and not to be refused we can request that they be returned to the classroom. Students are aware that exams are given in the gym simply for security reasons. Security implies cheating yet few students give in to outright cheating.

There are more important values in question. Distrust is damaging to the education of students. It is personal; it attacks the student's dignity. We can bring an element of humanism back to the classroom by insisting that those exams which are worth retaining be held there, discarding security. Trust breeds trust, and likewise distrust breeds distrust.

Holt concludes his chapter: "Unless we become telepaths, we can never know more than a small part -- and that only

approximately -- of what is in the mind of another human being. Why need it trouble us so? There is no reason, except to relieve our own anxieties and insecurity, that we should constantly know what children are learning, or even that they are learning. What true education requires of us instead is faith and courage -- faith that children want to make sense out of life and will work hard at it, courage to let them do it without continually poking, prying, prodding, and meddling. Is this so difficult?"

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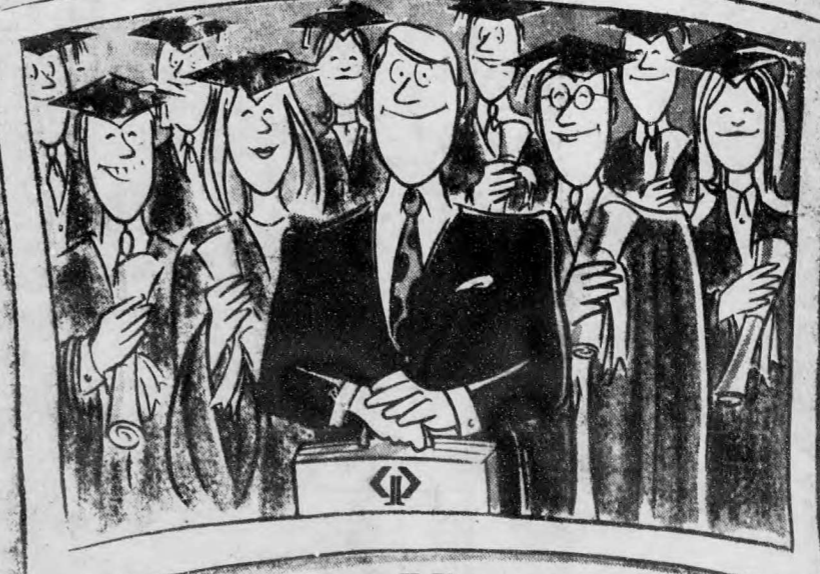
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