# The American Testing Hypocrisy

***BARTHOLOMEW J. CIAMPA****

"I'm furious!!" . . . "It was too subjective." . . . "I crammed for four hours last night and really didn't need to!" . . . "Why weren't there any true-false or 'fill-ins'?" . . . "We expected you to 'sock it to us'!" . . .

THESE were some of the responses given by college seniors which reflected the feelings of an entire group of Secondary School Teaching Methods course participants regarding an examination they had just completed.

Strangely enough, the examination material under discussion dealt with the negative motivation of high school students' studying solely for good grades. Also examined were the underlying academic pressures brought to bear upon American youth as a result of "the gold star syndrome."

We had been considering seven readings, each of which was concerned with a different contributory factor to the overall breakdown of the American learning process via pressures exerted upon students from diverse sources. One article dealt specifically with the pressure upon the student to conform to America's educational "rat race" so that he might later be admitted to one of the "right" colleges. Another treated the current homework escalation imposed, by many of our well-meaning teachers, in terms of quantity rather than quality. Still another entertained the subject of negative parental and peer group pressures. All in all, a very comprehensive selection of materials was chosen to give somewhat more than a "far-away" meaning to classroom discussions that sometimes tend to be overly theoretical for want of "working" educational experiments available for student observation.

How ironic it was to hear some of these prospective teachers complaining simply because I had failed to comply with the testing *status quo* to which they had become oriented throughout their formal educations. "Where are the multiple choice (multiple 'guess' in many cases) questions?" "What are we to do with the facts we mentally photographed during our self-inflicted, high-pressure studying?" These were the questions they unconsciously, nonverbally communicated to me.

* *Bartholomew J. Ciampa, Director of Student Teaching, Nasson College, Springvale, Maine*

In many cases I am certain it was felt that the assigned readings were intended to be read and swallowed merely to be regurgitated at test time. It seemed that the material was stored in the mind to be transferred later to the test paper and virtually left there!

## Negative Testing Techniques

There were those students who felt totally incapacitated primarily because they were expected *really* to think and not merely to "parrot" intelligent-seeming ideas they had encountered in the prescribed readings regarding pupil pressures caused by negative testing techniques. For example, such techniques may inadvertently place emphasis on fear of failure and thereby motivate students to "study" by memorizing passages or the first letters of words or phrases in a list of items soon to be forgotten.

Where was the misconception of preparing for tests in such a manner born? Perhaps it began with a simple reward-punishment association at a very early age and was then transformed into a more sophisticated stimulus-response situation, with the negative motivation of warped parental values serving as the catalyst during the very early school years.

Is this lack of emphasis on the qualitative, subjective approach actually perpetuated by the technological pressures of our recent "push" into the space age? Although some years have passed since that fateful day in October 1957, when the first man-made satellite was orbited by the U.S.S.R., we still seem not to have recovered from our first impulse; namely, of trying to regain our tarnished technological pride by rationalizing that *more work* would make our students better. *Not* more qualitative work, but simply *more work!* One gets the impression that some educators can justify trying to transform the average student into the excellent student in this manner by merely calling for the pursuit of academic "excellence" that will enable us to meet the technological challenge. This projection seems to have been carried, in some cases, even to the extent of sacrificing the total individual and substituting for his development the mass preparation of "bachelor's degree technicians."

The metamorphosis of American education of the post-Sputnik era has indeed had an irreversible effect on the students of this generation by virtually instilling the feeling that the student must "psych himself up" for an examination if he expects to pass it. The quantitative emphases on homework in American schools actually foster "cramming" simply because of the vast amounts of technical data for which students are held responsible in the academic disciplines of the objective sciences.

To what scholastic level is this extended? Some insight came to me when I realized that my group of college seniors had not yet achieved their own personal, intellectual renaissances. Indeed, they are intellectually aware, but are in need of a revival or a rebirth of genuine academic purpose. The overall aim of the pursuit of higher education seems to have been furtively disguised by the implementation of a maze of entrance, qualifying, and comprehensive examinations. Many students have lost sight of their destinations and are primarily concerned with each obstacle that is placed in their paths.

After having studied the disadvantages of pupil pressures by way of negative test motivation, most of my students took it for granted that they would be tested by this same "pseudo-norm."

Are we beginning to see the manifestation of a never-ending geometric progression of test-conscious citizens in a totally test-oriented society? Is the area of educational evaluation being viewed so superficially that the problem is not even realized? Has this practice become so widespread that it is now a generally accepted rule and, therefore, not to be questioned?

## Test Preconditioning

I would never have realized the extent of the test preconditioning of these students were it not for the evident congruence of the material under discussion. The American "way" of education, which, as the New Jersey Department of Education reports, caused at least 41 students in that state to commit suicide between September 1960 and June 1963, and possibly 738 suicide attempts during the same time period, is indeed open to harsh criticism.

I am sure much of my students' concern lay in the area of the test's grading. "How can a test that is subjective in nature be graded objectively?" "How can we be sure the tests will be graded fairly?" might be logical questions posed. Has the contemporary American trend inadvertently fostered the desire for the "good" grade and an atrophy of the pursuit of the "good" mind?

A number of my students were truly upset when they realized that this examination did not meet the level of objectivity of their expectations. They seemed to be frustrated because it really *did not* warrant their "cramming" or ulcer-producing anxieties without once giving a thought to the somewhat idealistic and "far-away"-seeming theoretical jargon which they had so heartily endorsed while discussing the material. As yet they were still subconscious prisoners of the very technique that they themselves abhorred. The trite ambiguity of "keepers of their own prisons" seems to loom ominously.

My first inclination was to feel that I had failed to jar these prospective teachers loose from the "truths" of their prescribed notions of learning motivation and proper study techniques. Yet, on pondering the situation further, I found it was not too difficult to realize the depth of this indelibly etched preconditioning. Such preconditioning, in some youthful cases, has bred hopeless academic incompetents out of capable students by virtue of reaction-formation defense mechanisms. Such preconditioning apparently has been nurtured during the formative years on the secondary school level and may be being perpetuated on many college campuses by well-meaning professors.

Where will this situation end?

It seems that many school systems are taking positive steps to alleviate much pressure by implementing flexible-modular scheduling, programmed learning, and complete nongraded primary situations; but this is not enough. I fear that the problem is so immense that the only effective curbing measure may be in the form of immediate, nationwide educational reforms at both the primary and secondary school levels.

For the present we *can* hope to break the chain of this progression by concentrating on the link with which each of us, parent and educator alike, is involved. Perhaps if this were to be done the "SCAT, PSAT, SAT generation" could be realistically termed the "enlightened generation." □

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