

MOVING TARGETS:  
AN INTERACTIVE EDITORIAL

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On the ranch where I grew up, everyone learned to use a rifle. We carried one with us as we worked in the field, keeping an eye open for unwelcome critters. A well-placed round of ammunition resolved any problems. My brother was my teacher. He set up a target and had me shooting for the bull's eye. After I was hitting it most of the time, he devised a moving target. I found this much more difficult, requiring a great deal of practice, a bit of luck, and a quick trigger finger.

I share this story with my students whenever they ask, “Why don’t you grade on a curve?” I tell them that I don’t want to fail 10 percent of the class—explaining that in order to follow the bell curve, only 10 percent would receive A’s, about 10 percent would receive F’s, and at least 40 percent would receive C’s.

Students are quick to clarify that this isn’t the kind of curve they have in mind. Their idea is that the person getting the highest score sets the standard for an A. They want the other scores to be adjusted accordingly. I point out that adopting such a grading policy is like setting up a moving target—no one knows exactly where to aim. Not only is the target moving but also intervals between grades shift around. The cut-off from one grade to another is often chosen arbitrarily.

Another difficulty is that students soon identify their top classmates—who can then become targets themselves. Instead of applauding achievement and looking upward, students flirt with conspiracies of mediocrity that undermine initiative and academic excellence.

You’ve probably heard the story about collecting crabs in a bucket. A crab alone in the bucket will scale the side and escape. But drop in a second crab, and the beachcomber no longer has to worry about escaping crabs. If one tries to climb out, the other will reach up and pull him down. Allowing a few students to lower the standard and dilute the learning experience for everyone is regrettable.

Students, however, are not to blame for their point of view, since it does not factor in the teacher’s experience with assessment. If extensive, such experience permits a clear view of appropriate levels of achievement for a given course. Indeed, I would be culpable if I ignored my many years of experience in assessing students.

Nor do I think my concept of assessment is solely behavioristic. If a reconstructionist is on one end of a balance board and the student on the other, with a book as fulcrum, then the student needs some weight of his or her own. Perennialists either come to know the classics or they don’t.

Existentialists are left to make their own meaning, but in the end they must make meaning. And so on. Standards are established. If everyone in a section earns an A, then everyone receives an A. If no one does, no A's are given. Inhibiting learning is not the business of a university.

This issue of *Perspective* has several articles dealing with teaching ideas and methods of assessment. We at *Perspective* believe that excellent instruction results only from careful and conscious organization—it is never a simple collage of good teaching techniques; furthermore, there are many ways to teach well and each teacher can (and must) find her or his own way. At BYU-Idaho we have come to a point where we can address the tension directly, the apparent tension between learning pedagogy from each other and teaching in individual ways.

So this is an editorial with a homework assignment. In our assessment studies we have learned the six predominant philosophies of education in America. Using this model as a theoretical background, we can each assess ourselves on important aspects of our own teaching. In the few pages after this editorial article, you will find an apparatus for doing so.

Your personal results will not be reported to Max, but you may have a laugh or two over them with a colleague during the lunch hour. The point is that the cycle of working through the self-assessment, reading *Perspective* articles, and rethinking your own pedagogies will help you in teaching yourself to teach.

Methods of teaching and assessment are as varied and numerous as are teachers. We are a university, not a uniformity. And this is our great strength. But for each of us to develop into our best self as a teacher—this is our great challenge. We can adopt much from each other and learn much by study, but the final leap to becoming an effective teacher must be made on our own and in our own way. ☺

## SURVEY OF INDIVIDUAL TEACHING STYLES

In your teaching, how important—or how true—do you consider each statement?  
(least important) 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 (most important)

- \_\_\_ 1. Students should learn to reason and to understand logic.
- \_\_\_ 2. When possible, students should have practice in real-world situations.
- \_\_\_ 3. The purpose of education is to teach what is practical and useful.
- \_\_\_ 4. Important concepts can be taught effectively in lectures.
- \_\_\_ 5. Reading and discussing important books are excellent ways to teach.
- \_\_\_ 6. If it were possible, I would like my students to have access to the Internet and a collection of books in their specialty.
- \_\_\_ 7. Teachers should make learning fun for the students.
- \_\_\_ 8. Teachers can evaluate by interviewing the students about their work.
- \_\_\_ 9. The most important aim of education is to teach the classics.

- \_\_\_ 10. Students should be interested in local and world issues.
- \_\_\_ 11. Teachers may evaluate by having students present their work to the class.
- \_\_\_ 12. If it were possible, I would like my students to receive more training in reading, writing, science, and mathematics.
- \_\_\_ 13. Learning achievement can be evaluated by using predetermined criteria.
- \_\_\_ 14. Students should study what interests them and makes them creative.
- \_\_\_ 15. Teachers should have a list of objectives for students to achieve.
- \_\_\_ 16. The best thing students can learn is how to make their own meaning in life.
- \_\_\_ 17. Students must learn basic subjects, such as language and mathematics.
- \_\_\_ 18. If it were possible, I would like my students to work as interns in an office while they are still studying at the university.
- \_\_\_ 19. Students should be encouraged to adopt appropriate behaviors.
- \_\_\_ 20. If it were possible, I would like my students to choose interesting subjects and study with others who have the same interests.
- \_\_\_ 21. First of all, education should teach what is important for our times.
- \_\_\_ 22. It is important for the students to be able to do the tasks I teach them.
- \_\_\_ 23. Teachers should have students prepare summaries and outlines.
- \_\_\_ 24. If it were possible, I would like my students to study the social sciences, learning about reality and ways to deal with it.
- \_\_\_ 25. Students may help prepare their own examinations.
- \_\_\_ 26. Multiple choice questions are often adequate for testing the students.
- \_\_\_ 27. Primarily, education should make the world a better place to live.
- \_\_\_ 28. Essay questions are a good measure of students' learning.
- \_\_\_ 29. The main aims of education are to cultivate habits and teach skills.
- \_\_\_ 30. Students can help evaluate each other's progress.
- \_\_\_ 31. If it were possible, I would like my students to spend time with Socrates, Dostoevsky, and other great thinkers.
- \_\_\_ 32. I think it is very helpful to have students work together in small groups.
- \_\_\_ 33. A good way to test students is to have them report on their activities.
- \_\_\_ 34. Teachers may evaluate students' work by assigning a single mark for each project.
- \_\_\_ 35. Students must find their own way to live.
- \_\_\_ 36. Independent research is a very good way to learn.

## KEY TO SURVEY OF INDIVIDUAL TEACHING STYLES

### *Characteristics of the Social Reconstructionist Theory of Education*

- \_\_\_ 27. Primarily, education should make the world a better place to live.  
(Curriculum)
- \_\_\_ 10. Students should be interested in local and world issues. (Focus)
- \_\_\_ 33. A good way to test students is to have them report on their activities.  
(Assessment Method)

- \_\_\_ 8. Teachers can evaluate by interviewing the students about their work.  
(Assessment Method)
  - \_\_\_ 2. When possible, students should have practice in real-world situations.  
(Teaching Method)
  - \_\_\_ 18. If it were possible, I would like my students to work as interns in an office while they are still studying at the university. (Teaching Method)
- \_\_\_ My total score for *Reconstructionism*

### *Characteristics of the Behaviorist Theory of Education*

- \_\_\_ 29. The main aims of education are to cultivate habits and teach skills.  
(Curriculum)
  - \_\_\_ 19. Students should be encouraged to adopt appropriate behaviors. (Focus)
  - \_\_\_ 13. Learning achievement can be evaluated by using predetermined criteria.  
(Assessment Method)
  - \_\_\_ 15. Teachers should have a list of objectives for students to achieve. (Assessment Method)
  - \_\_\_ 22. It is important for the students to be able to do the tasks I teach them.  
(Teaching Method)
  - \_\_\_ 24. If it were possible, I would like my students to study the social sciences, learning about reality and ways to deal with it. (Teaching Method)
- \_\_\_ My total score for *Behaviorism*

### *Characteristics of the Perennialist Theory of Education*

- \_\_\_ 9. The most important aim of education is to teach the classics. (Curriculum)
  - \_\_\_ 1. Students should learn to reason and to understand logic. (Focus)
  - \_\_\_ 28. Essay questions are a good measure of students' learning. (Assessment Method)
  - \_\_\_ 34. Teachers may evaluate students' work by assigning a single mark for each project. (Assessment Method)
  - \_\_\_ 5. Reading and discussing important books are excellent ways to teach.  
(Teaching Method)
  - \_\_\_ 31. If it were possible, I would like my students to spend time with Socrates, Dostoevsky, and other great thinkers. (Teaching Method)
- \_\_\_ My total score for *Perennialism*

### *Characteristics of the Essentialist Theory of Education*

- \_\_\_ 21. First of all, education should teach what is important for our times.  
(Curriculum)
- \_\_\_ 17. Students must learn basic subjects, such as language and mathematics.  
(Focus)

- \_\_\_ 26. Multiple choice questions are often adequate for testing the students. (Assessment Method)
  - \_\_\_ 23. Teachers should have students prepare summaries and outlines. (Assessment Method)
  - \_\_\_ 4. Important concepts can be taught effectively in lectures. (Teaching Method)
  - \_\_\_ 12. If it were possible, I would like my students to receive more training in reading, writing, science, and mathematics. (Teaching Method)
- \_\_\_ My total score for *Essentialism*

### *Characteristics of the Existentialist Theory of Education*

- \_\_\_ 16. The best thing students can learn is how to make their own meaning in life. (Curriculum)
  - \_\_\_ 35. Students must find their own way to live. (Focus)
  - \_\_\_ 25. Students may help prepare their own examinations. (Assessment Method)
  - \_\_\_ 11. Teachers may evaluate by having students present their work to the class. (Assessment Method)
  - \_\_\_ 36. Independent research is a very good way to learn. (Teaching Method)
  - \_\_\_ 6. If it were possible, I would like my students to have access to the internet and a collection of books in their specialty. (Teaching Method)
- \_\_\_ My total score for *Existentialism*

### *Characteristics of the Progressivist Theory of Education*

- \_\_\_ 3. The purpose of education is to teach what is practical and useful. (Curriculum)
  - \_\_\_ 14. Students should study what interests them and makes them creative. (Focus)
  - \_\_\_ 30. Students can help evaluate each other's progress. (Assessment Method)
  - \_\_\_ 7. Teachers should make learning fun for the students. (Assessment Method)
  - \_\_\_ 32. I think it is very helpful to have students work together in small groups. (Teaching Method)
  - \_\_\_ 20. If it were possible, I would like my students to choose interesting subjects and study with others who have the same interests. (Teaching Method)
- \_\_\_ My total score for *Progressivism*

## DESCRIPTIONS OF EDUCATIONAL THEORIES

In America today, six major educational theories are at work. Each flows from a particular world philosophy that determines its purpose and curriculum. Each is associated with specific teaching methods and assessment strategies. No single theory is universally considered the correct one or the best one. Individual teachers typically combine several theories and methods according to their personal philosophies, training, and talents. New methods of instruction and assessment are constantly being developed.

*Social Reconstructionism* comes from the philosophy of Idealism. The Greek philosopher Plato first formalized this philosophy, which values the ideas of the mind, or rational thought. Idealists believe in the power of ideas and attitudes. Social Reconstructionism holds that schools should be agents of change, concerned with issues of global welfare. Rather than merely study the world's problems, teachers of this theory encourage their students to feel and think about issues. They like their students to work in the community, become involved with problems, and help find solutions. Social Reconstructionists challenge their students to acquire strong moral values; teachers favor the techniques of simulation and debriefing.

*Behaviorism* finds its roots in Realism. Aristotle, one of Plato's pupils, is the father of realism, which stresses the world of nature or physical things. Realists focus on tangible things that can be sensed and measured. They rely heavily on the scientific method, the systematic analysis of what is observed—learning by empirical means. They believe the aim of education is to cultivate habits. Behaviorists believe that education can best be achieved by modifying students' behavior by using rewards. They like to state the behavioral objective, observe students' behaviors, and distribute reinforcers. Behaviorists often employ performance skills and checklists.

*Perennialism* emerges from the philosophy of Thomism, named for Thomas Aquinas, who tried to reconcile the tension between Idealism and Realism. Thomism is the official philosophy of Catholicism, and its adherents believe that both ideas and tangible realities are important. They conclude that when reason fails, man must rely on faith. Perennialists feel that school curricula should include both liberal arts and theology. They focus on what is permanent: God and the classical works of history and literature. They believe that education should confront the questions that have challenged people over the centuries, which they accomplish by reading and discussing the classics.

*Essentialism* is a branch of Perennialism, as its philosophy, Protestant Sectarianism, was a break-off from Catholicism. The Reformers, men such as Martin Luther and John Calvin, protested abuses of the Catholic church. Like the Thomists, Protestants believe that God exists and can be known by faith and by reason. But unlike the Catholics, who maintain a strong attachment to the past, Protestants do not focus heavily on the "classics." Rather they focus on what is "essential" for daily life, and their curriculum consists of essentials such as reading, writing, and arithmetic. Essentialists' favorite instructional method is the lecture followed by the test.

*Existentialism* as a teaching theory arose in the 19th century from the Existentialist philosophy. More than any philosophy preceding it, Existentialism taught that students must create their own meaning. Existentialists believe that each individual is responsible for the choices he or she makes, indeed, that students must choose to learn—a teacher cannot force knowledge into a student, nor can the teacher arrange the conditions of learning. Ultimately the student must take these responsibilities. Existentialist teachers provide time for students to do self-reflection in journals. They want students to make personal meaning out of the education they are receiving. The main teaching strategy they employ is independent research leading to presentations by the students.

*Progressivism* comes from the philosophy of Pragmatism, the philosophy most favored in 20th century America, whose premise is “whatever works.” Pragmatists see reality as an event or a process. Progressivism promotes the idea that learning should be centered around the interests and needs of the child, that learning should be creative and fun. This is the first theory to truly encourage enjoyment, in the form of fun, in the pedagogical process. The theory of Progressivism encourages cooperation, not competition, using problem-solving in cooperative groups with peer evaluation and review.

You now know which philosophical theories you favor and disfavor. Assess your teaching by asking whether your methods of instruction and assessment are consistent with your favored theories. No theory is considered superior to all others, and you may be as eclectic as you wish in using methods from several theories. You may even change your preferences among theories whenever you like. But you should be true to your values and consistent within your system. For each teaching and assessment method you use, from whatever theoretical background, you should be able to explain how it fits your own style and instructional plan.