

# *Cheating*

## What's the point of teacher evaluation?

More specifically, when it comes to measuring student growth, should teachers do things in their classroom and with their students that will result in scores going up, and by extension, increases the likelihood that their own evaluation will look better? Or should teachers do those things - and only those things - that have a real impact on student learning? It was in the context of these questions that I reflected on a major change in the way I used data in my classroom.

It began twelve years ago when I taught a mini STEM unit to my fourth graders. I brought in a box of K'nex parts, including motors and wheels. I divided my students into groups of three and challenged them to build the fastest car. They all started with the same basic design, but groups could change their design however they wanted. They would challenge other groups to a race and the winner got a fake five dollar bill. The rules were simple; you placed your car with the rear at one edge of the table and the first car whose front got to the other end of the table won.

At about the third day of the unit one group showed up at the table with an extremely long car. As you can imagine, it didn't take long for the front of a five-foot long car, with its back wheels at one end of a six-foot long table, to travel to the other end of the table.

The rest of the class cried foul, but the group argued successfully that they did nothing wrong. They simply exploited the rules to their advantage, and even though their car wasn't technically "faster," it did turn in a "faster time." Right around this time I was administering the third, and final, reading comprehension assessment. And my strategy for administering those tests was not unlike that group's strategy.

In my district we test all elementary students in reading comprehension three times a year. Not only does every fourth-grade teacher take reading comprehension very seriously, but we meet several times as a team, along with the principal, the psychologist, and the learning support teachers to look at reading scores throughout the fourth grade. And although it's not a competition per se, it's definitely an occasion when you want to "look good." And looking good means improving; showing test scores that get better over the course of time. One of the easiest ways to show improvement is to start with low scores. This is fairly easy to achieve, as long as you know something about the factors that contribute to high test scores. I know, for example, that kids tend to perform better on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. They tend to do better after they review test-taking strategies. They do better when they receive feedback along the way. They do better when they're encouraged to do better and believe that high achievement is important to them. Of course, they also tend to do better after they've received quality instruction.



If you know how to get kids to perform to their potential, then you also know how to get kids to perform below their potential. And that's basically what I did, at least on the first test. I gave it on the Thursday and Friday of the first week of school. I spent no time at all reviewing test-taking strategies. I gave no feedback along the way, scoring their work only after they finished. And of course I didn't stress to them how important it was that they do their best, since I didn't actually want their best.

In January, to show improvement in the results, I took it up a notch. I gave the test earlier in the week, after reviewing some fairly obvious test-taking strategies. I also told them the scores would count on their report cards, which was true.

Of course I also delivered quality instruction between September and January, and also from January to June, when my class took their third test. And when they took that test, I pulled out all the stops: we tested on Tuesday and Wednesday, reviewed test-taking strategies, and I gave feedback along the way. After each of the seven parts, they came up to my table where I corrected their efforts, followed by encouragement or perhaps a gentle reminder to "slow down and look for the answers in the text."

As you can probably guess, my class showed a great deal of improvement. They started out low, got better in January and even better in June. And while it would be nice to think that this improvement was due to my excellent instruction, I have no doubt that it was partly due to my manipulation of the testing experience. In other words, I'd like to think I designed a fast K'nex car, but I played it safe by also making it longer.

Was this cheating? Perhaps, but I don't think so. Or at least I'm not ready to admit it. But it definitely wasn't teaching. I would put it somewhere between the two. Let's call it "cheaching." Cheaching is bad. Not evil, but bad. Cheaching defeats the purpose of teaching without actually breaking the rules. But before you judge me too harshly, keep in mind that what I do isn't much different than a business executive who times the company's billing cycles in such a way that the earning reports look good to the shareholders. And for that matter, it isn't much different than a trial attorney who chooses witnesses based on how innocently they'll portray the client.

And as I'm sure you can guess, I wasn't the only cheacher in the school. Or the district. Or the state. Cheaching is a way of life when you're a teacher. We want to look good, so we look good. It certainly isn't all we do, but it's definitely something we do when we want to look good. And we do want to look good.

Just to be clear, I was cheaching when it didn't even matter. There was nothing at stake other than my own pride.

But then something happened: TPEP and Student Growth Goals.

Ten years ago, the State of Washington began evaluating teachers using the Teacher and Principal Evaluation Project, or TPEP. One of the requirements is that teachers show evidence of student growth—in their whole class, in a subset of students and as a result of collaboration

with colleagues. And you get a better evaluation if you show more growth. This means that there's a lot of pressure on everyone to make those scores go up. To the casual observer – or the lawmaker – it all makes sense: better teaching yields better scores. It's as simple as that.

As you can probably guess, I frequently chose to use my students' reading comprehension scores as the basis of my student growth evaluation. And sadly, as you can also probably guess, I frequently cheated.

Not so much recently, though. Maybe I'm tired of playing that game or maybe I'm just getting old. Or maybe I've learned that I'm less effective when I focus on merely making the data look good. And I'm a lot more effective when I focus on collaboration and using student data to make instructional decisions.

**And now we get to do just that!** Although it's still in pilot-form, OSPI has revamped the Student Growth Goal Rubric. The biggest change - and the one that makes me giddy - is that in Student Growth 3.2: Achievement of Student Growth Goal, The first indicator is essentially the same from "Basic" to "Distinguished." Here it is:

*The teacher provides evidence of student progress on the stated learning goal, which includes both formative and summative assessments.*

This is enormous. Teachers no longer have any excuse to create "good-looking data." Because the rest of the rubrics emphasize actually using the data and getting students engaged in their own assessment. When there's pressure to produce "good" data, the data we end up with isn't always useful for instruction decisions. But now that there's pressure on using data instead of making it look good, I'm convinced that we'll end up with useful data.

And less cheating.



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