

## **Teaching to the test: an argument in favour?**

### **Part 1**

This is really a theory off the top of my head, just an idea based on observation and a bit of solipsistic reasoning. I would be very interested to hear your views. It is a question very much of interest to me as I begin an unfamiliar journey of home-schooling my children. Having complete freedom of choice as I do with regards to which approach to take raises endless questions.

It might surprise you – if you are familiar with my educational philosophy – to see that I am arguing in favour of teaching to the test. I'm clearly not; however, I would like to offer an alternative way of looking at the subject.

I think that “teaching to the test” is generally frowned upon as a teaching approach. Any educator worth his salt will know that formal testing – I'm not talking about assessment or feedback, just formal testing – has a negligible at best impact on the learning of a child or a student. If it motivates study, then any such real long-term learning is negligible. Good teachers I believe in any school including ours are genuinely trying to teach the subject and getting the students ready for the test becomes a secondary objective to that. Yet this approach seems to be incompatible with the hard reality of testing – in our school it is IGCSE or end-of-semester testing, which is rewarded with one grade or another.

I suspect that this juxtapositioning of an anti-teaching-to-the-test teaching approach with the hard reality of testing is actually elitist. It's not intentionally elitist, in fact it is rather intentionally non-elitist, yet ironically it ends up with an elitist outcome. I think that the students who are most academically oriented – let's say 'left-brainers' – are able to cope better with this paradigm than the academically-weaker students. The left-brainers can more easily adapt and organise all the test-irrelevant or relevant learning, then filter the irrelevant, and apply the relevant learning to the test, whereas the right-brain-colour-outside-the-lines – who may even have a better overall grasp of the subject – struggle in the formal testing situation because it is harder for them to compartmentalise. This is compounded by the teacher's poor timing in many cases and panic cramming sessions invariably prelude exam week – again, cramming I suggest suits the left-brainers. From a purist educational perspective, of course the holistic approach is obviously better than the teach-to-the-test approach – and yet when the children are ultimately graded according to formal testing, what is the overall effect and who are the winners and losers?

At this point you may feel that this is utter tosh so stop reading here. However, if you think I might be on to something, please read on because I have supporting observations and a suggested solution.

### **Part 2**

Something which really struck me as odd as I researched the teaching of IGCSE is that Cambridge state in their overview for each subject that the course is based on 130 hours of directed instruction. This is striking because a two-year course for, say, Maths IGCSE is 304 hours at four hours a week, 38 weeks a year. Add in all the endless homework which makes everyone's life miserable, and in addition many students have tutors, then it adds up to 500 or 600 hours. I spoke to a Chemistry teacher at SCIE recently and told him to imagine a very small group of intelligent, motivated students and asked how many hours would it take him to teach them IGCSE Chemistry. His reply was: 60 hours. So the question has to be asked, why is a course which is supposed to take 130 hours and could conceivably be completed in 60 hours, why does it take 500 or 600 hours? And then – as if a parody of my point - you see teachers panicking at the last minute about not having covered certain material and having to cover two units in three lessons. Something is seriously broken here.

So why is a 130-hour course taking 500 hours? You might argue that the students are not just studying the IGCSE content and there's the social aspect and team-building skills etc., but then again the course is actually called 'IGCSE Maths' or 'IGCSE History' and the end outcome is a test and certificate with a grade on it. Then consider that the results of IGCSE exams or whatever the school's external exams happen to be are one of the cornerstones of an international school's marketing program. You hear it all the time. So one obvious conclusion is that it is just a big money-making scam. Now that may well be the case, and certainly there is an element of that in the explanation. However, that doesn't help the educational planner or in my case home schooler decide on the best approach to take.

There may be other explanations for this huge difference between the recommended 130 hours and the 500 or 600 which the hapless student must endure. A general lack of competence amongst teachers is another possible one: perhaps the majority of teachers are just really bad at explaining stuff. Maybe they forgot how they learned it in the first place, maybe they are not good communicators or lack patience or passion. Maybe a major contribution comes from all the time at school wasted on classroom management, handing out books and equipment, collecting books and equipment, moving from classroom to classroom and all that nonsense. Perhaps it's the inevitable huge lapses in time between when the student completes the work and when – if ever - he or she receives meaningful and personalised feedback and direction.

All these are no doubt partial factors, but I have an alternative explanation and a proposal.

### **Part 3**

My conclusion is that the vast majority of teachers anywhere and in any school are genuinely trying to teach their subject and resent the external interference of formal testing. They are individuals, rebels many, who mould the subject in their own image and stray far and wide from the narrow path which was cleared by Cambridge or whichever other external force tries to impose their despotic influence on WHAT I DO IN MY CLASSROOM! (Of course, some do it better than others.)

I applaud this, however...

...possibly this is having the unintended effect – if my thoughts above have merit – of creating an elitist outcome and forcing students to dedicate much more time to something, which indeed they might prefer not to be doing, than is actually necessary in order to walk away with the desired certificate, as advertised in the name of the course on offer. Isolating efficient exam-oriented instruction would free much time for the teacher to do his personal will and still sleep soundly at night.

I am suggesting a more honest and transparent approach which makes the clear distinction between the test and the subject instead of a wishy-washy approach which attempts to meander creatively towards the misty coastline of exam week yet never coming out quite in the right spot - resulting in completely unnecessary exam stress. I would make a clear distinction in the timetable and in the student's mind between the test and the subject. Let's face it anyway, a lot of the things in IGCSE tests are biased or out-of-date. The student should be aware that this is game we call “getting qualifications” but the real subject is outside of those colouring lines – and what they are asking you to colour might be an optical illusion in any case. Divide up the lessons, and in the 'IGCSE' lessons the aim is pure and simple; to get a good grade on the test. Everything you do in those lessons has the same single goal. Then, in the other lessons – which could be half the lessons if the 130 hour recommendation is to be taken seriously – fly like a bird, investigate the latest thing, watch a video, look at real life which is happening right now and see how you can apply your subject discipline to understanding more about the world in which we live. As a teacher with a passion for your subject,

freely share whatever you are into at that time.

#### **Part 4**

As I said at the start, this is off the top of my head and I don't know if it's true. I would like to hear your thoughts. I think that for the home-schooling I am doing and my children being who they are and the stage they are at in their education, I think I am faced with no choice but to adopt this approach to quite a bit of the instruction. I would attempt to prepare them for the test in the most efficient way possible leaving plenty of time for inquiry and individual pursuits. History, for example, or Economics I cannot possibly teach as a whole subject to be tested because there is practically no point of contact between the subject and the syllabus. It's almost all total lies and bias.

But in schools too, there may be something to be taken from this. Exams are either important or they are not and, like it or not, they are important. So, no matter how crappy the syllabus or how biased the comment or how pointless the testing, the students must be properly prepared to take the test. If the school is delivering what it is advertising, that is a minimum. Moreover, the magic 130 hours figure comes from Cambridge themselves. There are eons of time left over to deliver a real education which the teacher believes in and is individually relevant to whichever given group of students in their given location and from their given economic background.