

Learning vs. Learning to Take the Test: What's the Difference?

by Leila Christenbury

February 25, 2002

Our nation's teachers are deeply concerned about the current emphasis on testing and test scores. With drilling and repetition, with daily practice on test items, test time management, test tricks and shortcuts, with total concentration on the test and testing, young people can learn to pass the test and even to improve test scores. Teachers know this, but they also worry: what do their students really know about the material? Could, in fact, students do as well on a different kind of assessment, a different kind of test? Most crucially, can students pass a particular test but not know much else?

Let me tell you a story. When I was fifteen, I was dying to drive. But because driver's education was not offered in my high school, and no sane adult in my family wanted to take on the task of teaching me, my mother turned to the professionals. I was enrolled in a driving school, taught by a neatly dressed, quiet gentleman whom I thought of as "Mr. Muffin." Mr. Muffin charged a fairly stiff hourly fee, but he told my mother and me the only thing we really wanted to hear. I could be on the road, a fully licensed driver, in a matter of a few dozen hours behind the wheel. Mr. Muffin promised, "After my course, you will pass the driving test."

Call us naive, but the one thing that escaped both my mother and myself is what Mr. Muffin didn't promise: he promised I would pass the test--which I certainly did--but he didn't say that I would learn to drive.

Sure, during the road test--a route which Mr. Muffin had memorized and used as our only practice area--I did everything right. There was no aspect of the road course that Mr. Muffin and I had not fully rehearsed. At the intersection in the neighborhood, I looked for the gray house and made sure I braked right there. A few blocks later, I knew where the speed limit suddenly dropped and was careful to slow down right at the high hedges opposite the sign. During the parking test, I aligned Mr. Muffin's compact car directly across from the painted pole to my left and swung the wheel as soon as I saw the curb in front of me. Mr. Muffin even knew the better days and times of day to schedule the test and with which friendly examiner. There were no surprises.

Problem is, I didn't know a thing about driving or even parking. I could park that car into that particular parallel space. I could drive in that portion of that neighborhood under certain traffic conditions. But I had been taught so that I could pass the test. I had not been taught how to drive, and when, in subsequent months I had to go into unfamiliar neighborhoods and on the interstate and park in different areas, I was truly unsure and at times felt close to panic. Yet I was a fully licensed driver. After all, I had passed the test.

Perhaps this story illustrates part of the reason that many educators don't share the current uncritical faith in standardized tests. In a perfect world, passing or scoring well on a test would absolutely indicate mastery of the material: isn't that the point? But when one kind of test and test score become the focus of all, and results in intensive practice drilling for that particular test--as is done now in school districts all over the country--then mastering the material can become truly secondary. It's not about learning; it's about learning to take the test.

Surely one reaction to the nationwide emphasis on testing is the proliferation of commercial companies who promise improved test scores. According to a recent report in *Time* (2/4/02, "Test Drive," 53-54), many schools across the nation are turning to commercial companies and their test preparation courses and workbooks to teach students how to eliminate choices in multiple-choice exams, skim reading passages, and fill in bubble sheets. Yet, despite this burgeoning \$50 million business, the report concludes, "there is no solid evidence so far that this kind of preparation makes kids dependable test takers, let alone good learners." Most teachers know this.

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) has passed a number of resolutions on testing and is currently crafting a test taker's bill of rights. NCTE believes, as do many of the nation's educational organizations, that the focus of education should not be on testing and intensive test-taking preparation but on the mastery of the material itself. Rigorous curriculum, extensive opportunities to read and write, and the use of multiple forms of testing and assessment are just part of what NCTE advocates for the nation's classrooms. This kind of emphasis goes far beyond short-term improvement of test scores and, as one NCTE resolution states, focuses on "the right to experience a challenging curriculum that is not constrained by any given test."

What's the difference between knowing how to drive and passing a driving test? What's the difference between learning and learning to take the test? The difference is education, which, according to one definition, is "what is left when we have forgotten all that we have been taught." Education is lasting. Test scores are temporary. Isn't a real education what we want for all our children?

Leila Christenbury is past president of the National Council of Teachers of English, a nonprofit association of 60,000 members dedicated to improving the teaching and learning of the English language arts. She is professor of English education at Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond.