



## **How to Assess Your Teaching Quality**

Dan Olinger, PhD



<b>Contents</b>	Assessing Curriculum Content	3
	Assessing Instructional Effectiveness	4
	Conclusion	6

## How to Assess Your Teaching Quality

*Vocation.* It means “calling.” Everybody knows that. Americans use the term all the time for their profession, their job. But to most Americans, the word has lost its core meaning. If we work in a calling, then someone has called us. If we’re teachers, then the fact that we’re teaching is part of a plan; we have been designed to be teachers, we have been appointed to be teachers, and we will be held to gracious account as to how well we have fulfilled our calling. The Caller makes and carries out good plans.

In our largely secular society, that vision is gone. Nationwide, more than 1 in 3 teachers quit after 3 years, and nearly half quit after 5.<sup>1</sup> That means, first, that a great many people have spent thousands of dollars on a college education that they barely use and second, that an unnecessarily high percentage of teachers are inexperienced.

Why the attrition rate? The chaos of the public education system undoubtedly plays a role; no one wants to live most of his waking hours in chaos. But underlying even that factor is the large-scale loss of a sense of calling—a relationship with the Caller. If we’re called by a good and great God to do something hard, we can endure even chaos for the sake of the larger cause.

Fortunately, while Christian education is difficult, it doesn’t suffer from the kind of frustration and despair that are the natural consequences of the current public education system. We are promised direction and empowerment by a loving heavenly Father. And one day we will have the opportunity to give account of our stewardship. How great will be the joy of hearing His “Well done”!

So. We’d better do the best we can, by His grace. Are you doing a good job in educating your students? How do you know?

There are two elements to a complete answer to that question. First, are you teaching your students the curriculum content that they need? And second, are you teaching that content effectively? In other

words, are they getting the right stuff, and are they really “getting” it?

### Assessing Curriculum Content

Some educational experts assert that a major problem with American education is that we have no standard national curriculum and thus no way to administer standardized tests that measure the students against a uniform curriculum and no way to prepare teachers to teach that specific curriculum.<sup>2</sup> Most conservatives would reply first that lack of a national curriculum is hardly the cause of the large-scale failure of American K–12 education—the problem with American students is not that they are learning different things from students in other states or communities but rather that they are learning essentially nothing at all—although they do have great self-esteem in the process—and that even if inconsistency were the problem, the federal government, given its track record in education and a great many other extra-constitutional endeavors, is hardly the institution to be trusted with devising the specific curriculum.

In the Christian school, the curriculum will be devised by the administration and faculty. They can use several sources for guidance: the public school curriculum (at least its scope and sequence), the curriculum of other Christian schools, and the textbooks available from the major Christian or even secular publishers. Home educators, of course, can use the same sources in planning their curriculum. Curriculum planners will find that such indicators are all fairly consistent with one another as to basic scope and sequence; for example, high school social-studies curricula almost always include a year each of world geography, world history, U.S. history, and U.S. government. Some might shorten the geography and/or government to a semester and add one or two semesters of other topics, such as economics, but these differences are typically

<sup>1</sup> AFT President Randi Weingarten, “A Quality Agenda: How to Build Enduring Education Reform,” TEACH Conference, July 11, 2011. <http://www.aft.org/newspubs/press/weingarten071111.cfm>.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, David K. Cohen, “Learning to Teach Nothing in Particular,” *American Educator*, Winter 2010–2011, 45. Available online at <http://www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/winter1011/Cohen.pdf>. This entire issue of this publication of the American Federation of Teachers is devoted to advocating a standardized national K–12 curriculum.

inconsequential for the students' preparation for college or life.<sup>3</sup>

As to the content of the specific courses, most states have some sort of content standards, and while they do differ somewhat among states<sup>4</sup> and are, of course, not perfect for every student, they do serve as a useful foundation. It would be wise for Christian educators to meet and exceed those standards so as to disarm the charge that their education is inferior. We should note, however, that the standards serve only as a minimum or core for the subject; they are not comprehensive. Curriculum should include other material. Educators can start with areas in which they have special expertise or interest, and they should extend the curriculum to areas of special interest for individual students as they have time and resources to do so.<sup>5</sup> Why? Because education is not merely about filling the student's "bowl" with facts; it's about turning on a switch, seizing his interest in learning, and preparing him to pursue it independently. If he's deeply interested in something—assuming it's worth learning—then a good teacher will leverage that interest to show him how to learn more on his own. The ideal graduate will learn much more after he graduates than he did in school. Thus, curriculum should include regular opportunities to read and explore widely.

### Assessing Instructional Effectiveness

Analysts of the American educational system sometimes assert that the reason students don't do well is that we don't value our teaching profession enough—as is evidenced, for example, by the fact that we don't pay teachers well.<sup>6</sup> Again, most con-

servatives would reject that premise, first because it assumes that an entire profession, on balance, is substandard—"we don't have any good teachers because the good ones are attracted to higher-paying jobs, and we're left with the incompetent ones who can't get those better jobs"—and second, because the assertion ignores the simple fact that U.S. teachers (at least those in public education) are the highest-paid teachers in the world, including the other economically developed nations.<sup>7</sup> Further, teachers' unions have persistently rejected efforts to assess teacher performance.<sup>8</sup>

The core question in instructional assessment is not the teacher's degrees or CEUs or diversity of methods. All of these things can play a role, and occasionally they actually do. But the core question is how much the *student* has progressed from the beginning of a particular class to the end. If he hasn't progressed satisfactorily, nothing else really matters. The teacher is not solely responsible for that progress, of course; the greatest responsibility is with the student himself, and environmental factors beyond the teacher's control may influence the student's progress as well. But the teacher is a major factor and the primary agent tasked with impelling the student forward.

### The Grading System

So how do we assess student progress? For most courses, the academic grade is the most immediate key indicator. This means that the grading system has to be well designed; you get what you grade for, and if your grade is based primarily on factual memorization and recall, that's what you'll get from the student. A course grade should consist of varied types of assessment. Depending on the specific course, the student should show that he has

<sup>3</sup>For what it's worth, many suggest that the economic troubles of modern America find their root in the general economic ignorance of the populace. Combining economics with U.S. government for that fourth year seems like a very good idea.

<sup>4</sup>The Common Core State Standards Initiative has recently proposed standards to bring participating states into alignment. This is a recent effort, and detailed analyses of the quality of the standards are not common; further, it remains to be seen how many states will participate. See the standards as currently formulated at <http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards>.

<sup>5</sup>This individualized expansion of the curriculum is obviously a central part of much home education. Traditional classroom teachers may have to confine themselves to areas in which large groups of students are interested or gifted, perhaps because of local history or similar factors.

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, Bryce Covert, "How We Teach Our

Graduates Not to Teach," [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bryce-covert/how-we-teach-our-graduate\\_b\\_837109.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bryce-covert/how-we-teach-our-graduate_b_837109.html).

<sup>7</sup>In 2005 the average U.S. teacher salary was \$5,266/month, or \$63,192/year, for an average work week of 36.6 hours. The second-highest teacher salary was in the UK at about \$5,000/month, followed by Germany at a few cents less. <http://www.worldsalaries.org/teacher.shtml>. Incidentally, U.S. teacher salaries were at 136% of U.S. median household income for 2005, which was \$46,326. Carmen DeNavas-Walt, Bernadette D. Proctor, and Cheryl Hill Lee, U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, P60-231, Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2005 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2006), 6. Available online at <http://www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/p60-231.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup>See, for just one example of many, <http://www.nea.org/home/42303.htm>.

not only learned the basic facts but also needs to show that he

- understands how those facts fit into the larger picture
- understands the relative importance or significance of the components of the subject
- understands processes in the subject
- has the ability to express the subject's ideas accurately, clearly, and coherently
- has the ability to do research in the subject
- has the ability to reason, or extrapolate, from what he knows about the subject to other things that might be true
- has the ability to evaluate whether those extrapolations are indeed true
- has the ability to explain the impact this subject has on other areas of life
- has the ability and the inclination to make moral decisions in the subject

### **Assessment Methods**

All these things can't be with true-false questions. At the early elementary level, students should be graded on their skill level in reading, writing, and calculating. As they progress to the core academic areas, older students need to be graded—held accountable—on varied kinds of activities that demonstrate all the competencies listed above. How can this be done?

What follows are some of the most common and effective assessment methods. Some require more time and effort to grade than others; some are suitable only beyond a certain level of educational experience; some are effective only when they're used relatively rarely.

- Objective testing is efficient as to time (especially when it's machine graded) and very effective at testing basic factual understanding. It can be used to test higher levels of learning, but doing so requires considerable skill in the test writer.
- Writing exercises are effective at demonstrating overall understanding of a concept and clarity of expression. They often require rubrics for the best student achievement and consistency in grading.
  - Short essays (one paragraph or less) can demonstrate a narrow competency and can be graded relatively efficiently. For example,

“Summarize the main point of this article in one sentence.”

- Longer essays can demonstrate the student's ability to develop a concept (an argument, for example) and follow it through several stages.
- Case studies can demonstrate the student's ability to apply what he has learned in a real-world situation. Incidentally, case studies can be either written or oral (discussion) exercises.
- Research papers can demonstrate judgment in the use of sources, comprehension of varying sources' arguments, precision of thought and expression, and attention to detail.
- Journals can demonstrate skills in describing and analyzing as well as giving the teacher insight into personal factors that may affect the student's ability or inclination to perform well academically.
- Creative writing can give the student opportunity to pursue areas of particular individual interest.
- Oral presentations demonstrate the student's ability in expressing himself extemporaneously, thereby demonstrating his familiarity with the subject and his ability to communicate clearly face to face.
  - If other students are allowed to question him after the presentation, the teacher can get further insight into his command of the subject area as well as his mental adeptness and his ability to respond calmly under stress or in the face of opposition.
  - Personal interviews give the teacher an opportunity to follow up on impressions and clarify the limits of the student's understanding. Much of classical education, still practiced to some extent at such institutions as Cambridge and Oxford, relies on the personal interview as a primary assessment device.
  - Class or group discussions give the students opportunity to evaluate and respond to opposing ideas. Discussions need to be led; they typically are not efficient as to time if the teacher just lets the students go. That's why whole careers have been built out of facilitating discussion groups.
- Graphic reports encourage the student to develop skills different from those used in verbal and oral presentations. They encourage him to think

more spatially and creatively as well as to develop a sense of composition and beauty in design.

- Physical performance, such as science labs, dramatic performances, and simulations, involve the student's motor skills, thereby reinforcing the learning for most students. Further, the student's choices at key decision points will often indicate his level of understanding.

For most of these exercises, the teacher and student can benefit by occasionally including either peer review or self-assessment.

### Standardized Testing

Standardized testing is useful in showing how your students are doing relative to the rest of the student population, but it suffers from a number of weaknesses. Most obviously, since it is not aligned with the specific curriculum in your school, it is testing achievement only in a very broad sense. It's not really a specific assessment of your student's understanding of the instruction he received. Even attempts at the state level to align state standards with standardized tests appear unworkable because standards tend to be vague, while test questions need to be specific. "A teacher may faithfully and effectively teach to the standards all year and her students may learn a great deal, but her students may do poorly on the test simply because the teacher and the test developer interpreted the standards differently."<sup>9</sup>

Further, in order to be gradable efficiently in large quantities, standardized tests have to limit their testing methods to a small subset of what is available. Many of the testing methods discussed in the previous section are not scalable: they can't be applied cost-effectively to large numbers of students. Standardized tests can't include research papers, for example, or oral presentations. There is evidence that even the relatively short essay-writing sections on standardized tests are graded inconsistently,<sup>10</sup> and the cost for such subjective grading is significant.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Laura S. Hamilton, "Testing What Has Been Taught," *American Educator*, Winter 2010–2011, 49. Available online at <http://www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/winter1011/Hamilton.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Congressman Barney Frank, "Can Testers Pass the Test?" *Congressional Record*, May 21, 2001, 8826.

<sup>11</sup> Illinois has recently decided not to include writing on standardized tests because of the grading expense. <http://www.daily-chronicle.com/2011/07/06/standardized-exam-edited-down-in-state/aidbquh/>.

A final problem with standardized tests, especially because they are significant factors in college admission (they are "high-stakes" events), is that they tempt teachers to "teach the test" rather than the curriculum.<sup>12</sup> The kinds of useful educational activities that are not tested on the standardized tests—such as conducting lab experiments or giving group presentations—get less attention than they deserve. Further, many teachers spend considerable class time teaching how to take standardized tests rather than actual course content. Since a number of popular "test-taking techniques" ignore comprehension,<sup>13</sup> this classroom time is spent on a short-term benefit (a higher test score) with literally no long-term educational usefulness—and less time is left for what the student should actually be learning.

So standardized tests do serve a limited purpose, but they cannot be your primary assessment tool or even your most accurate one.

### Conclusion

To know if you're teaching effectively, you really need to gather information from many sources. Some of them will be quantifiable: tests, project grades, and so forth. Some will be highly subjective: the aura of the classroom, your students' attitudes in class, students' anecdotal feedback after they graduate. A good steward of your educational calling will look for feedback from all of these sources, and others as well, to improve your teaching content and methods in order to have the greatest possible positive impact on all the students that providentially cross your path.

<sup>12</sup> They tempt the teachers and administrators to do a lot more than that. Cheating on the test—by teachers and administrators—does occur. See, for example, cases in Baltimore ([http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2010-05-27/news/bs-md-school-cheating-20100526\\_1\\_test-scores-cheating-students-tests](http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2010-05-27/news/bs-md-school-cheating-20100526_1_test-scores-cheating-students-tests)), Washington ([http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2011-03-28-1Aschooltesting28\\_CV\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2011-03-28-1Aschooltesting28_CV_N.htm)), Atlanta (<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2011/07/05/eveningnews/main20077025.shtml>), and Houston (<http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/metropolitan/6909076.html>). At the time of writing, investigation was ongoing in several locations in the Midwest ([http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2011-03-06-school-testing\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2011-03-06-school-testing_N.htm)).

<sup>13</sup> For example, students are taught that the longest choice in a multiple-choice question is usually the correct one. <http://www.testtakingtips.com/test/index.htm>.

Dan Olinger is Chairman of the Division of Bible at Bob Jones University. To read more articles in the "Issues in Education" series, visit [bjupress.com/go/ed-issues](http://bjupress.com/go/ed-issues).