

Professors Who Profess

Making a Difference as Scholar-Activists

By Alfie Kohn

The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum – even encourage the more critical and dissident views. That gives people the sense that there's free thinking going on, while all the time the presuppositions of the system are being reinforced by the limits put on the range of the debate.

— Noam Chomsky (1998)

It is still disturbingly common to witness what the sociologist Alvin Gouldner (1973, 24) once referred to as the “vain ritual of moral neutrality.” The assumption that it is possible, or even obligatory, to avoid taking a moral stand in one's work is partly due to the persistent and rather desperate attempt of many social scientists to align themselves with the natural sciences and snub the humanities, which are regarded as soft, subjective, and less substantive. This alliance manifests itself in different ways, ranging from the belief that everything can (and should) be reduced to numbers, to the current fashion for supporting certain pedagogical practices by certifying them as “brain-based.” The attempt to bask in the reflected glory of the hard sciences helps to explain why many professors refuse to profess. After all, values are tantamount to biases, something to be excluded or denied. The scientist's job is simply to discover.

But a number of critics over the last century have contended that it is futile, and therefore disingenuous, to pretend that social science can ever be value-free. Some have noted that there are political consequences to that charade: when you take pains to avoid making a value judgment, you end up tacitly accepting the values of the status quo. “Research rooted in the dominant values of the society is less likely to be questioned about its scientific objectivity and yet more likely to suffer from the lack of it,” observed Herbert Kelman (1968, 72).

Thus, it is seen as perfectly acceptable to ask whether a given educational policy (say, single-sex schooling) succeeds in encouraging more girls to choose careers in fields that have traditionally been dominated by men. But what would we make of a study that asked how successful an intervention has been in encouraging more boys to choose to be nurses, or preschool teachers, or full-time parents? (see Noddings, 2002, 57). The latter project is more likely to be dismissed as an attempt to further someone's ideological agenda, but only because the values embedded in the former project are more widely shared.

Other examples aren't hard to find. Some years ago, after I gave a talk about how students can be

helped to care about others, a woman rose to inform me, rather heatedly, that she doesn't send her child to school to "learn to be nice." That, she declared, would be "social engineering." But a moment later she added that her child ought to be taught to respect authority. The moral here is that whether one is thought to be engaged in social engineering (or in value-laden research) is determined to a large extent by the particular values in question.

These days many of the talks I give at conferences are about the harmful effects of the Tougher Standards movement, and a number of conference organizers have made a point of "balancing" my presentation by inviting another speaker who supports the conventional wisdom about the need to demand accountability, raise scores, and so on. (Alternatively, I am sometimes asked if I will participate in a debate on the topic so that attendees "can hear both sides.") Yet I am unaware of any organizations that feel the same obligation to provide equal time to the dissident view after inviting a keynote speaker who supports standards and testing. Indeed, mainstream education groups regularly hold entire conferences devoted to the question of how to implement standards-based reform without a single presenter who inquires whether this is a good idea.

Hidden Values

The same general point can be made by scrutinizing favored concepts in educational research. Consider the idea of withitness, the rather cute term coined by Jacob Kounin to denote a teacher who not only is attentive to what students are doing but lets them know she is aware of what's going on. Such teachers were shown to be more effective than their (withoutit?) colleagues. But what does it mean in this context to be "effective"? To Kounin (1970), it meant getting "conformity and obedience"; it meant students didn't do whatever was defined as "deviant" and they kept busy at "the assigned work." Now, if a good classroom is one where students simply do what they're told, it shouldn't be surprising that this is more likely to happen when teachers make it clear they can quickly spot noncompliance. By the same token, if a good society was defined as one where citizens obeyed every governmental decree, then scholars might be able to adduce scientific evidence that the most "effective" leader was one who resembled Orwell's Big Brother.

Come to think of it, "Orwellian" is not a bad description for another common educational construct: curriculum alignment, which, at least in its current usage, signifies that what teachers do in the classroom should be made to coincide with something else - usually a test or a list of standards mandated by the state. Those who are reminded of the need for such alignment are actually being exhorted to teach certain material (or teach it in a certain way) not because this enriches students' understanding, or responds to their interests, or is consistent with good research, but simply because someone in power demanded that they do so. "Alignment" is generally not about improvement but about conformity. (From a pedagogical perspective, I have argued elsewhere, the only thing worse than tests that aren't aligned to the standards are tests that are aligned to the standards. The former is silly because it is inefficient, while the latter is dangerous precisely because it is efficient . . . at accomplishing a dubious goal [Kohn 2001].)

In short, what stands out about many concepts in our field is the way certain values hide behind the appearance of neutral scholarship.

Erroneous Assumptions

If any issue has begun to rouse teacher educators and others in the field to take a public stand, it is the practice of high-stakes testing - of children and of teacher candidates. The current accountability fad was not initiated by educators - either teachers or researchers - nor was it initiated for educational reasons. It was imposed on schools by politicians (and corporate executives) for political reasons. Everything about the way the movement has played out can be traced back to

that fact about its birth. The apparent intent of the 1983 Nation at Risk report — which David Berliner and Bruce Biddle (1995), among others, have shown to be based on misleading claims and a tendentious use of data — was to cultivate a distrust of public schooling. The current testing mania is a perfectly logical consequence of that perfectly political document.

(Something rather similar, and in a way even more remarkable, took place in Ontario, Canada. In September 1995, John Snobelen, the Minister of Education and Training for Ontario's newly elected Conservative government, announced to his senior staff that their job was to "invent a crisis" in education. To do so, he added, required "some skill" because the schools were actually in better shape than he had thought. His government proceeded to cite that alleged crisis on a regular basis in order to justify a U.S.-style emphasis on standardized testing and accountability. That the crisis was created rather than discovered is a fact known only because a videotape of Snobelen's speech was leaked to the press.)

When I am asked by reporters how we are supposed to hold schools accountable if not by standardized tests, I always pause before describing alternative assessments to explore the premise of the question. We have an obligation, I think, to refuse to accept the debate as it has been framed for us. We need to ask: What is the source of this fierce, frantic demand for accountability? How accurate are the assumptions that underlie it? Who benefits and who loses when this becomes our primary focus?

Are these questions value-laden? Absolutely — as is the question about how we can best hold schools accountable. It's just that the latter inquiry is more common these days, and seemingly more straightforward, so we don't notice the values that inform it.

Against Test Scores as Measures

The next question, then, must be: How can we make a difference? To begin with, we have to acknowledge that conducting and publishing research is not sufficient. Exhibit A would probably be the practice of forcing students to repeat a grade, because retention has grown in popularity "during the very time period that research has revealed its negative effects on those retained" (Natriello 1998, 15). Nevertheless, there are ways that researchers can maximize their impact on public policy. First, they can make more of an effort to publicize their findings and those of their colleagues, using their credibility as experts to speak up at local gatherings (such as school board meetings), write op-eds for newspapers, meet with legislators and education reporters, and so forth. The people who crusade for "accountability" do not, as a rule, subscribe to the American Educational Research Journal, so the findings published there will not have an appreciable impact on policy until they are communicated to other audiences by other means.

(To communicate those findings, of course, requires that we speak and write in a language that is widely understood. Some scholars have slipped so far into the stylized talk — excuse me, discourse — of academia that important ideas are rendered virtually incomprehensible to most people. Because it sometimes seems that scholarship is valued by other academics in direct proportion to its inaccessibility,* some individuals may have an instinctive aversion to writing in simple sentences even if they could remember how to do so. The reality is that we contribute usefully to a discussion about testing when we explain clearly why higher scores do not necessarily signal better learning. We do not contribute usefully when we ramble on to a general audience about point-biserial correlations — or, for that matter, about liberatory praxis.)

A constructive effect on real-world policies depends not only on how findings are described but also on how research is conducted in the first place. This comprises not only which topics are selected for investigation, but also how a study is designed, and specifically, what will be the dependent

variables. Consider an investigation of the effects of teacher certification. It's understandable that one might be tempted to ask whether certification affects students' scores on standardized tests. Even someone who has his doubts about the value of these tests might reason that many people place stock in those scores and it can be persuasive to show that a given practice has the effect of raising them. But there are long-term consequences to that choice. I believe we should hesitate not only before conducting studies, but even before citing studies, that purport to justify practices we may happen to support - or to indict practices we may oppose — on the basis of their effect on standardized tests results.

I say this for two reasons. First, these tests measure what matters least - or, if you prefer Ralph Tyler's phrase, they give "small answers to small questions." Indeed, such tests are so fundamentally flawed that advocating a given intervention solely because it helps students do better on those tests is not rational. To put it another way, if all one can say in support of a policy or practice (for example, one of those scripted reading programs) is that it has a positive effect on standardized test results, then one has not yet made a persuasive argument in its behalf. This is particularly true of norm-referenced tests, like the Stanfords, Iowas, or Terra Novas, which were designed to maximize response variance - that is, to create a broad range of scores for the purpose of sorting students efficiently - rather than to gauge whether a given teaching strategy was effective. Such tests are not merely inappropriate as a strategy to change teaching (that is, as a high-stakes accountability tool) but also problematic when employed to measure teaching. It is not merely a matter of how these tests are used but how they are constructed; some elements of their design raise questions about both applications.

Second, every time a study is published - particularly in a reputable journal or by a reputable researcher — that uses standardized test scores as the primary dependent variable, those tests gain further legitimacy. If we are not keen on bolstering their reputation and perpetuating their use in schools, we would want to avoid relying on them even in the course of pursuing other objectives and investigating other topics. For example, although I have grave concerns about the extent to which voucher programs help most students (to say nothing about how they undermine public schooling and subsidize religion), I would not try to make this case by citing evidence that these programs fail to raise test scores.

Researchers who understand the dimensions of the threat posed by standardized testing might want to consider (1) using other measures of achievement instead, (2) reinforcing the message that test scores are a poor indicator of student learning by explaining in each study why they are not being used, and (3) looking at outcomes other than achievement. Among the possibilities that come to mind here is the construct sometimes known as continuing motivation to learn.

This outcome merits attention in itself, not merely in the context of looking for alternatives to test scores. One might go so far as to say that a study in educational psychology is incomplete if it does not consider the impact of its independent variable(s) on how students come to regard what they're doing. Dewey (1916, 100) famously said that the goal of education is more education: the point is not just to fill students with facts and skills but to nourish their curiosity and disposition to learn. Nor is this view confined to theorists: many classroom teachers, asked to specify their long-term goals for students, instantly respond with the phrase "lifelong learners. "

Forget the test scores. Do smaller classes make kids more likely to enjoy the process of figuring things out? Does a given approach to reading instruction have an effect on whether children pick up books on their own? How do students in bilingual programs feel about school? Even people who regard academic performance as the educational holy grail will have to concede that interest (intrinsic motivation) is a uniquely powerful predictor of achievement. But surely anyone who views interest as an end, not merely a means, ought to be doing research that reflects that conviction.

Teaching Future Educators

Finally, in addition to speaking to the general public about research and reflecting on the design of that research, there is the question of how future teachers are taught. Does that process consist of socializing students to deal with reality as they find it, to accept and perpetuate the status quo, to try to succeed within given parameters? Or are students encouraged to ask radical questions, those that get to the root of the issue? For example, are they more likely to ask how best to raise standardized test scores, or to step back and ask whether such tests need to be used at all?

Why are there Methods courses in schools of education, but no Goals courses? What are our long-term objectives for future educators? Presumably all of us want them to enter the classroom with a set of skills, with knowledge about their subject matter, with a growing competence at (and passion for) teaching itself. But perhaps they also need to develop - or at least avoid losing - a sense of outrage when outrage is required by the situation in which they find themselves. Students may need to hear about different theories of education, but they also need what Hemingway called a crap detector. And perhaps they also ought to acquire a collaborative orientation so that when they are told to hand out worksheets, or run lecture-based and textbook-driven lessons, or spend time giving kids practice tests, their first instinct will be to reach out to their colleagues, to organize, to say, "We must not let this pass." I hope the next generation of teachers emerges from the university secure in the belief that one can and must fight what is wrong, rather than being inclined to put their heads down and hope it will go away by itself. Do schools of education accomplish these goals - and, if not, what can we do to change that state of affairs?

Of course, short of helping students to oppose bad policies, it would be an improvement just to have them work to minimize the damage. In either case, though, they first must understand that these policies are in fact damaging. And that, in turn, requires them to understand that their ultimate obligation is not to raise scores, not to maintain order, not to please administrators, but to do what is best for children. Do preservice programs teach this, emphasize this, every day?

Some of what I am urging may require that teacher educators look at their own teaching. It is not uncommon to find university instructors who see themselves as critical thinkers, progressive and even radical critics of the status quo, but who rely on traditional pedagogical methods to transmit these ideas. Some of their courses are done to, rather than designed with, students - with syllabuses completed before the course has even begun. Some of these instructors proceed largely by lecturing, by fishing for the "right" answers during discussions, even by giving grades. And that is the chief lesson their students will take away: not the explicit content of the course, but the idea that classrooms are places where students listen and memorize facts and figure out how to snag a good mark. (This is precisely parallel to what readers will take away from a study showing that a given intervention produces higher test scores: not merely the explicit finding but the idea that test scores are a reasonable measure of learning.) In both cases, we can do better - provided that we are unafraid of embracing certain values, provided that we are ready to take a stand.

* Here is Ibsen in *Peer Gynt*: "He is a remarkably learned man: Almost all that he says is beyond understanding."

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