

The Positive Uses of Contradiction

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Abstract: A personal and honest look at the often contradictory ways in which tests are seen and used.

Essay:

Several years ago the Washington Post featured a story on an African American teenager in one of the D.C. schools who had obtained a perfect 1600 on the SAT. Her teachers and other school officials beamed with pride about what a dedicated, serious, and bright girl this student was. Suddenly the SAT, so much maligned as a biased gatekeeper of the establishment, a proxy for social class and racial privilege with no real value as a predictor of college success, was confirmation of a particular minority student's academic brilliance.

I was struck and mildly amused by the contradiction. Upon further reflection, however, I realized that I was guilty of the same inconsistency, and not just on one occasion or two, but over much of my professional life. Like the labor union negotiator who berates management for its mean-spirited stinginess, but tells the rank and file they are the best paid workers in the world with the highest standard of living, I realized that I had been telling contradictory stories about test fairness and bias depending upon my audience. For years I have complained to test development companies that they must do a better job of test construction; that their tests are imperfect and only modestly related to later success; that they must be constantly vigilant to ensure that biases do not burrow their way into the assessments. Being African American, I am often asked to speak to minority students and their parents about testing. When doing so, I have insisted that there is nothing wrong with the SAT, the ACT, and other measures of academic achievement; that they must not kill the messenger but heed the message; that they must knuckle down and study hard.

Is this a case of intellectual dishonesty, or is there a deeper, more subtle truth to be found here? To be sure, the labor negotiator and I are not unique. Contradiction seems to inhere in the human social fabric. Anyone searching for clean, simple, and unambiguous solutions to the problems of school quality, religious strife, the environment, affirmative action, homelessness, and a host of other societal problems is in for bitter disappointment. Simple solutions do not exist. Even in a search for guiding principles to live by, one is confronted with contradiction and complexity. “Look before you leap,” but “He who hesitates is lost.” Indeed, Aristotle’s famous prescription for health and longevity, “Moderation in all things,” has its polar opposite in the philosophy of the legendary octogenarian Mae West who quipped, “Too much of anything can be wonderful.”

Among the controversies in education and schooling, perhaps nowhere is contradiction more apparent than in tests and testing. Standardized testing has been a part of the American educational and employment scene for almost 100 years. The recent lead article in Time Magazine’s Oct. 27 issue describing some of the most significant changes in the SAT beginning in 2005 has renewed interest in the long debate over the distinction between scholastic aptitude and academic achievement. The article also underscores this nation’s continued ambivalence toward tests and testing.

We are told by its defenders that the SAT is a superb measure of academic promise, but its detractors insist that it is next to useless in helping colleges and universities select their entering class. Test-driven accountability systems have been criticized as counter-productive, and praised as the best solution yet to failing schools. Teachers insist that externally imposed standardized tests distort instruction, but public officials and policy makers maintain that well-constructed, curriculum-related examinations are the only reliable and valid alternative to inflated grades. Commercial coaching schools, not to mention students and their parents, insist that coaching on admissions tests is highly effective and can raise students’ scores by hundreds of points; but test developers maintain that coaching results in only minimal score gains over and above regular instruction in school. Their defenders insist that certification and licensure tests ensure standards of quality and protect the public from incompetent practitioners, but critics insist that performance on such tests is unrelated to professional success and competence. And perhaps most controversial of all, test critics insist that standardized tests are culturally biased against minorities and the poor, while test developers insist that their tests fairly reflect genuine differences in academic preparedness that are the result of unequal educational opportunity.

Can any virtue be found in such a morass of contradictions and partial truths? With respect to test bias at least, and perhaps in other controversies as well, I believe so. In telling two different stories to management and to his constituency, the labor leader was attempting to get an agreement, to drive both parties toward each other. In telling different stories to test developers and to African American students and their parents, I was attempting to get both parties on the same page, and to induce in both a certain tension, a sense that they could, in fact, be wrong.

Just as an easy complacency on the part of test developers and users is to be discouraged,

so also is a defeatist conviction on the part of students that their future is foreclosed, their educational aspirations doomed by implacably biased tests that cannot be mastered, even through hard work and study.

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