It’s Time We Hold Accountability Accountable

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The maxim, “if you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it” (often misattributed to Peter Drucker¹), sums up our society’s continued belief in the necessity and power of accountability. A lack of accountability is seen as a sure path to lawlessness, indolence, and corruption. We don’t trust people who are unwilling, unprepared, or otherwise unable to render an account.

As a high school language arts teacher who is increasingly “going gradeless” in his teaching practice, I find that I am often left with few “measures” of student learning and growth. In its place, we have a lot of feedback—mostly verbal—and not the kind that fits easily (or at all, really) within the neat grids of a traditional gradebook. Although I still give the occasional quiz (always with the option to retake), this approach has largely destabilized the traditional economy of completing assignments in exchange for points.

Since I am required to submit a grade at the end of each term, I involve students in this process, using a Descriptive Grading Criteria to bring a modicum of consistency and fairness to these deliberations. Students use a linked letter, screencast, or face-to-face conference with me to highlight evidence in their online portfolio supporting the letter grade they think they’ve earned.

But if I can’t measure it, how do I manage it? How can I hold my students accountable? And how can I, in turn, render an account to those above me?

To some degree, as I’ve suggested above, I’ve found workable answers to these questions. But, here, I’d like to pose another question: What exactly does it mean “to be accountable”?

Following the etymological breadcrumbs, we know the word originates in the act of adding, enumerating, and summing up. The prefix a- means we must convey this sum to another, presumably someone who has a stake in the result. And -able means that we are capable of performing both these tasks.

Before its emergence in Old French, the word seems to have leapt from the Latin verb computare, meaning “to count, sum up, reckon together.” That word derives its meaning from the prefix com- meaning “with,” and the verb putare, “to reckon.” Before taking on this more modern meaning, putare meant “to prune,” and before that, “to strike, cut, stamp,” finding a common ancestor with

more aggressive, violent words like dispute and amputate.

It’s not hard to imagine why ancient accounting might have involved this kind of violence. Transactions likely involved cutting off the correct amount of commodity or currency; authentication of an agreed-upon amount may have involved stamping with a seal or signet. And the fact that we did this cutting and stamping together may betray our deep-set fear of getting duped.

Returning to the present, accountability continues to represent an interesting combination of contention and consensus. Even today, the ambivalence and unease it occasions seems to flow from its ancient origin: the act of impressing symbolic agreement, certainty, and exactitude on something fundamentally malleable, arbitrary, and uncertain. Although its usage has strayed far beyond these origins, accountability still makes the most sense when it involves a transaction, what Gert Biesta describes as “an exchange between a provider and a consumer.”

The fluidity and nuance of education makes us especially uneasy because it isn’t easily summed up, certified, or commodified. And when so much money is involved, it’s easy to see why one might wonder if we’re getting swindled. Thus, schools, administrators, teachers, and students must find ways to produce measurable results.

Even in making the case for going gradeless, I often find myself arguing from the standpoint of how that change will show up in measurable ways. Researchers like Jo Boaler, Dylan Wiliam, Paul Black, and Ruth Butler have shown how, by forgoing grades (and, in the process, not measuring or certifying learning), we can produce even greater gains.

Greater gains on what?

On the eventual summative assessment, usually the state, national, or international exam.

In other words, even without the daily currency of grades, I can still pay up come test time. All I’ve done is write you an IOU for an even more impressive amount. At that point have I really escaped the transactional nature of this paradigm?

I’m not saying it’s wrong for us to want the most “bang for our buck” from schools. What I am saying is that accountability—with its impulse to strike, to cut, to stamp—has often resulted in us getting far less than we bargained for.

By its very nature, accountability limits our focus to that which can be counted, ignoring the existence of anything unmeasurable or subjective. This fact is perhaps most evident in the humanities, where learning to grapple with complex, interconnected, irreducible realities is of central importance. As Bill Ferriter asserts, “The truth is that the things that are the most meaningful are also the hardest to measure.”

Instead, we choose the lesser part, crowding our curriculum with things that are most measurable, things which are, not coincidentally, least meaningful. Accountability pressures us to eviscerate the disciplines we love, turning them into stale collections of discrete, demonstrable steps and concepts unmoored from their central essence.

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Perhaps the most obvious victim of this approach is writing, a discipline which, as Linda Mabry observes, is “fundamentally self-expressive and individualistic.” In order to enact the alchemy of making writing measurable, we must narrow our field of vision to contain “only a sliver of…values about writing: voice, wording, sentence fluency, conventions, content, organization, and presentation.”

Often, this attempt to render writing accountable is paired with a prescriptive form or template.

As Paul Thomas puts it,

...the root of what my students do not know and often badly misunderstand is the template used to teach students in most K-12 settings. Further, I now believe that teachers using those templates are also misled about their students’ concepts of sentence formation, paragraphs, and essays because the template and prescriptions mask the lack of understanding...Rules and prescriptions, I am convinced, impede the development of conceptual understanding of how and why to form sentences and paragraphs in order to achieve an essay.

Author and writing professor John Warner points out how this kind of accountability, standardization, and routinization short-circuits students’ pursuit of forms “defined by

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the rhetorical situation” and values “rooted in audience needs.”

What we are measuring when we are accountable, then, is something other than the core values of writing. Ironically, the very act of accounting for student progress in writing almost guarantees that we will receive only a poor counterfeit, one emptied of its essence.

Some might say that accountability only makes a modest claim on teaching, that nothing prevents teachers from going beyond its measurable minimum toward higher values of critical thinking, problem solving, and creativity. Many seem to think that scoring high on lower-order assessments still serves as a proxy for higher-order skills.

More often than not, however, the test becomes the target. And as Goodhart’s law (phrased here by Mary Strathern) asserts, “when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure.” What we end up aiming at, in other words, is something other than the thing we wanted to improve or demonstrate. When push comes to shove in public schools—and push almost always comes to shove—it’s the test, the measure, the moment of reckoning we attend to.

For most of my career, I’ve seen how a culture of accountability has caused the focus of administrators, teachers, and students to solidify around the narrow prescriptions and algorithmic thinking found on most tests. When that happens, the measure no longer represents anything higher order. Instead, we demonstrate our ability to fill the template, follow the algorithm, jump through the hoop. And unfortunately, as many students find out too late, success on the test does not guarantee that one has developed the skills or dispositions needed in any real field. In fact, students who succeed in this arena may be even more oblivious to the absence of these.

Even approaches like Jo Boaler’s, which show how eschewing grades and tests in the formative period can lead to greater gains on standardized exams, still run a constant risk of narrowing their focus to serve prescriptive, sterile ends. How many teachers and students can bravely embrace what John Updike called “that strange law whereby, like Orpheus leading Eurydice, we achieve our desire by turning our back on it”?8

How many of us, when the stakes are high enough, will instead lose nerve and falter before guiding students back to the sunlit regions of discovery and growth?

And how can we lead them, when we ourselves are condemned to this same Sisyphean fate, squirreling away points in order to avoid the poor evaluation score? Often any creativity, critical thinking, or problem solving I’ve brought to my own teaching has been at my own peril. Taking risks, trying new strategies, questioning long-accepted norms almost always involves an unacceptable implementation dip. It’s safer to get with the program: post your learning objectives; manage your transitions; model, practice, and routinize your procedures.

**WWDD: What Would Danielson Do?**

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The abused becomes the abuser. Dehumanizing demands for accountability will continue until someone stands up and stops it. In my experience, that stand largely falls to teachers, those with the courage to carve out human spaces within a pervasive milieu of mistrust and measurement. A first step for many of us is reining in our own compulsion to manage through measurement, using grades as behavioral carrots and sticks.

As Peter Drucker (actually) said,

Your first role . . . is the personal one. It is the relationship with people, the development of mutual confidence, the identification of people, the creation of a community. This is something only you can do…It cannot be measured or easily defined. But it is not only a key function. It is one only you can perform.⁹

Without the currency of numbers, we glimpse anew the immeasurable value of the students in our care and the potential of our time together.

We don’t need to capture or quantify these unmeasurables to appreciate or cultivate them. We don’t need to add, enumerate, or sum anything up for learning and growth to occur. In fact, we may find that the old impulse to strike, to cut, to stamp is antithetical to the work of teaching and learning.

What will it take for us to start thinking of accountability, not as a numerical concern, but as a responsiveness to the students in our

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care, a reciprocity that cannot be mediated by measurement?

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