

Hegemony Cricket: Standardized Testing and You!

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In this article, Hummels and Riggert-Kieffer fuse the genres of dystopian narrative and research focused on standardized testing. This hybrid article claims that standardized testing reduces students to easy-to-manage numbers using a dystopic narrative to show the dangers of testing taken to its powerful limits.

Preface

The article you are about to read is a fusion of research and dystopian narrative. Dystopian worlds are often defined in terms of the *opposite* of utopia, amazing worlds where nothing unpleasant happens. In the dark universe of dystopian narratives, the elements of power, communication, and the individual are often included. The focus on power and how it is exerted is a central theme in dystopic narratives where the consequences of absolute power are often explored (Heinz & Ostry, 2003). *The Hunger Games*, which features an all-powerful capital, is an example of a dystopian novel and a blockbuster movie, as is *Fahrenheit 451*, a novel and movie featuring firefighters who start fires to destroy books, which are illegal commodities. Within the dystopic setting of this narrative, standardized testing plays a prominent and powerful role. You might be asking yourself why standardized testing matters to you. Maybe you have taken the ACT or SAT as an admissions requirement for college. And if you are planning to attend graduate school, you will likely take the GRE. The writing you will complete, which could determine the school you attend, will be assessed by a company like Educational Testing

Service (ETS). Your carefully written response will be graded in a process Todd Farley (2009), a former ETS employee describes as follows: “From my first day in the standardized testing industry until my last, I have watched the open-ended questions on large-scale assessments be scored by temporary employees who could be described as uninterested or unintelligent, apathetic or unemployable” (p. 225). Did you realize that the essay you wrote or will write was or will be scored by someone who probably spent less than two minutes assessing your work and had no interest in the outcome? Do you think these folks care about your scores when they have hundreds of essays to read every day? Still, standardized test scores determine, in part, admissions and scholarships, but what do they really tell us? Farley suggests, “. . . the business I have worked in is less a precise tool to assess students’ exact abilities than just a lucrative means to make an indefinite and indistinct generalization about them” (p. 241). Farley continues, “The idea standardized testing can make any sort of fine distinction about students—a very particular and specific commentary on their individual skills and abilities that a classroom teacher was unable to make—seems folderol to me” (p. 241). So, while these tests won’t tell your teachers or professors what you have the potential to accomplish, they do function to generate a ton of cash, and they have been shown to be fairly accurate predictors of socio-economic status. While seemingly harmless, standardized tests have the power to influence the type of education and the educational opportunities students receive.

“Faith rested neither in the secondary-school instructor nor in a certificate issued by such individuals. Faith now rested in the examination.”—Elliot (2005, p. 39)

As I walked into Rand School, I wondered what my first day would reveal. I never really fit in with the kids at my other school. I spent too much time reading, writing, and thinking to be part of the popular crowd. Team sports and competition never interested me. I have always been more comfortable reading and researching. As a result of my interests, even the more advanced students had difficulty comprehending my thoughts. I learned to keep to myself and only speak of the things the others would understand. I didn’t realize the relative freedom I had experienced until my recent move to the town called Malice, a place that recently fell under the rule of the strict Rand Empire. I found Mrs. McFallen’s room and took a seat in back.

“Hello. I’m Mrs. McFallen. I am highly educated and received my online Master’s degree in leadership from the esteemed Pearson Academy. Now, we will begin the year with standardized testing, and this will tell us everything we need to know about you. I won’t bother getting your names.

You'll be assigned a number as soon as we've finished the testing. You will also be given a color so you know which books to read. The best students will be the color blue. You blues are the best test-takers and can read any book you choose. The greens are just average. You should only choose books with green covers. Finally, there are the reds. Reds are bad test-takers. We consider you low readers, but I won't call you "low." As soon as we finish the testing, I'll just call you by your number or sometimes by both your number and color. Anyway, you reds can only choose books with the red covers. You really can't understand anything else, and I wouldn't expect you to try."

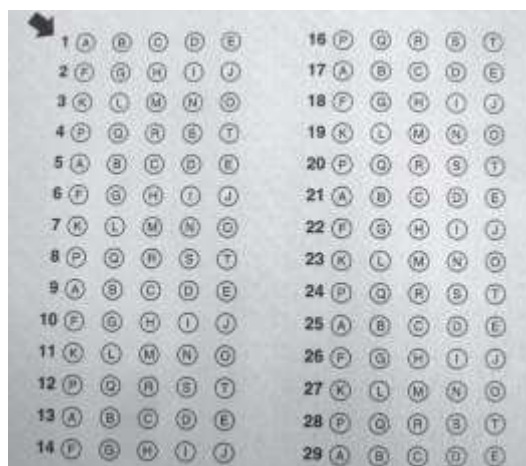


Figure 1. A common standardized testing, bubble-style answer sheet.

McFallen continued, "You will be the same color all year, even though we will test you many times. Your color is never expected to change. In fact, it rarely happens. In all my many years of experience, no student has ever changed color."

One student dared to ask, "Don't the books in your library have titles? Why are there just colored covers?"

McFallen responded, "You don't need to read the titles; you just pick the colors. That's all you need to know. In fact, I could choose the books for you. It's simply a matter of choosing the right color. In fact, if I could change your schedules, I'd put all of the same color in each class. It makes my job so much easier to teach to one type of color at a time."

Then the first-day rules were explained by McFallen: "In our system, you will learn to walk the halls in a precise, quiet manner, staying on your side of the hallway with your hands tightly clenched behind your back. This is to ensure that you pose no threat to an authority figure, but, above all, that you are willing to submit to my commands. There will be no noise in the hall because other teachers might become distracted if they hear you. The rooms and the halls must be completely silent unless you are otherwise directed. The final rule of expected hallway behavior is that you will always take your hat off inside. If you do not do this, you will be ridiculed and labeled as a D-STU or a delinquent student. If you are labeled as such, you will receive a red ribbon with a white "X" on it, and your IDENT cards will be imprinted with the term. The computer will label you so that you may never receive dessert or extra food rations."

A dead smile crossed McFallen's ashen face as she proclaimed, "Are you ready to begin learning? Of course you are, because I am ready to begin giving you the knowledge to be successful in today's real world. Take out your guide to the Hogan/Savage Curriculum for Raising Standardized Achievement. It has a gold cover. Of course I wouldn't expect any of you reds to actually read a book title. Last year we won the lavender star for near excellence in the field of programing students to take standardized tests. This is an honor because it is a reward from the blessed state; however, we still need to improve our performance because they have just come out with the Tope Star of Trust and Justice. This is a measure of how compliant you are to take the test. Not only do we want you to be compliant test takers, but we also want you to be fast when you are taking them. You see, the knowledge that I give you needs to be taken in like a deposit, and like in a bank, when knowledge is deposited, it can be taken back out at any time. This, of course, is exactly like your brain, or it should be. My brain is automatic, and I have memorized all of the mandated facts the state requires you to learn; however, because you have not reached my level, you need to continually be pushed through the steps of the sacraments of evaluation."

McFallen's detailed explanation persisted, "If I need to manage you in any negative way, then you will be punished according to your color. For example, if you are a blue, you will be judged less harshly than a red, because you have proven yourself compliant in other areas, and thus you will be more in my graces than a filthy red."

Student attention began to drift as McFallen droned on, "While you are in different groups, you will be taught the exact same thing at the exact same time in the exact same manner, but if you do not learn it, I will not go back because if you need help, then you are weak, and the weak are not useful to our society. We thrive on competition; it is the most blessed of human desires and emotions. If you are unable, or worse, unwilling to compete, then you will probably be a lifelong "X," and sent to the colony of exiles."

"Even though today is the first day, I am going to be teaching you to write. The first thing that you need to learn is that good writing is always done in our prescribed, generic form, and I always tell you the genre you will use. If you use any other genre or if you use the wrong form for writing, points will be deducted. I am the sole audience for your writing. You may only write about the topic that I give you, and if you write anything I deem inappropriate, then I will erase your file, and you will be forced to attend re-education during the detaining hour. I know a few of you reds will be occupying space in the re-ed. room so that Detention Officer Padlock can change your wrong ideas into the real facts that you need to be programmed

with in order to pass the test and function for success. Back to writing; the first thing you need to be aware of is that your paper will be broken into five sections, one will be an introduction, and one will be a conclusion. The other three will be your appropriate thoughts on the subject I give. Your paragraphs will be four sentences at most, and if there are more, then you are nearing an investigation. Remember: too much thought in writing will only get you in trouble.”

Finally McFallen dismissed the class, “You may enter the halls, but remember the rules. I’ll be watching.”

As I left my first class, I also began to understand my position within the school. The main goal of school is to provide the workforce with compliant workers at each level of society with the majority of jobs coming from corporations. School dictates the values and the ethics that guide the lives of the people. School teaches the rules of “good” behavior and the proper attitude that children should have in order to operate correctly and professionally. Workers must reliably take up the ethics and values of mainstream society to be successful.

Even before the move, I had heard neighbors talking about standardized tests in hushed tones, but I didn’t understand their concerns at first. After thinking about class today, some of what they said started to concern me. I know I shouldn’t be thinking in ways that are not sanctioned by the school, and I know impractical thinking has recently been forbidden and is no longer discussed. Still, that information made me curious as I considered the following bits I had overheard, mainly that standardized testing functions to effectively reduce students to numbers and categories. Therefore, students are grouped by their scores. While the reliability of a standardized test score may be viewed with skepticism—considering the narrow range of questioning, the rigid format, the timing limitations, and simplistic multiple choice questions—there are teachers and principals who believe in the power of the test. My mind wandered back to the days when we could read anything, and I remembered finding a book in the attic called *Standardized Minds*. It made me think more about the tests we had to take at school. I considered a response from the Assistant Superintendent of Johnson County in North Carolina who, when questioned about students “falling through the cracks” due to high-stakes tests, replied: “There are no children who do not test well” (Sacks, 2001). Couple the efficiency of the one-shot, standardized test with the attitude of one-measure-fits-all, and children can be easily sorted for their future roles. Standardized testing is one of the tools schools use to label students as successful or non-successful in the educational world. Being a member of the middle class gives some students an understanding of the

world that is useful to do well on standardized tests. Then I remembered my parents quoting Louis Althusser, a cultural theorist and one of their favorite authors who wrote about how culture is enacted in the schools. They commented on the way Althusser described schools and how schools worked to maintain the values of the middle class (Szeman & Kaposy, 2010). I guess the training of getting rewards for answering the way a teacher would want you to answer gives you a higher standing in the class and helps to prepare for one of the corporate jobs. The opposite is also true: if you do not become comfortable with the Rand Empire system, then you are labeled negatively.

I began to wonder about who was accountable for the programming of the schools. I knew curiosity seemed to be forbidden at my new school, but I decided to defy Mrs. McFallen and do some research. I sneaked into the computer lab and hacked the password, the way my big brother taught me. I found some information that made sense. I read about why students were required to go to school in the old times and wondered about the history of testing. I really should not have put myself in such a dangerous position, but I thought about kids in the past again and had to keep researching. I discovered more than I planned. Compulsory schooling for all children was seen as essential by the secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, Horace Mann (Pinar, 2006; Sacks, 2001). A supporter of education for all, Mann also believed in the efficiency model of education based on the work of Frederick Taylor. In the name of efficiency, Mann was one of the first to use written standardized exams for students in the Massachusetts school system (Sacks, 2001). He did this in response to a request for school reform from the state school superintendent (Sacks, 2001). These original exams were designed to reform schools and make the headmasters look bad (Sacks, 2001). With just thirty questions from over an entire year of school work, these written tests results were narrowly designed and resulted in students averaging less than 30 percent correct (Sacks, 2001). In Massachusetts, public officials misused the tests of individual students to rank the schools for comparison (Sacks, 2001). This marks the early beginnings of the political manipulation of test scores. According to the U.S. Office of Technology Assessment:

The idea underlying the implementation of written examinations, that they could provide information about student learning, was born in the mind of individuals already convinced that education was substandard in quality. . . . tests are often administered not just to discover how well schools or kids are doing, but rather to obtain external confirmation—validation of the hypothesis they are not doing well at all. (Sacks, 2001, p. 109)

Could this be what was happening at my new school? Did the Rand Empire believe that the education at Rand School was substandard?

I wondered what all of the research meant. Just as I was thinking about this quotation, I heard the computer lab door open and saw two peace enforcers step into the room. They told me that I was in violation of the Interweb Rule. I was accused of using a computer without permission and proper supervision. As a punishment, I was charged as a D-STU. I received a red ribbon with a white “X” on it, and my IDENT card was imprinted with the term. Now that I was labeled, I would never receive dessert or extra food rations. I didn’t care. I would find another way to continue my research. I headed for the library. I knew I could override the computer controls. Once online, I continued my search on standardized testing, looking up sources from the list I made while reading *Standardized Minds*. I found that the persistence of standardized testing remains, and the design has not evolved since the days of Horace Mann. These tests still include only a sample of important skills for each grade level. Because a sample is used, the measure of error can be quite wide. Consider the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). These high-stakes tests, requiring a passing score for students to advance to the next grade, carried a measure of error of 13 points for the math subtest for 6th grade students in the Spring of 1997, which is a huge margin of error (Sacks, 2001). Yet in the name of efficiency, schools continue to test students without concern for the tests’ power to make predictions about students. When the Texas Education Agency examined the TAAS scores from 1992 through 1997, they found that poor and minority students were “twice as likely as whites to fail the TAAS, even while succeeding in their math class. For instance, more than four in ten African-American tenth-graders passed their math courses but failed TAAS math” (Sacks, 2001, p. 113). While the TAAS didn’t correlate with success in the classroom, it was a predictor of socio-economic status: “Four in ten students from poor families of whatever race didn’t pass the TAAS, despite succeeding in schoolwork” (Sacks, 2001, p. 113). From my research, I could see the power of the tests to sort students by social class. I wondered how people who seem to want what’s best for students could allow the tests to define what students could do.

As I continued my research, unnoticed, I realized that the effects of standardized testing can be seen throughout the educational system. Students prepping for SAT, ACT, GRE, or MAT tests and paying to maximize their scores are buying into an illusion. Bates College, a liberal arts institution located in Maine, did away with the required standardized test scores as part of their admission requirements in the 1990s as a result of research analyzing test scores and student performance. The trend beginning with Bates has gained momentum as more colleges remove the standardized test requirement from their admission requirements (Fairtest.org, 2012). At Bates, “The lower-scoring students who opted out of the SATs performed just as well at Bates as higher scoring ones who did submit scores” (Sacks, 1999, p. 260). Certainly

Bates isn't an isolated case. Standardized test scores have been found to have small predictive values in many instances. What they do, in fact, predict reliably is social class (Peterson, 2005). Consider this: one-third of students from upper socioeconomic classes earn SAT scores of 1,100 or higher, which is double the rate of students with a middle-class background and four times that of students from lower socio-economic classes (Sacks, 1999).

It seems that Charles Eliot's 1908 vision of education remains. As president of Harvard, he saw schools as instruments for sustaining class divisions with a small upper layer attending universities and controlling the managerial roles, followed by a layer of workers skilled for trades, continued with a commercial class, and last, a large lower level to perform the jobs requiring the least education (Pinar, 2004; Sacks, 1999). Eliot envisioned educational systems that would serve each social class. So, the ideal of school providing equal opportunities for all amounts to mythology.

I was about to begin a search on Binet when the library minister ended my session. "You are classified as a D-STU. You have no right to be in the library. The Thought Security will escort you to the door. Do not return here," the minister threatened. As I left, I knew the spot to continue my research, Rick and Ilsa's, a small café on the outskirts of my childhood town that housed old computers that couldn't be traced. This would be my only option. Rick and Ilsa welcomed me, and I went to work. I knew my research could continue without interruption under the protection of my friends.

Alfred Binet was responsible for creating the first intelligence test in 1904 as a means to identify "defective" children (Sacks, 2001). The Binet-Simon consisted of 30 tasks, like naming objects, and defined children in terms of mental age (Sacks, 2001). The Binet-Simon favored those with strong verbal language skills and was slanted toward the dominant, middle class culture. While Binet and Simon acknowledged the cultural bias of their test and did not deny research by Decroly and Degand, published in 1910, that reported children of wealthy families had superior performance over those from lower social classes, they continued to support their belief that the Binet-Simon scale measured a "natural intelligence" or untrained ability (Sacks, 2001).

Lewis Terman of Stanford University adapted the Binet-Simon for the American market in 1916 and the Stanford-Binet became the standard for measuring intelligence (Sacks, 2001). In *Measurement of Intelligence*, Terman defines the uses for intelligence tests including the potential to weed defectives from society (Terman, 1916). Terman stated, "It is safe to predict that in the near future intelligence tests will bring tens of thousands of these high-grade defectives under the surveillance and protection of society. This will ultimately result in curtailing the reproduction of feeble-mindedness and the elimination

of an enormous amount of crime, pauperism, and industrial inefficiency” (Terman, 1916, p. 6-7). Terman’s insistence in a test as a reliable tool to uncover potential ability, rather than looking to authentic accomplishment has been institutionalized. Currently under Public Law 94-142, students are categorized as eligible for special education services on the basis of test scores (Sacks, 2001). Terman’s categories of intelligence based on a numerical score are still practiced because norm-referenced scores and leveled categories are still used.

While many of Terman’s conventions in intelligence testing persist, the finding that Terman’s data was a reliable predictor of social class remains largely transparent (Sacks, 2001). According to Terman’s data, membership in a privileged social class gave a seven point advantage in IQ score, and belonging to a low social class equated with a seven point disadvantage (Sacks, 2001). Terman explained this difference in terms of heredity, an idea that went unchallenged. The importance of social class in the role of testing, still largely unacknowledged, remains as transparent today as it did in the early 20th century. Although heredity is no longer credited as a cause for differences in testing, schools now place the blame on teachers and students.

From my research, I could see how the tests were being used to tell my teacher everything she wanted to know about me. I started to understand where the labels originated, and I started to understand their trajectory. If students do not respect the authority represented by the standardized tests, then they will not likely get the jobs that will help them remain a member of the middle class.

I was caught up in thought for too long. If I was away from the community for an extended amount of time, people might begin to get suspicious of my thought time. Thought that becomes solitude has been made illegal because there have been some reds who have rebelled. We do not know what has become of them. I don’t know what to do with these thoughts; surely they are subversive. I knew any form of independence was punishable by tribunal, and I was blanketed in a cloak of fear.

What am I supposed to do? I’m one of the lucky ones; the life that has been decided for me will be a good one. Even with the D-STU label, my parents have the influence to get the mark removed. I am a blue, and I will be set with a job at a corporate office, which is the pinnacle of employment in my district. Who would want more? But this knowledge and these subversive thoughts will not leave. I see people, good people, who drink too much at approved adult meeting times, who have walked the streets crying or screaming. They disappear.

I finally decided that I couldn’t do anything. I will have to close myself off to these thoughts and never let them out. I have to forget everything now; anything else is suicide.

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Namaste broseph and brosephines, I was just having a weekend in Sausalito when I meditated this out of my thought stream like a grizzly bear catching a salmon. My education isn't important, but I went to ISU for two Bachelor's degrees, one in English and one in education. Currently I maintain citizenship in the earthly realm, but I am willing to relocate. Shalom.