Testing Our Way to Future Societal Success?

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In 1983, the federal government report, “A Nation at Risk,” critiqued the educational quality of America’s high schools and declared them failing in their contribution to the development of a skilled future workforce. In rather alarmist language, the authors charged that our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world.... [T]he educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity.... We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament.

Since then, school curricula and assessment practices have been the target of educational reformists. This had led to the development of state content standards and standardized testing and to the passage of NCLB in 2001. But as America evolves from an industrial to post-industrial society, and its economic vitality and competitiveness remain under scrutiny, it has been argued that the success of that transition depends upon the development of a different kind of worker, one whose general knowledge base is deeper and whose critical reasoning or problem solving skills are more sophisticated. But will the current regimen of K-12 high-stakes testing assist with that grand societal shift? Will it produce students who can think “outside-the-box?”

An Evolving Society

Some economists argue that the advanced industrialized nations (G8/OECD) need to decrease their economic dependency upon traditional manufacturing, and evolve into more scientifically literate societies where research and intellectual capital dominate. This evolutionary shift is designed to maintain their current economic pre-eminence and to translate into greater wealth generation with all the opportunities that such wealth bestows upon the citizenry.

From WWII up to the early 1980s, the manufacturing base of the advanced industrialized nations expanded significantly and afforded workers the opportunity to earn substantial wages. The middle class grew thereby creating a large pool of taxpayers and consumers. Government coffers at all levels also swelled. But as the developing nations have grown their own manufacturing base over the past 20 plus years at labor costs significantly less than their advanced counterparts, and whose same inexpensive products are now in direct competition with those of advanced nations, the interests of capital decided to shift their manufacturing to those same developing nations for reasons of economic competitiveness. Thus, we have all witnessed the devastation wrought upon Michigan communities as factories have closed and workers, many of them middle-aged, have found themselves seeking employment in a shrinking labor market that has less need for their knowledge and skills at their current wage structure. What is a state to do?

Human Capital and the Information Society

Under current economic thinking (human capital theory), one of the options available to states is to develop different products and processes that will require a different kind of worker, one whose knowledge and skills...
If Testing Is the Answer, What's the Question?

necessitate higher education. This would be particularly true where processes involve technology. Human oversight would require heightened expertise. And so, for example, with the first of the baby boom generation about to retire, opportunities exist for considerable expansion in the products and services associated with an aging population, much of which will call for a medical or scientific knowledge base. To maximize those investment opportunities and to reap the job creation and economic potential associated with them, those companies will require a labor pool whose core knowledge and skills must be greater than they are currently.

We are told that one way to assist in this economic and societal transformation is to increase our number of college graduates and thus increase our academic expectations of high school students. The bar must be raised and recent legislation suggests as much. Associated with that is our infatuation with high-stakes testing as the assessment and accountability instrument de jour. But will such produce the kinds of graduates, workers and citizens that we seek?

Testing For What?

Since NCLB, we have become enamored of high-stakes testing as an accountability tool. It apprises us of students' abilities in reading comprehension, tells us on a given day what any student recalls factually, and may inform us as to students' abilities in the areas of computation, application and even some basic skill in logical deduction (thinking). And while these are not unimportant, most remain at the lower end of Bloom's taxonomy (lower order thinking). The larger question remains as to whether these tests, in their current form, can tell us anything about a person's future ability to identify difficult problems (ask the right questions), decipher their constituent parts (analyze), and develop creative strategies for solving them, both at work and in life (synthesis and evaluation). Nor does the present testing regime give us any insight into students' abilities to organize themselves for such important tasks as marshalling one's time in a judicious manner. And while improving base knowledge is an important first step for the evolution of human capital, how that knowledge will be put to use by future generations—the level of thinking that engages that knowledge—will ultimately determine the successful economic transition of American society. But in Michigan, as elsewhere, we confute testing for accountability with meaningful assessment. As test expert and UCLA professor emeritus James Popham reminds us:

"Most educational policy makers, state board members, members of legislatures, are well intentioned, and install accountability measures involving these kinds of tests in the belief that good things will happen to children. But most of these policy makers are dirt-ignorant regarding what these tests should and should not be used for. And the tragedy is that they set up a system in which the primary indicator of educational quality is simply wrong."

And, we are more concerned about the cost of testing than we are about assessing effectively. We seek technological solutions (computerized tests) as cost-saving measures, when more human solutions are called for. But those human solutions come with a price, and in this bottom-line society, economics rule the day.

So will we be successful with our societal transformation in sufficient time to allow most of our students to be able to contribute to the economy in meaningful ways while reaping its financial rewards? We delude ourselves if we think that at the end of the day mere standardized testing will solve our problems and somehow create a better informed or more purposefully competent student, worker or citizen.

CITATIONS

References:


For further reading:
