

PRACTICE MAKES BETTER— A NEW LOOK AT ASSESSMENT

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There are few immutable truths in this world, but this is one: practice makes better. Not perfect, but better. The more we repeat an activity, the more experience we acquire, the more mistakes we make and then correct, the more we improve over time. Whether piano playing, driving or cooking, organizing a school camping trip, a curriculum or our papers, repetition and perseverance and longevity all reap their rewards. Each time we return to the same task, we mostly do it better or clearer or deeper or with less effort.

I recently came across a summary of precisely how we improve. * The list posits five stages we pass through in trying to accomplish any given task or skill, as follows:

1. UNCONSCIOUS INCOMPETENCE

I don't know how to do this and I am blissfully unaware.

2. CONSCIOUS INCOMPETENCE

I am keenly aware that I cannot do this.

3. AWKWARD PRACTICE

I am starting to get it, but I really need to concentrate hard.

4. CONSCIOUS COMPETENCE

I can do it! Consistently!

5. UNCONSCIOUS COMPETENCE

It is so wholly a part of me that I don't even have to think about it.

* This list appears to be circulating without a clear author—it came to be from Ian Hawkins, a Toronto teacher, who got it from Jen Hardacre.

Take a moment to think of something new you tried recently. Perhaps it was figuring out how to organize your I-Photo library, edit photos and order them online or maybe something more adventurous like skiing, hang-gliding or perfecting your Pilates routine. Put yourself through the above list and note how it applied to your progress. Chances are you can identify pretty clearly where and when you shifted from one to another. Chances are that as an adult learner, you were allowed to proceed at your own pace, make mistakes and figure out how to correct them. Chances are also good that your instructors did not go out of their way to compare you to others. You might be a 55 year-old beginning skier or yoga student with some 22 year old teacher telling you, “Good job! You’re getting it!” while you fall face first in the snow or collapse from your headstand.

Now imagine that whatever the new skill, you were constantly being watched, that your efforts had to match someone’s timetable of when you should achieve it, that you were being compared to your neighbor, that your place on the scale of competence was stamped with a number or a letter that was publicly displayed, that you were being named with all sorts of pseudo-scientific labels—“Pilates-challenged,” “computer-handicapped.”

Welcome to school.

For some reason, schools have developed a highly unnatural style of assessing children’s progress. We pit children against each other, label them, sort them, shut down their confidence or falsely inflate it, teach them to learn to get something else—and the unbridled curiosity of the six-year old hungry to know everything he or she can about how the world works turns into the sullen cynicism of the high schooler who asks, “Will this be on the test?” And the children are not at fault here—they have merely obediently become the monster we create when we organize education around judgement.

With some rare exceptions, most schools subscribe to something called a report card. Of all of mankind’s invention, the school report card is perhaps one of the strangest and most harmful practices we have come up with. Because most of us have lived through it, we imagine it as pre-ordained, somewhat benign and/or a necessary rite of passage. But if

we stop to think about it more deeply, we might come to see that it is a cruel and unusual punishment of innocent children.

As a teacher of over three decades who is responsible for writing report cards, I'm speaking from the front lines. I understand the need to assess how children are doing, share it with them and share it with their parents. I imagine the reasoning behind all this is simple—once we know where we are, we might be better prepared to understand where we're going and how to take the next step. In simple language, we assess children to understand how we can help them—and to help them understand how they can help themselves.

I can report with confidence that the present (and past) system does not work. Instead, it curtails children's enthusiasm by shutting down too early their need to explore, try things out and make mistakes. It tattoos unnecessary letters and numbers on their psyche that can stay with them their whole life. It puts them in competition with their friends and neighbors, creating an unhealthy community atmosphere. It often tests them in the most shallow of assessments (the currently-favored All Children Left Behind tests) and creates an atmosphere that favors right answers over right questions. It reduces the whole adventure of learning to a game called school that those with good short-term memories and a particular set of intelligences (mostly linguistic and logical-mathematical) can win. But even the winners leave with a false sense of victory. All you ex-honor-roll students out there who are now adults—when was the last time someone asked to see your high school report card?

I can also report from my experience that the wounds of the report-card mentality never heal. In one case, a group of music teachers being trained in the approach called Orff Schulwerk sang, danced and played music together all year, forming a deep community bond. Near the end of the study, they were not only given grades, but had their grades publicly read out loud. Within five minutes, people who had supported and encouraged each other, people who had celebrated each other's breakthroughs in skills and

understanding, were squabbling with each other about why so-and-so got an A and they got a B. These students were 30 to 40 years old.

I also get graded once a year in an official evaluation of a teacher-training course I run, one of these “number 1-5” affairs (with 5 at the top). When I look at my evaluations, I immediately scan to see if there is anything but straight 5’s. If I see a 3 or 4 next to “teacher comes prepared to class,” I bristle with indignation. Why? Not only because I am programmed to want all 5’s, but also because the number tells me nothing useful. Maybe the student was thinking of the day I couldn’t find the words to the song I was teaching or a question was asked that took the class in a different direction that I purposefully allowed or the student wanted all the notes before the class in a neat package and didn’t accept my reasoning for waiting. Instead of a number, I needed a conversation. And so do we all.

A Positive Alternative

The philosophical shift from labeling, sorting, competing, succeeding or failing to encouraging, working as a team with the teacher and fellow students, improving, is not a distinction to be taken lightly. It can mean the difference between feeling defeated and cast out and feeling known and invited in. And if we can imagine a whole society of future citizens who have learned to feel encouraged and to encourage each other, to meet challenges with confidence in eventual success, to feel celebrated for every step of progress—well, it may not produce Utopia, but I imagine a lot of the behaviors that occur when people feel judged, ostracized, labeled as winners or losers, would decrease significantly.

It is good and necessary to critique harmful practices and sometimes that is sufficient to control the damage. But here I offer something more— a viable alternative that might actually accomplish what report cards set out to do. A quick summary of the main ways in which this five-step model of a continuum toward mastery offers an improvement over business as usual:

- No need to add another label, which brands the psyche and tends to fix things instead of keep them moving.
- We are all on the way, moving along the continuum. (The Indonesians have a marvelous word that they use instead of “no”— when asked if they have or can do something, no matter how impossible it seems, they answer, “Belum.” Which means, “Not yet.”)
- It doesn’t matter who arrives at the top first—the view is the same.
- We are all awkward at something.
- Except for those stuck in the first stage, everyone is acutely aware of where they are—in fact, more aware than the teacher might be.
- When children—or adults—feel encouraged and note their own progress, they are naturally motivated to learn more. When practice feels like drill, learning shuts down and progress is slow. When the desire to practice is lit from within, repetition works its magic. Free from labels, time limits and comparisons with others, children—and adults—tend to have a higher and intrinsic motivation.
- Identifying one’s place in the progression is an excellent starting point, but sometimes more is needed. Once the teacher and child understand that the child is in Awkward Practice or Conscious Incompetence, the foundation is laid for the next step. Now the teacher and student are ready to engage in dialogue as to what is needed to get to the next plateau. “Do you need more time to practice? Need to go through it more slowly? Need to try it from another angle? (Draw the answer, dance the answer, sing the answer.) Need it broken down further? Need to clarify why it’s important to increase the motivation? Need some temporary outer motivations? (Please save this to LAST!) Need to have more choice in the subject? (Hate reading this book assigned, but would love reading another.)

- Some activities are clear as to what constitutes success or failure— you either shoot the ball in the basket, finish the jigsaw puzzle or drive the car without crashing—or not. Other activities have many more subtle layers and the student can't always know how he or she is doing—is this a good painting? A good musical improvisation? A persuasive essay? And here is where the teacher steps forward and gives clear guidance as to what “success” looks, sounds or feels like, with very specific critiques to help guide the student. And this is also can be a subjective murky realm. We have plenty of stories, especially in the complex world of art, in which people later revealed as geniuses, are reviled—Haydn giving up on Beethoven as untalented, Debussy's poor grades in his Conservatory composition classes, Thelonious Monk's early reviews.

- Assessment and self-assessment are lifetime skills. This kind of conversation— whether dialogue with self, peers or teacher— is ongoing, not reserved just for the marking period. For those nervous about tracking a student's progress, we can still write report cards with these five stages on them two or three times a year just to keep an official record. But always the purpose is to note what the next step might be— it is not enough even to report that Tanisha is in the 5th stage of every skill—we are still responsible for imagining how she can improve herself yet more. In the Buddhist tradition, the spiritual path is called a practice, something you must repeatedly do, because practice makes better. They say that even Buddha is working on himself somewhere.

So a word to you parents out there. Think about your skiing class and reflect on how good it feels just to get better, with the encouragement of your instructor. And how bad it would feel to be graded, forced into a timetable of learning and compared to your husband or wife. And then consider what school is doing to your children.

And teachers. The next time your school year begins with a four- hour meeting about how to administer the next test, stand up, raise your right hand and invoke the teacher's Hippocratic Oath—“First do no harm.” Steadfastly refuse to stamp confining labels on your innocent student's foreheads and suggest to your fellow teachers—“Let's use the time to talk about the projects we're excited about and how we might collaborate to make

this grand adventure of learning even grander. Or talk about what Jessica is trying to tell us with her behavior and brainstorm as to how we can help her.”

And to all the readers of this article, give yourself this test and choose the number that describes you:

1. Are you blissfully unaware that you don't understand how important this topic is?
2. Are you aware that it might be important, but don't know how to think about it?
3. Are you awkwardly mulling over some of these ideas thinking that you want to keep chewing them over until they are better digested?
4. Have you had a little “Aha!” moment and understood how to proceed to stop hurting children and help them instead?
5. Or have you arrived at that place where you have no choice but to help children improve inch by inch, class by class, day by day, because that is simply what it means to be an adult human being on this planet?

Let's start having the conversations that will lead us all to the next stage.