



‘HOW CAN I REACH THESE KIDS?’

Reflections on student [dis]engagement and negative washback from assessment in 2017

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In a now mostly forgotten episode of *South Park*, with a title I won't share here, we see Eric Cartman take on the role of a maths teacher in a rough-and-tumble school. In the face of perpetual hardships as a teacher trying to make a difference, Cartman repeatedly asks himself one, pointed question:

‘How can I reach these *kiiids*?’

The episode itself is a parody of the classic 1988 film *Stand and Deliver*, where the balding Jamie Escalante battles to prepare students for their final mathematics exam in a low socio-economic setting. Ultimately, both characters succeed in ‘reaching their kids’ and helping them to find academic success, although in slightly different ways. Acting as an impassioned mentor, Escalante instils in his students the *ganas*, the characteristic of hard work and self-efficacy. Cartman, on the other hand, simply hands his class the answers to their final test. Nevertheless, the core question posed by both the original and the parody (*how can we, as teachers, engage our students in their learning?*) was hugely resonant with me. In fact, it's the one question that keeps me up at night as a developing teacher. And the answers aren't so simple.

I can recall a past Year 11 Senior English lesson, standing high upon a tall, precariously stacked set of chairs. The chairs were a metaphor (like everything is to an English teacher), and I was climbing what I had dubbed *The Bildungsroman Stack*. We were reading *Jasper Jones*, you see, and I was hoping to introduce them to the concept of ‘coming-of-age’. Poignant. Calling out from dizzying heights, I asked my students: *Will I fall? Will I die? Or will my new vantage point give me an insight into the true nature of the world around me?* Far below me, as I looked out into the sea of vaguely confused faces (*is my teacher crazy?*) there was one face that stood starkly in contrast with those around it. What made this face so unique were the vivid, flashing lights that were cast across it, as the student scrolled incessantly through Instagram post, after Instagram post, after Instagram post, after...

I've since recovered from my failed attempt as a stuntman, of course, but have found that every

day I face a similar problem. And to be honest, in that case I was lucky to have only one student disengaged.

What the rising tide of disengaged learners warns us is that while the average student's self-system¹ is able to grapple with the value in the end result of a subject, many are failing to see any value in the journey that would help them find true and meaningful success. To rephrase: most students see the value in completing the ‘thing’ (*If I just write this essay, I'll get a grade and mum will leave me alone*), but don't see any utility in the varied and complex thinking and engagement required for them to do well at the ‘thing’.

This issue of end-point fixation is a symptom of negative washback, and is also manifesting as a result of the seemingly one-way highway to university. Today's students (and parents) are sometimes so single-mindedly obsessed with summative assessments and academic awards that students rarely engage in the learning process. As a result of this approach, many students are disengaged in their coursework until (quite literally) the midnight before a task is due, or an exam is scheduled. In addition, most students don't apply taught skills into assessment contexts, and focus only on writing ‘something’ that vaguely responds to a given task.

The outcomes from this approach are usually lacklustre, and these students usually underperform, but for the most part they pass. The bitter irony of that approach, however, is that from there the cycle continues (but only worse) in two ways:

- **First scenario:** the students who are happy to <just pass> continue to do so by engaging with their learning in a grossly limited capacity, if at all; or

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- **Second scenario:** the students who want to improve become even more dogmatically obsessed with summative assessment tasks, and only make improvements in their ability to write ‘things’, maybe through a haphazard amalgam of google-searched sources. They continue to not engage meaningfully in their learning, or apply taught skills. Some even resort to cheating (Cartman!).

It’s a worrying combination of poor learning habits noticed by many teachers around the world. I recently spoke to a teacher of English and Literature from the U.S. about her thoughts on the biggest issue in American education. Here is an abridged version of her frustrated reflection:

Urgh. Don’t get me started on the American education system! Despite the whole “No Child Left Behind” (bullshit) initiative, kids [continue to advance through to graduation] even though they are unprepared – some kids can’t even write a coherent sentence. [The] biggest issue is that kids aren’t held accountable for anything... ‘I need more time to finish this paper because I wasn’t feeling well this weekend.’ ‘Um, no, you had 2 months to do this paper.’ Then the parents start making excuses for their children instead of actually teaching them to deal with their issues and take responsibility. It’s infuriating. How will these kids be able to function in society if they are coddled every step of the way?

It’s like you can almost hear her keyboard clicking in frustration all the way from California. However, in staffroom conversations, in the wider community, and in the media, the same sentiments are shared about an endemic trend on the rise. Commentators make varied statements: *kids these days lack motivation, they lack resilience, they’re not accountable enough, they’re too cotton-wooled, they’re lazy...* You get the picture. At the heart of these frequently uttered laments, though, is a common problem. Today, more and more students aren’t personally engaged or intrinsically invested in their learning, and it’s only getting worse.

These problems of negative washback from assessment and waning student engagement worry me the most as a young teacher. I’ve poured my heart and my soul into teaching in the early stages of my career, and have spent nearly every night awake, fretting over this-and-that approach to my pedagogy. With time, I’ve found it doesn’t matter if I teach like John Keating in *Dead Poet’s Society*, or the boring roll-marker from *Bueller’s Day Off*. It doesn’t matter if I’m teaching them to read Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, or the back of a cereal box. Ultimately, the efficacy of a teacher can only extend so far if the students aren’t *themselves* motivated and invested in the learning process. Ultimately, nothing will change if the only thing on a student’s mind is the end result (a letter on their report card), and not the process (the rich learning that should occur within a classroom).

As English teachers, especially those new to the profession, we face an uphill battle. NAPLAN writing scores are down, external examinations are back in, and the workforce our students are going to find themselves in requires a level of engagement and elasticity that students are increasingly failing to demonstrate. With those storms brewing in the distance, what frightens me as I look ahead to ~40 years as an educator is that every major conversation on improving educational outcomes and overhauling the curriculum is based on a false assumption: that every student actually *cares* about their learning, or that every student actually *wants* to improve their outcomes. And what if they don’t? Will we simply hand them the answers to the test?

This isn’t something that should be opined over endlessly in staffrooms, nor is it a problem too far gone. This is a problem that we, as teachers, have to solve. The first question we must ask as we look ahead to the future is not, ‘How can we prepare students for 2030?’ but, ‘How can we help students *care*?’

Because the simple truth is: most don’t.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Marzano, R. (2001). Designing a New Taxonomy of Educational Objectives. Experts in Assessment. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED447161>