A Chat with Professor Madeline Hunter

First we are told by Rousseau in his book Emile that "To lose time is to gain time" and that was in the 16th century. Today we are told in another book that "To teach less is to teach more." Like Rousseau's statement "Less is more" sounds conflicting. How can one teach less yet teach more? How can one lose time to gain time? The master teacher, Professor Hunter explained it thus:

If a student knows something really well, it will transfer more accurately and more predictably into a new situation. Therefore it is better to teach one thing really well so that the student can use it all his life than it is to cover two or three things that the student doesn't understand and as a result that information will not transfer.

But what about the syllabus? We have a syllabus to cover and we are accountable for that, argued the interviewer. Covering the syllabus is a serious business to many teachers and many are ever so concerned that they have not covered all that is in the syllabus. The wise lady looked at the persistent Singaporean and said:

But if a student doesn't learn it, what good has covering the syllabus done? We act as if when the syllabus is covered, everybody knows everything in it. Yet a lot of students don't. We can find that out in reading or vocabulary. If you teach 5 words that a student can learn in a meaning loaded sentence and use about himself, that student will use those words for the rest of his life. On the other hand, if you make a student memorize the definitions of 20 words, then after the student passes the test he will forget the words and they will never be used again. That's why teaching less is teaching more.

The interviewer persisted. "Yes, but in Singapore we have examinations - major examinations - and this is an exam-oriented society. If you teach less, wouldn't you be short-changing students? Anyway, would you say that examinations force us to narrow the curriculum?" This time the Professor replied:

No way. The thing about exams is that we are finding out what students don't know. So when we teach something really well, that's going to be remembered longer and transferred more accurately to new situations rather than just running through it, cramming for a test - and forgetting it. The whole purpose of assessments or examinations is to help a student recognise what he knows and what he doesn't.

Not one to keep quiet, interviewer interrupted. "But we have external examinations. A child takes about 4 external examinations from Primary 1 to JC 2. External exams are big issues which every school has to grapple with. What are your views about such examinations?" The master teacher smiled and said:

There's nothing wrong about that if they are used for the purposes intended. Your "O" level examination spreads students out. It tells you who are your best students, who are your weaker ones and that's something you may need to know. But it doesn't help a teacher know what she should be teaching that student tomorrow morning. It's perfectly okay to have...
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external examinations. In the States we have entrance examinations. We even have examinations for doctoral students.

The interviewer persisted, "Many teachers worry about the final examinations every year, they want their students to do well. How can we ensure that students are learning, i.e., they are not merely cramming and after the exams everything is forgotten?" She lighted up and said:

The way to do that is by increasing skills in teaching - the only way to do that. Doesn't matter how you organise, how you test etc. It depends on one factor - how skilled that teacher is in teaching. That is the critical element and we have done everything else to change the skill of the teacher. In fact within the last 20 years, we have been looking at the process of teaching and saying that if a teacher does this or that, kids can learn more. For example, if a teacher was signalling during teaching, then the teacher stops and clears up the confusion right there and then. No kid can then pretend they know and become more confused. The teacher clears it up there and then through signalling or through a written test.

(Note: signalling - students make signs to the teacher to indicate whether they understand, e.g., thumbs up to show that they understand. Or the teacher could give a problem sum and students indicate whether the process involves division or subtraction. Signs or signals are previously agreed upon. The aim is for students to send periodic messages to teachers about how well they are understanding.)

But we have over tested children. This is why we strongly recommend that all the way in his teaching, a teacher does dip sticking - seeing that there is enough knowledge before going on and that means that teachers must have a good idea of students also.

(Note: Dip Sticking is to ask questions around the class, i.e., to pick on pupils all over and asking lots of questions to check for understanding. The aim is to monitor continuously whether students understand.)

The interviewer persisted. Another issue we have in Singapore is we use examination scores to rank schools. Schools are ranked based on their "O" level scores. What are your views on this? The master teacher replied instantly:

We do that for university entrance examinations too. Our scholastic aptitude tests (SAT) do the same kind of thing. That's okay if you want to rank people and spread them out. If you say school A outperforms school B, does it tell you that the teaching in school A is better? Students from school A could be from professional families, affluent families and students from school B from manual labour homes and it doesn't tell you how good a job teachers are doing. School B teachers might be doing a better job at teaching. Often times very bright children learn in spite of what you are doing. In a way it's like saying if an affluent child gets a really good breakfast and dinner, if he has a poor lunch it doesn't make any difference. The poverty child who has a poor breakfast and a very poor dinner, if he gets a very good lunch, that will help him close that gap.

"Still on the subject of assessment," the interviewer droned on, "in your talks you mentioned authentic assessments. Can you tell us a bit more?"

We are really assessing what a student has learned, what he is ready to learn next rather than just testing him on much lower level things. We are finding out that standardized tests measure very accurately what they were designed to measure but they were designed to measure where the child fits with the group that's been normed, in other words a comparison group. If a student meets the comparison group, that's fine. However standardized tests were used for things they were never intended. It's
fine to compare programmes of school district A with B and so forth but as far as knowing what to teach a particular student tomorrow morning, they are not good for that. A criterion referenced test often replaces them because in a criterion referenced test, it tells you what a student can do with a particular objective or chore, e.g., can he write a persuasive essay?

Authentic assessment is a different thing. It is a timed thing where presence or absence of success doesn't depend on the fatal moment, e.g., we would have a student write a persuasive essay that gives a baseline, say to persuade his teachers not to give him so much homework.

Then you would teach persuasive essays where the criterion measures are:

- Can a student present a point of view?
- Can a student support it with objective evidence, not just opinions?
- Did the student anticipate a counter point of view?
- Was it all presented in a cogent argument with an introduction and a concluding paragraph?

In other words we can differentiate between the child who says "I don't think we should have so much homework, I don't like it" to one who presents a persuasive argument about other kinds of important things in life that he had to give up and so forth.

Authentic assessments contain actual products of the child's work. There are 3 ways of knowing:
1. Can you generate the knowledge, skills, product, procedure whatever it is?
2. Can you recognise a correct one when you see it?
3. How long does it take for relearning?

So we are not only measuring recognition which standard achievement test has been measuring but the ability to generate views yourself. The advantage is that it gives you measurements over time from the beginning to the middle to the end of learning. Give us check points in between rather than deciding on the fate of students in one day where he may have been sick or where he does not produce his typical performance.

The interviewer went on, "How does this authentic assessment work? That is, do teachers grade all the work, is it like continuous assessments?" The professor was quick to reply:

Yes, but you select what you put in the portfolio. The teacher and the student select what to put in. One student's portfolio could be different from that of another. One who is a visual learner will have diagrams etc and the other may have an essay.

What is a portfolio?

A portfolio is a collection of student's generated work, e.g., an essay can be in a portfolio, a page of maths and so on. A portfolio is basically to help the student and his teachers assess learning. A student has to ask himself "What have I learnt? What am I ready to learn?" This is more effective than for a student to say I'm an A or a B student. Because if we say we are an A student and we are good but good in what? Portfolios say I'm very good in this, here's something I need to improve. Yes, this is an area that I'm not so good in, but by and large I'm a good student.

In fact we have students very involved in selecting materials for their portfolios and often times determining what it is to be measured. What would be a fair measure of their learning? The students become very involved in their learning rather than becoming passive recipients.

Puzzled, the interviewer asked, "Does this form of testing assess student's academic achievement..."
reliably?"

Depends on what is selected. Like every other test it depends on how it is done. You can get the best achievement test in the world and you have people teaching to the test...anything is only as valid as the way it was done.

We are still not satisfied. Portfolios are now still randomly assembled. We are just learning what are the essentials in portfolios and what aren't. It's an important learning, for it's causing teachers to say what evidence would there be that this child can now do well, something that he couldn't do before. There is now objective evidence. The problem of portfolio is the selection of evidence. What selection of evidence to show that the person is wanting of one thing or another.

How does one establish standards in portfolio assessments then?

We are in the process if establishing standards. We don't have them. Right now standards are being developed by people but we don't have a blanket standard yet. Portfolio is a very, very good idea but remember when they first built the U2, the first one crashed. We don't give up. We are working on it.

How do you ensure objective assessment in portfolios?

Create a protocol such as: Is the student expressing a point of view in support of the data? Is the student anticipating counter arguments and either deluding them or eliminating them. We establish a protocol for it. Is the student using a variety of sentence pattern? Is he using descriptive words and such likes.

If we were to use portfolios in Singapore, how then do we compare schools?

If you create standard portfolios, it's just as comparable as anything else. At the moment we are comparing schools where the teachers are teaching very differently and we seem to be satisfied about that. We are also comparing schools where the bulk of the teachers are first year teachers with another where the teachers are very experienced and that doesn't seem to bother us.

Remember, portfolios are not the be all and end all. We are not eliminating other kinds of testing. We are now teaching for transfer over and beyond just understanding. Can students use it in new situations? This is the essence of thinking. We want kids to think. They can't think unless they transfer. We want kids to generate responses.

Because there is such a variety of presentation, how does the teacher grade them?

The issue is "Does it demonstrate understanding?" Can you grade a poem? Can you grade a sonnet? Now poems, sonnets are all different but the teacher can grade them. Does it have critical attributes of a sonnet etc. In a doctorate, people don't do all the same dissertation but we can still grade them. We can pass them or pass them with Honours.

The idea that everything has to be identical doesn't hold. For instance, we both go for a medical check-up and we have different blood pressure, different weights and so forth but we are both certified healthy. The same doctor judged that we are both healthy but we don't have identical health records.

Yes, indeed the issue in this day and age is understanding and transfer. Students may score in PSLE, O or A level exams, but can they transfer? With that I hope we understand why covering the syllabus may not be all that crucial for often in our bid to cover the syllabus, we actually "covered" it for many of our weaker students. There is thus a lot of wise adage in these words "Less is More."

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