

## Teaching to the Test

One of the most passionate arguments among professional educators centers on the concept of “teaching to the test.” The whole concept of teaching to the test seems to have gotten the reputation as being cheating somehow. In our work with districts to align their curriculum, instruction, and assessment, we hear often that “It sounds like we are teaching to the test.” The obvious question is, “To what else would you teach?” In other words, do you plan to test things you haven’t taught?

There is a difference between “teaching the test” and “teaching *to* the test.” In the first example, the actual test questions, problems, or tasks are used during instruction. But when we say we’re teaching *to* the test, we are talking about teaching students the *concepts and skills* that will appear on the test — not the specific test items. Most teachers would agree that this makes good sense if we truly want to measure student learning.

Rather than concentrating on the unpopular connotations of teaching to the test, it would be more helpful to make the “test” worthy of being the focus of teaching. If our goal is to improve student learning, then the *measure* of the student learning must be in line with what we wanted them to learn (curriculum) and how we helped them learn it (instruction). A close alignment of the three corners of this triangle — curriculum, instruction, and assessment — leads us to our goal of student learning. Let’s look at how that happens.

The first step of alignment is to have a well-articulated curriculum. The curriculum must define not only what a student is to know, but also what a student is to do with that knowledge. Therefore, a curriculum goal that allows thorough alignment is one that has not just topics, but also verbs that describe the types of tasks a student would be able to accomplish as a result of the learning. Without the verb in the curriculum, complete alignment of the assessment is not possible. Also, the *type* of assessment that will be needed is clear when the level of learning is described by a verb.

The second step of alignment is to assure that instruction also matches both the topics and verbs in the curriculum. For example, suppose the curriculum

says the students will compare the writing styles of various authors of fiction. One teacher had the students read a selection by each of the authors and then summarize the characters, setting, and plot for each selection. In this example, neither the topic (writing style) nor the verb (compare) was addressed, so obviously there was no alignment. Instead, instruction should have focused on *style* — what it is, and how to identify it — and then after reading the selections, students should have compared the styles of the various authors.

The final step is to assure that the *test* also matches the topics and verbs in the curriculum. In the example above, the test would ask students to make a comparison of the authors' writing styles — period. In order truly to align an assessment, any extraneous topics must be removed. This point often challenges many teachers' philosophy of separating the "A" students from the "B" students. These teachers want to add "extra" test items that go beyond what is stated in the curriculum. They will often say that if a student knows the learning goal thoroughly enough, then the extraneous material will not cause them undue stress.

However, this practice can be very frustrating to students who have indeed learned what was expected, but who do not have the knowledge or skills to go beyond that. Assessment of student learning requires that students have had the *opportunity* to learn — and this is not always the case when "extra" test items are employed. Additionally, even if the extra topics or concepts are at the end of the assessment, many students read the whole test before beginning, as we encourage them to do in "test-taking" strategies. Therefore, the students may be concerned about those topics all the while they're trying to demonstrate learning on the material for which they are accountable. Measuring the impact of that reaction is difficult if not impossible, and the fact that students may have been frustrated by the additional challenge cannot be ignored. *The sorting of students into the categories of excellence should not be the goal of assessment.* The purpose of assessment is simply to find out if students have actually learned what we intended for them to learn.

Validity is another factor here. Validity of assessments is defined as the extent to which the assessment measures what it is we set out to measure — which is what is stated in the curriculum. If the alignment with curriculum is carefully completed, the assessment has a good start to being valid.

Although there are other issues that contribute to good assessment practice, alignment with curriculum and instruction are the most crucial steps. Assuring this alignment is an important point in resolving the concern teachers feel about "teaching to the test." Since a good test measures learning of the curriculum, "what will be tested" should naturally be the focus of the "teaching" that takes place.