

TESTING – THE VERB

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The text below is a translation by Google (roughly checked by me) of a column I wrote for a special issue devoted to assessment of a Dutch journal for secondary school teachers. [<https://van12tot18.nl/>] I argue that the verb 'to test' should be understood as an ordinary verb that points out an everyday aspect of our behavior. Unfortunately, we have started to isolate 'testing' in education and have attributed the activity unilaterally to the teacher, who therefore becomes an examiner. The result: teachers are burdened with power – and not even their own power.

A chef who makes a sauce constantly tastes and smells how the sauce progresses during cooking. A sailor who wants to stay on course constantly keeps an eye on things and continuously adjusts his actions. When people work together the same thing happens. Lift a cupboard up the stairs together. You constantly pay attention to yourself and others, and together you will get things moving in the right direction. For the chef preparing a sauce, for the sailor staying the course, testing – the verb – is a completely integral and iterative part of what they do.

People are reflective beings. We relate to our own and each other's behavior, make sense of it, anticipate it, respond to it and correct ourselves and each other. The feedback loop is an integral part of every human interaction. This is no different in education. Teaching a lesson is not possible without continuous feedback from the receiving party, just as receiving the lesson is not possible without continuous feedback from the teaching party. But this self-evident reflective approach to our own and each other's behavior has acquired a special, distorted character in education. The fact that we hardly experience this distortion is the result of the institutionalization that has taken place in education and that has deeply embedded itself in what we have come to take for granted. The isolation of testing is an outgrowth of this institutionalization par excellence, which, if you think about it seriously, is actually too crazy for words.

We usually know what we are doing. The sauce progresses steadily because the cook knows what he is doing when he adds some cinnamon, cream or binder. When they lift a cupboard up the stairs, the lifters know what they are doing: step by step, without causing damage to the cupboard, the stairs and each other. People who do something know what they are doing – at least under one description, as philosophers call it. The student who struggles in vain with an arithmetic problem also knows what he is doing: he is trying to be a student, someone who does arithmetic, or at least who works in his arithmetic notebook, someone who spends time in the classroom and perhaps he hopes that for now the teacher overlooks him. Virtually all growth, development and learning takes place in individuals who are aware of what they are doing. A two-year-old toddler who eats spaghetti knows he is eating spaghetti even though his face is bright red and most of the spaghetti is on the floor. A child who tries to write her own name in illegible handwriting knows what she is doing. She has to, for the simple reason that otherwise she would not be able to complete the act of writing at all.

People who work together also always know what they are doing in at least one way. And because they work together, they continually test not only their own behavior, but also that of others. Testing is an integral part of all human actions. But in our education we regard students as people with a cognitive deficit. They do not know something, or not yet, and therefore they cannot do something, at least not independently, without the watchful eye of

the teacher. What exactly is the reason for this ignorance among students? Is it in the preparation of the action, in the anticipation, the implementation, the reflection, the evaluation, the improvement? The clear distinction in capacities implies that there is apparently a specific ignorance localized in testing. After all, the teacher tests the student. It is never the other way around. The cognitive deficit of students apparently lies exactly there: they do not know how to test.

The interaction between students and teachers can take many forms. Students and teachers can influence each other in education. They can learn from each other. They can explain something to each other. They can correct each other. They can develop themselves and even help each other develop. But apparently they can't test each other. When it comes to testing, the hierarchy is unrelenting. The teacher tests and the student is tested. We seem to believe it cannot be the other way around. Students apparently do not know how they should test. When it comes to testing, we seem to believe the authority is exclusively unilateral. Ultimately, there is an absolute hierarchy within this. But is this actually true? Can you do something while at the same time not being able to test what you do? Why has testing become so separate in educational practice? Testing is making a judgement, a judgment about the quality of an action, or, possibly, about the quality of the underlying knowledge that manifests itself in an action.

Testing is an integral part of improving coordination and cooperation. And the partners can decide jointly, but also unilaterally, and even contradictorily, that the judgment of one is more authoritative than that of the other. There can only be one captain on a sailboat. And there is only one examiner in the class. The word examiner makes visible the tension that has made the role of the teacher so difficult in current education. In a class there is only one examiner, one person who is the only person authorized to assess, test and summatively test the others. At the same time, every teacher knows that this is not true. Testing, which has become detached from the learning process, which has become isolated from the actions of developing young people, is not at all in the hands of one examiner. Summative testing must primarily realize its value outside the learning process. Summative testing is apparently of value for all kinds of important decisions outside the classroom, in society. Summative assessment is not done for the learning process, but for the civil impact it has outside the school.

After all, parents respond to those test results, just like the school management and the inspectorate. This brings all kinds of power into the classroom. As a result, the teacher is no longer able to test in a way that fits the learning and development processes that take place in the classroom. Teachers have become executors, examiners, detached from the everyday interaction with their students, a plaything of external forces, desperately searching for the flow of a good lesson in which they are lifted together with their students. Teachers are forced to split in two. They are a teacher, someone who realizes lessons in good collaboration with the students: human interaction in which everyone constantly tests each other to make the collaboration successful, to keep development and learning going, to monitor, evaluate and improve everyone's behavior. But they are also an examiner, someone who has been pulled out of the primary process, who takes a distance, who halts the continuous development process and makes judgments - judgments that serve the powers that be, that shape and maintain them. It is high time that we return testing to our everyday actions, that we make it an integral and iterative part of our interactions with each other. That makes us all better. And let's also remove final decisions from education - because that is what testing becomes when it becomes summative, when it becomes a matter of examining. Final, all-or-nothing decisions have no place in education. Power has no place in a healthy educational climate.