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In the pursuit of classroom alchemy

BY JEFF LANTOS

I'm beginning my 20th year of teaching in the Los Angeles Unified School District, and if I've learned anything, it is that good teaching cannot be measured quantitatively.

Every year, we hear administrators crowing or politicians moaning over student test scores as if these numbers were indisputable indicators of teaching excellence, mediocrity or failure.

In fact, test scores (on the annual standardized state test) are like the closing prices on the stock exchange. They fluctuate for any number of reasons. A bad breakfast, a case of the jitters or skipping a line and filling in the wrong bubbles can wreak as much havoc as not knowing the difference between "abjure" and "adjure."

Likewise, teaching to the test can inflate scores but, given no context, all this random information is seldom retained. As a result, evaluating a teacher based solely on student test scores is like evaluating a corporation based solely on just one day's stock price.

If you really want to evaluate a teacher, you have to walk into a classroom, sit down and listen. I'm convinced that when you're listening to good teaching, you hear a familiar refrain. It goes like this: What is the connection between... and... ? So much of good teaching is about taking strands of information and looking for connections and broadening the context.

Endless test preparation has the opposite effect. It shrinks the context. It reduces inquiry. It mitigates against Socratic dialogue and can drain much of the passion from teaching and learning.

If we can get beyond the notion of schools as testing factories, then teachers will have the freedom to strive for a higher standard of excellence. Part of that higher standard would include the teaching of critical thinking. How does a teacher do that? By creating an academic environment in which students can sift through the mass of facts being hurled at them and begin to perceive pathways of interconnectedness.

The irony is that young students begin by making connections. They're taught to check their subtraction by adding. They can see that a rectangle can be divided into two triangles. They know there's some link between the Pledge of Allegiance and the flag hanging from the wall. They connect classroom behavior with a specific code of conduct.

The challenge for teachers is to build on that foundation, to encourage students to seek connections between, say, fractions and percentages, or between lobbying and legislation, or between Copernicus and Darwin, or between the main characters in two different novels.

I like to ask my students why the food in India, Africa and Mexico is so much spicier than the food in Ireland, Iceland and Finland. Typically, lots of theories are advanced and eventually (and perhaps with some guidance) students use their knowledge of geography, chemistry, botany and economics to make the connections that will lead to an explanation. We teachers call this "thinking across the curriculum."

Once students start seeing how and why seemingly disparate topics are related, and more important, once they start looking for and making those connections, then the teacher will have performed that special kind of classroom alchemy — turning passive receivers of knowledge into active participants in the learning process.

The answer to the spice question: First, spices grow in equatorial regions; and, second, in hotter climes, food rots more quickly, so spices were needed to preserve the food and, later, to mask the rancid smell.

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