

Teaching – Testing Congruency. Is standardised testing the answer?

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I. Introduction

How would you react if I asked you to play Chinese checkers (which you had never been taught) with me and your future career depended on it? What would you think if you were being trained in draughts and on competition day you discover that the game to play is chess?

I am certain that in either case, you would think it totally unfair and unjust. Very often, unfortunately, something very similar happens in our classrooms. In the current debate about nation wide educational restructuring, perhaps no issue is more central than that of student assessment and testing and its congruency with the syllabus and the actual teaching that takes place in the classroom. Although testing is primarily an outcome-measuring device, it cannot be separated from the syllabus and the actual teaching.

Today a new perspective (and a new education buzz phrase) is emerging. It's called **curriculum alignment**, and it means teaching knowledge and skills that are assessed by tests designed largely around academic standards set by an outsider.

Curriculum Alignment is the degree to which the written, taught, and tested curriculum is congruent. It is also the extent to which the curriculum is used to guide decisions about materials, textbooks, staff development, and facilities. If there is alignment of the curriculum, there is agreement, continuity, and connectedness, horizontally and vertically.

Vertical alignment refers to agreement throughout the 3 or 4 year course system; horizontal alignment refers to agreement within a grade level or course or year.

Better alignment, proponents argue, will make better schools. And indeed, ignoring the link between what is taught in the

classroom and what is tested can have painful consequences. In America, principals can lose their jobs if their schools' standardized test scores do not measure up; superintendents can be fired and school boards can be dissolved if districts perform poorly.

II. Achieving curriculum alignment

Chronologically we have the following three aspects: curriculum design, then class room teaching, and last but not least testing and correction.

1. Syllabus

A user-friendly syllabus is one worded in terms of **learning targets**, that is observable, measurable and hopefully re-usable performance objectives, explicitly stating the goals set by the designers and / or teachers and/or students (with teacher support) for achieving mastery of the required course objectives.

Educational standards which specify what students should know and be able to do should be clearly defined before assessment procedures and exercises are developed. For assessment information to be valid and useful, assessment must be based on a consensus definition of what students are expected to learn, and the expected level of performance, at various developmental stages. Such standards, which might also be called **intellectual competencies**, are not discrete pieces of information or isolated skills, but important abilities, such as the ability to solve various kinds of problems or to apply knowledge appropriately.

In the 1960s, American educational psychologist Robert F. Mager proposed a rigorous, objectives-based approach to the design of teaching materials — that behavioural objectives (**learning outcomes**) should be written in clear, unambiguous terms and should include three basic elements:

1. State the **required terminal/end behaviour** (i.e., what the student should be able to **do** at the end of the learning experience).
2. State the **conditions or constraints** under which this behaviour is to be exhibited.
3. Indicate clearly the **minimum standard of performance** considered acceptable.

For example: The student should be able to write a composition (element 1) of about 250 words in one hour without any outside help (element 2) with less than 5 mistakes (element 3). Over time, it became customary to define only the required end behaviour, with the specification of the conditions and minimum standard of performance generally being omitted. Recently, however, there has been a strong return to the Magellan approach.

2. Teaching – Testing Congruency

We shall see these two aspects together, namely **what** is taught and the **context** or environment in which it is taught.

a) Content Alignment

The first aspect concerns **WHAT TO TEACH**, in terms of content and degree of difficulty, and therefore what to test.

Content alignment, as it is known, refers to the congruency between the written curriculum and the topics that are used for developing the written curriculum. Content alignment answers the question of **what to teach**, and therefore **what to test**.

The content is to be defined as exhaustively as possible. In Morocco for example, they have set the list of lexical items on which the baccalaureat paper is set. In Algeria, the Ministry of National Education have set an exhaustive list of activities to choose from for the baccalaureat paper. In both cases, the lists represent the threshold levels to teach.

b) Context Alignment

The second aspect, which is more complex, concerns the environment in which the WHAT is taught. It is known as **Context Alignment**.

In order to meet the contextual alignment requirement, teaching strategies must be developed **with the assessment in mind**.

Teachers/ evaluators must do a task analysis of the assessment. The task analysis reveals how the content must be delivered in order for there to be an alignment to the testing situation. In other words, the content must be taught within the context in which it is tested. Without **contextual alignment**, teachers are left to develop teaching strategies that may not align with the actual assessment, thereby reducing the likelihood that students are truly prepared to perform successfully on the assessment instrument.

Context alignment at four levels

Besides and over Content, Teaching – Testing congruency concerns other levels, of which I will mention four.

1. The cognitive level

If your entire teaching has privileged memory, are you fair and just when you ask your students to analyse or evaluate a passage?

If the only questions your students have been exposed to are of the type: **'Who'**, **'when'**, **'where'**, **'describe'**, **'choose'** or **'match'**, are you just and fair when they see in their tests things like **'summarise'**, or **'justify'**, or **'propose an alternative'**?

If, during the teaching phase, the students have been exposed exclusively to reference or factual questions whose answers can be found explicitly in the reading passage, is it fair and just to ask them to read between the lines and infer from the passage when they are being tested?

2. The production level

In teaching as in testing, are the answers expected from the students in both cases

- verbal (answer, justify, describe, etc.) or non verbal (tick, underline, match, etc.)?
- If verbal : are they productive or receptive level (e.g. reorder words, or sentences)?
- open-ended questions or MCQs?
- the wording of instructions familiar to the students?
- In other words students must be tested in types of activities of the same format as and with a wording of instructions similar to those they have been exposed to prior to the tests, during the teaching / learning phase.

3. The skill or mode level

What skills (listening / speaking-listening/ reading / writing) are involved in the teaching / learning phase? Those very skills must be addressed in the testing.

We cannot expect the students to be able to speak if all they have been doing is listen, or write if all they have been doing is read in the teaching / learning phase?

4. The degree of autonomy level

If you have been spoon-feeding them, how can they "feed themselves" on exam day?

If for example your students have never been taught how to make use of context to understand a new word, or to ignore it altogether, how can they do it on exam day?

If they have not been taught self-reliance, they cannot become autonomous on exam day.

III. Four Recommendations

1. Devising appropriate testing tools

The assessment exercises or tasks should be valid and appropriate representations of the standards students are

expected to achieve. A sound assessment system provides information about a full range of **knowledge and abilities** considered valuable and important for students to learn, and therefore requires a variety of assessment methods. Appropriate tools should be designed to measure the most important educational outcomes. Such tools include **portfolios**, open ended questions, extended reading and writing experiences which include rough drafts and revisions, individual and group projects, etc.

Portfolios are collections of student work representing a selection of performance. A portfolio may be a folder containing a student's best

pieces and the student's evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the pieces. It may also contain one or more works-in-progress that illustrate the creation of a product, such as an essay, evolving through various stages of conception, drafting, and revision.

2. CRT: Criterion Referenced Testing and Correcting

CRT is an acronym for criterion-referenced test (assessment based on performance toward a predetermined set of skills/competencies): what are the students going to be tested on? These criteria which are in the head of the evaluator should be made explicit to the students. Students should be encouraged to submit first drafts of their papers for a first evaluation, or re-write annotated tests and submit them for re-correction

3. Introduction of Study Skills

To help students develop valid learning strategies, the introduction of such study skills is highly recommended

- cramming
- effective listening
- learning and remembering

- listening and note taking
- reading strategy
- research papers
- stress management
- test taking skills
- time management
- writing exams

4. Deep Alignment

It refers to narrowing the focus of the objectives in order to achieve greater depth within the content and greater specificity and adherence to the teaching strategies identified within the written curriculum. The desired results are that teaching strategies contain teaching cues that are aligned to the assessments in order that teachers are able to construct meaning for students throughout their lessons. It is only when students have meaningful learning experience that they can transfer learning to new situations. These cues provide good examples that can be used by teachers as they connect the content to the assessment. Teaching the similarities to students, particularly slower or at-risk students, makes it possible for them to begin to make these connections independently so that in a testing situation, they are prepared to attack test items as confident learners. This is also referred to as “pedagogical parallelism”.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, I will turn full cycle to the questions I started with and say, please don't teach hopscotch and test skipping rope. Test what you taught in the context you taught it, or else let other people do the testing for you. My well-considered suggestion is that if tests are standardised, and not written by every teacher for their own classes, we would go a long way towards this congruency that teachers worth their salt have been advocating.

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