

Teacher: How my job went from great to infuriating

Introduction by Valerie Strauss, who covers education and runs The Answer Sheet blog for the Washington Post, April 21, 2013

Here's a call for the end of high-stakes standardized tests from a teacher who chronicles how he approached his job before and after No Child Left Behind. David Patten is an award-winning history teacher, college lecturer, and the author of eighteen articles published in various magazines, including "History Today," "Military History," "Man at Arms," "Arms Collecting," "Medal News," and, most recently, the Journal of the Orders and Medals Society of America. A version of this appeared on George Mason University's History News Network website.

By David Patten

From the moment I was hired to teach history and government at a public high school to the moment, years later, when I walked away, I had the audacity to believe that I had been hired for my expertise. I taught the entire range of students, seventh through twelfth grades. No matter what the age or ability level, I actually believed that I had something to convey to my students and that I could truly refine thought and inspire learning.

And why not? I graduated *summa cum laude* with a 4.0 GPA in two majors. I was already a published writer and had traveled extensively. Given those brazen assumptions, to me the textbook was a mere afterthought, something to reference every now and then. State and district curriculums were only skeletons and I would flesh them out. My students would learn through highly detailed learning packets hundreds of pages of learning packets that I wrote. I also created slide shows and later on PowerPoints which dovetailed the information contained in the packets. These tools formed the basis of class discussions, thus touching all the learning styles. The students read the packets, learned visually, and learned orally.

It did not stop there. Projects that I created became a hallmark for many of my classes. My students would write historical fiction stories along with modern and historical position papers. They would participate in "great debates", their own teaching project, an historical magazine project, and a world geographic magazine project. Last, there were the required reading books. Books such as "Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee," "Son of the Morning Star," "The Prince," and "Treblinka" were read and thoroughly analyzed through lengthy class discussions.

My school system's finest superintendent was the one who refused to micromanage. He believed in something called "Teacher Empowerment." Educational excellence was not to be found in the ego par excellence of administrators, but in the abilities of the teachers. He made certain the lights were on and resources were available. The rest was up to us.

Under that system, virtually nothing was off limits. We were free to create programs, design the curriculum, and above all provide an intense instruction for the students. In the early 1980s I became one of the founding fathers of our gifted and talented program. It soon became a lighthouse program inside a lighthouse school district. In that regard, I was certainly not the only one helping to create a first-class educational atmosphere. There was energy and excitement present in every building. The teachers competed with each other to design and offer only the best for our students. During those "empowerment" years, the district became a regional, state, and national system of excellence, with the appropriate awards to prove it. And then came proficiency testing.

It came upon us slowly at first. States such as Florida and Texas had been applying the new methodology for a few years. Ohio, my state, would soon follow. We heard rumors, had a few discussions concerning what it all meant, and merely wondered what impact if any the testing would have. We soon found out just how serious it all really was. We endured district-wide meetings where administrators admonished us as to the critical importance of these fifty-question tests. Everything was going to ride upon student success or failure on these exams. Results were going to be published, levies would fail, and jobs would be lost unless we scored well. The meaning was truly driven home when a normally reticent

assistant superintendent began jumping up and down on the stage while screaming into a microphone, “Ram it down their throats!” She later apologized for the outburst, but the message was clear; testing would direct the curriculum, dictate the programs, and determine the future of our students and school district.

With apologies to T.S. Eliot, March, not April is the cruelest month, for March is the wasteland month of proficiencies. Early on in the experience, my project work and learning packets were barely altered. But it soon became apparent that cuts would have to be made in order to concentrate on preparing the students for the ultimate of tests. I complained bitterly to the administrators about this and was told: “Sorry, proficiencies drive the curriculum” and “Cuts in programs and projects will have to be made. We’re sorry.” Sorry is the cheapest word in the English language. Consequence is the most expensive.

I became a wizard at getting my students to pass the social studies section of the test. Every year until the time I left, I tracked the results for every student in my classes. Ninety-six percent was the lowest passing rate; ninety-nine percent was the highest. In addition, the vast majority of my students achieved the accelerated or advanced levels as determined by the state standards.

But the high scores my students achieved merely disguised the consequences. While so assiduously preparing them for the arithmetical triumph historical fiction, the teaching project, and the world geographic magazine project were discarded. As the testing became tougher and even more intense, many of my other projects became mere relics of a bygone era. None of the projects I created pertained to the testing and the time needed for them had to be used for proficiency oriented curriculum and test preparation. The required reading books vanished as well. Over time, only “The Prince” remained.

The twenty-first century delivered yet another hammer stroke. I recall hearing our “education” president, George W. Bush, declare, “Rarely is the question asked, ‘is our children learning?’” and, “It’s the systems that don’t test are those that quit on the kids.” His words signaled our nation’s educational future. The federal government, through No Child (and testing company) Left Behind, would be actively involved, and the states would be expected to take high-stakes testing even higher.

In Ohio, the old-style proficiency exam was replaced with an even tougher one: the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT). Statewide, schools were scoring extremely well on the old test and the state decided to create a more challenging high stakes exam in keeping with the federal mandates. In my classes, I was barely able to keep two projects alive: the historical magazine project and a new book review project I created. The latter was a rather pedestrian exercise but at least my students would be required to read an outside history book on a topic of their choosing. As to *The Prince*, he died in 2002.

I was certainly not alone in all this. The testing claimed its victims throughout the district. At the middle school level, for example, the gifted and talented program and foreign languages were reduced or eliminated. Indeed, virtually every program throughout the system suffered in one way or another as we focused on the terrible arithmetic.

Over the past decade, the nightmare of testing became even more intense and with predictable results. It wasn’t long until politicians demanded that teachers be held accountable for test scores. In district after district, state after state, proficiency scores and teachers’ careers were being inextricably linked. In states where testing meant everything to everyone involved, scores began to rise, then soar, almost overnight. Even the most cursory investigations found rampant cheating.

The much-heralded “Texas miracle” on test scores proved to be no miracle at all as cheating scandals dominated the headlines. The Dallas Morning News said it discovered 50,000 cases of cheating on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills test in 2005-2006. Seven hundred districts found themselves under investigation. Investigations in Georgia found an epidemic of cheating on their high stakes exam, and recently former Superintendent Beverly Hall and 34 other educators were indicted for it.

Then there was Michelle Rhee, who ran D.C. public schools from 2007-2010 and who became the darling of the data-driven crowd. She came to teaching through the Teach For America program. As a teacher, she once killed and ate a bee in front of her class just to demonstrate her toughness. On another occasion, to keep her students quiet, she taped their mouths shut. With all that on her resume, she was

well suited for the era of proficiency testing. In 2007, with no prior experience in running a school system, she descended upon the D.C. schools.

Rhee used the carrot and club approach. Raise the test scores and receive thousands of dollars in bonuses, or lose your job. She meant what she said. Teachers and principals were axed with monotonous regularity. Rhee once publicly fired a principal during the filming of a PBS NewsHour report on her. John Merrow and the film crew were stunned by what they recorded.

Nevertheless, under Rhee, test scores rocketed and bonuses flowed to those who succeeded in raising them. In 2010, she abdicated her position after taking the D.C. schools to the statistical stratosphere, and then came the deluge. So many multiple-choice answers had been changed from wrong to right that *USA Today* placed the odds of that occurring by chance at 1 in 100 billion. In spite of the data, cheating was flatly denied by Rhee and her cohorts. If we choose to assume that the erasures were honestly performed by the students, we can come to one and only one conclusion: the students of the D.C. schools are, without question, Powerball ready. As to their proficiency in the core subjects tested, the jury is still out — way out.

I never questioned the results of my school's test scores. We consistently scored well, very well. More to the real point, our test security would have impressed the Secret Service. On OGT, for example, we were not allowed to proctor our own subject matter. When we did monitor, it was a team effort. We watched the students, and each other. We weren't even allowed to touch the tests. When the students finished, a third party entered the room, collected the tests, placed them in a locking valise, and delivered the material to the guidance office. They were then gathered together and shipped off to the state for grading. In addition, our evaluations and our very jobs were never linked to student test scores. No bonuses were offered for increasing test results either. Thus, the greatest incentives to cheat were never present. We all knew the importance of scoring well, but the desperation to commit fraud was simply not there. Given all the factors, I have every confidence that our scores were always real.

But, test scores for any school, real or not, camouflage the true crime. I never feared proficiency testing. Instead, I loathed it. Proficiencies forced me to eviscerate the very elements that gave students a meaningful, vital, life-long learning experience. Distilling education into a number through high-stakes testing is nothing more than a fan dance in a corporate burlesque show. People become the equal of commodities; students are thereby converted into the widgets of our nation. Such is the price of oafdom. Ohio will soon gut the OGT exams and will join 44 other states in administering the Common Core tests. It is a distinction without a difference. Core testing is merely the flipside of the same coin and will offer the same educationally decrepit results. I would rather place my faith in teachers than number-crunching bureaucrats. To paraphrase Kierkegaard, "Life must be lived forward, but it can only be understood backward." I saw the before and I endured the after.

If we are to live forward, then the solution is simple: We must rid ourselves of proficiency testing and let the teachers teach.

[HTTP://WWW.WASHINGTONPOST.COM/BLOGS/ANSWER-SHEET/WP/2013/04/21/TEACHER-HOW-MY-JOB-WENT-FROM-GREAT-TO-INFURIATING/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2013/04/21/teacher-how-my-job-went-from-great-to-infuriating/)

All Comments

J Hamlin

7/12/2013 2:09 PM PDT

Where can one begin? Certainly by reading the fond reflections of fellow students below. Perhaps Mr. Patten is aligning his own legacy in the colorful way he only could, joining the ranks of significant historical figures throughout life...at least our lives.

When learning is easy and fun, there is magic going on. Patten wove the tale of so many stories of our nation and the world beyond, always presenting facts and figures dappled with brilliantly alive imagery. Simply put, that's what makes it stick.

In marketing, there's a 'new' trend... tell it with a story. Patten pioneered this approach - one that is applicable to nearly every form of leadership and communication. You reach people by engaging them -

you write *them into* the script. His assignments had us blending ourselves into the midst of every battle, struggle and success of the people. Not just history. The greater implications to humanity. And all of this offered us a life path of courage.

When you practically live it yourself, how could you fail to recall? When you can paint, in stunning detail, in your mind's eye each nuance of political intrigue and far reaching implication, how can you fail to apply the larger context to daily decision making?

Through teaching a 'mundane' topic, Patten mantled us with not only knowledge but also critical thinking, analysis and life skills. He gave us all a sense of who we are in history's tapestry and where we might be going. He adroitly opened our eyes to our potential to leave our own impact. He molded today's leaders.

Immersed in a world of legal marketing driven by ROI and statistics, I find myself patterning his techniques to build consensus among national attorneys. I've taken the same pedagogical approach into andragogy as an adjunct professor at a Columbus, Ohio university.

We were 13 - yet look at the testimonies. And guess what? A masters 840 class had us fill out a map.

As for the Prince? In this case, I'd argue it's better to be loved than feared.

Keith Goldsworth

5/27/2013 5:36 AM PDT

The problem is that they are teaching these kids what to think, not how to think

aawhitney

5/5/2013 3:22 PM PDT

To echo the sentiments of other former students of David Patten, his teaching style, use of materials, content, and the quality of education I received as a result were unparalleled. Mr. Patten is one of the major reasons I am now a teacher myself. However, the steady pull to standardization makes me reconsider the decision again and again. I still have many of my Patten Packets and retain a nickname he gave me in his classroom. I never felt that a teacher cared as much as he did in my 12 years of public schooling and I only wish I could be half the teacher he was.

msndis

5/4/2013 1:12 AM PDT

As a parent, with my youngest still in a public high school, I can tell you that I trust my kids' grades that the teachers give them. The state tests tied to NCLB and RTTT provide absolutely NO information that is useful to me, my kids or their teachers. They ARE useful to the testing companies so they can rake in the dough. I would rather have my kids being taught by teachers who are allowed to actually teach them, than to waste money teaching to tests that are worthless as evaluation tools.

sircornman

4/29/2013 9:14 PM PDT

I too was a Mr. Patten student, but more recently, a couple years before "The Prince" died. He was every feel good movie teacher rolled into one.

We can disagree all day about unions and benefits, but one thing is abundantly clear, ALL self-respecting teachers hate this system. It was designed to identify failing schools at the expense of dragging down the top performing ones. There's got to be another way to identify at-risk schools with all the statistics, analytics, and sociological studies linking poverty, crime, and education. Corporations like Target know when to email people baby ads based on their recent purchase history suggesting pregnancy, but we can't use those methods to identify schools that need help without student intrusion?

There's got to be a better way to do this, and I think a non-partisan effort led by parents, teachers, and concerned citizens should spearhead it, a "Patten's Army," if you will.

Rebecca Vorwerk Larson

4/29/2013 5:56 PM PDT

I am also a former student of Mr. Patten's. He taught 7th and 8th grade American history and Ohio history back in the 80s. (It's fun to see some names I recognize here who were classmates of mine.) I also want to take this opportunity to salute him as the best teacher I ever had.

I still remember with vivid clarity the amazing props he would bring to class, like a full suite of armor or a Sumari sword. I remember his meticulously crafted handouts and sweating it through his tests, which were much more difficult than any state-created multiple choice test could ever be. His were fill-in-the-blank, and either you knew the answer or you didn't. I remember participating in "The Great Debate" arguing (rather feebly) against my opponents as to why the south had no grounds for secession from the north. I remember reading "Treblinka" and "The Prince" and learning about the escapades of the galant Rogers Rangers. I remember memorizing all the countries in Asia and filling them in on a blank map during a test. I remember the energy and enthusiasm just pouring out of this young man who wore three-piece suits to teach 7th graders. I remember thinking and working harder than I ever had before, and loving every minute of it.

Perhaps the most telling indicator of the impact he had on me is this: I still have a folder in my keepsakes box containing the notes from his classes, as well as the historical fiction I wrote, and my position papers on abortion and the Kennedy assassination. I have never been able to bring myself to get rid of these artifacts because they are tokens from one of the greatest learning experiences of my life.

I am saddened to hear that other children didn't get to benefit from the Mr. Patten the kids of my generation knew, and concerned for the future of my son's education. Thank you, Mr. Patten, for your legacy. I hope it will not be destroyed by a government that thinks it knows better than teachers. What a shame.

Bohemia_1918

4/29/2013 3:01 PM PDT

I just want to echo all of the other former students of Mr. Patten's. Folks, take note, listen to this man. He is the best teacher I've ever had!

While most other teachers just taught standard American history, 1492-1865, in a spectacularly boring fashion, Mr. Patten included history from the ancient Greeks to the Tudors to the first five presidents in his 8th grade class. It was eye-opening for me. "You mean history began before 1776?"

Sure, there was little about Nero and Anne Boleyn on the proficiency tests. But history is so much more than disposable facts and forgettable dates.

Today I am a writer who also adores writing historical fiction outside of my 9-5. I may not be a historian, but I read history books obsessively. It is a great joy to me, and it is one of the main ways I continue to educate myself beyond college.

I can say without a doubt I would never have found this love if Mr. Patten had not instilled a love of history--and learning--in me.

What are we telling children when we teach them that education is only for a quick payoff, and is unimportant beyond earning a passing grade? We've seen that the NCLB method is not working, and is actually a detriment to education in this country. So what do we do next?