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National Center for Fair & Open Testing

Personalized Learning or Continuous Online Testing?

Technology "permits us now to do in nanoseconds things we shouldn't be doing at all."
– Gerald Bracey

Education policymakers and technology providers have joined forces to accelerate a longtime push for "test data-driven" education interventions. Both sectors look to computer-based curricula and data collected with online tests to control classrooms and define educational outcomes.

Though couched in humanistic language about "personalization," such a transformation is leading to even more frequent standardized testing. This narrows and dumbs down instruction to what low-level tests can measure, depresses student engagement, and produces inaccurate indicators of learning.

The Threats

1) Resistance to standardized exam overuse and misuse forced states and districts to take steps to reduce over-testing. **Now the push for frequent online or computer-based testing threatens to reverse this progress.** In addition to annual summative exams, students face more frequent tests, often integrated with instruction.

For example, Tom Vander Ark, former education director at the Gates Foundation and now CEO of Getting Smart, a "learning design firm," touts Curriculum Associates' i-Ready software package (Vander Ark, 2015). CA says its product "combines a valid and reliable growth measure and individualized instruction in a single online product." With i-Ready, so-called "progress monitoring" assessments can be administered as often as every two weeks. For some students, these test results trigger daily i-Ready math and reading lessons. CA claims the combined curriculum and testing help predict and support student success on summative exams at the end of the year (i-Ready, 2013).

2) Instead of schools with trained educators who use their professional expertise to personalize learning for students, these programs **perpetuate standardized, test-driven teaching and learning, now automated for "efficiency."**

For example, Vander Ark claims Edmodo's assessment tool, Snapshot, "allows teachers to easily and frequently administer standards-aligned assessments . . . to help gauge mastery, and, recommends high-quality resources (aligned to specific standards) to help students improve

their mastery." A video demonstration (Edmodo, 2014) shows it delivers conventional multiple-choice tests with bells and whistles that allow teachers to assign specific tests to groups or individuals and then sort the data for "analysis."

3) **Frequent online student assessments require teachers to review copious amounts of data instead of teaching, observing and relating to students.**

For example, Teach to One: Math is a "personalized instructional model for middle school mathematics" developed by New Classrooms Innovation Partners. It advertises an "online teacher portal that provides real-time information about student performance, which is monitored daily against detailed learning progressions that pinpoint a student's location and use algorithms to recommend the best next steps for instruction." This means student learning will be defined by tests.

4) Instead of moving toward truly student-centered learning, where children guided by teachers can choose among topics, materials and books based on their interests and passions (Neill, 2016), **the vision promoted by many education technology vendors and proponents is of students learning material selected by online or computer-based adaptive assessments.**

For example, Vander Ark recommends learning platforms with embedded assessments (e.g., New Classrooms, DreamBox, Realizeit) that promote "personalized learning experiences with continuous performance feedback." He concedes, however, "most of these systems aren't interest-driven" (Vander Ark, 2015). "Personalization" here means proceeding through a canned program, "choosing" among pre-set options.

5) Companies and government agencies are amassing unprecedented amounts of student data through online learning and testing platforms. **There is widespread concern about accessibility of this data to third parties and violations of privacy through data sharing** (Parent Coalition for Student Privacy). Parent groups and others advocate legislation to provide transparency and protect data from misuse. In the meantime, security breaches or data sharing are serious risks.

6) Frequent online testing creates obstacles to opting out as a way to call attention to and protest testing overkill. A robust national opt-out movement created enormous pressure for change**. But a shift to online exams creates new hurdles for parents who want to opt their children out of standardized tests.**

7) After several decades, researchers have seen little positive impact from educational technology (Enyedy, 2014). Meanwhile, **researchers warn of a range of negative consequences from overexposure to technology and screen time.** These include damage to intellectual, physical and emotional development, threats to privacy, and, ironically, increased standardization (PAA, 2016).

What Can Parents, Students and Educators Do?

Education technology proponents are increasingly co-opting and "rebranding" venerable educational terms that predate computer technology, such as "personalized," "competency-based education," even "assessment." Educators, parents and students need to look behind terms to see what the author or company really means.

To fight the onslaught of packaged curriculum-plus-tests as well as personal data collection, parents and educators must learn more about the new ways technology is being used in the classroom. Parents can collectively demand transparency from schools, districts and states, either directly from teachers and administrators or through policy-making bodies such as school boards and education departments.

Parents Across America's report on the dangers of EdTech (2016) suggests six questions parents can ask, including: which devices and programs are being used, how much time children spend on electronic devices, and what kind of data is being collected. Parents should also ask whether assessments are mostly multiple choice, how often they are administered, if some students (e.g., students with disabilities or English learners) are tested more frequently, and who controls the data and how it is being used.

Armed with detailed information, parents can fight back against technology misuse and overuse by demanding limits or prohibitions. Individual parents can request - or demand - that districts not purchase or require these packages and that their child not exceed a maximum amount of screen time per day or week (Wrench in the Gears, 2016). Parents, educators, students and their allies can organize for legislation that bars use of such packages, protects student data, limits screen time, and prohibits the adoption of expensive, unproven education technology. Parents can all demand that their children be allowed to opt out of interim or computerized, embedded tests.

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