

Standards, Teaching, Learning

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ABSTRACT: Standards are the criteria we use to judge competence, and the incarnation of some version of the issue of standards has woven in and out of education policy for the last thirty years. Unfortunately, much of the discussion has been ideological, rigid, and cast in either/or terms. In this essay, I use examples from basic writing and freshman composition to try to reclaim the notion of standards for use in the classroom. I conclude with an extended illustration of how a teacher's standards, more broadly defined, might play out in considering whether and how to teach the old standard, James Joyce's short story "Araby."

KEYWORDS: educational standards; basic writing; teaching literature; Joyce's "Araby"; underprepared students

Standards are criteria used to judge competence, and we rely on them every day, all the time: in sports or cooking, in raising children or voting, in forming relationships or teaching school. Another basic truth about standards is that we argue about them. This is surely true in education where standards have a contentious history.

When I was working in programs for underprepared high school and college students back in the 1980s, a national debate emerged over standards, expressed as a conflict between equity—increasing access to higher education—and excellence, holding firm on merit and achievement. The nation then saw the rise of the standards movement, an attempt to articulate precisely what students should know K-12, grade by grade about history or mathematics or social studies—and to align instruction to these standards. And this movement led to another set of debates about district or state control versus local autonomy and teacher independence, among other things. An emphasis on accountability then became part of standards talk, and it all intensified considerably with the advent of high-stakes testing, most notably, the federal No Child Left Behind Act. And, these days, there is pressure to bring standards-based accountability models to higher education.

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Regardless of what one thinks about the merits of any of these concerns about standards, the discourse and debates around them does seem to have narrowed and polarized our understanding of standards, the way we define standards and conceive of them in instruction.

As someone who has taught for a very long time, I find many of the policy discussions concerning standards to be of limited use in the daily work of teaching. We need other ways to talk about the issue of standards if we are to help students develop what educator Mina Shaughnessy calls their “incipient excellence.”

To foster an alternative discussion about standards, we need to do our best to move beyond the various definitions and debates and the easy labeling of positions as either “progressive” or “conservative.” One way to do this is to start from the specifics of the classroom. Although I hope that what I say applies to other domains, I will ground my discussion on the teaching of writing at the college level and begin with two classroom stories.

Vince, who received a Ph.D. from a prestigious psychology department, tells his story from the enviable position of one who has succeeded in the academy. Coming from working-class, Mexican-American origins, Vince learned his first English from a television set, but with his parents’ encouragement, he worked hard at his second language, and by high school, he was taking college-preparatory English classes. They were designed to help students do well on achievement tests and the Scholastic Aptitude Test; the classes consisted primarily of workbook grammar exercises, although students also read some literature and wrote a few book reports. After completing high school, Vince figured he was ready for college, so he was stunned when he sat for his university English placement exam: “We were to answer a question on a reading passage, something on the use of grain—and we were supposed to argue for one position or another. ‘What the hell am I supposed to write?’ I thought. They wanted an argumentative paper, though I didn’t know that then. . . . I knew my grammar, but applying it to that kind of writing was another story.”

Vince’s poor performance landed him in remedial English. As he recalls, “The teacher seemed very distant and cold. I’d get my papers back graded with a C or lower and with red marks about my style all over them.” Vince couldn’t figure out what the teacher wanted. “I kept trying, but I kept getting the same grades. I went through this routine for four or five weeks, becoming more withdrawn. Finally I said, ‘Forget this,’ and stopped going to class.”

Vince took the class again two quarters later and got a teacher who gave feedback in a more useful way and was more encouraging. He started going to the campus learning center and asked for help from teaching assistants in other courses in which the instructors had assigned papers. He learned to write good academic prose and in graduate school was frequently complimented for his writing.

Vince's story illustrates several problems with how standards are used in the teaching of English. Often, they are reduced to so-called objective measures, like multiple-choice grammar tests, and although the instruction geared toward such measures can be specific and targeted, it is also limited. Vince's high-school English classes had been labeled "college preparatory," so he believed they would prepare him to write in college, but they had not prepared him for even his first university writing assignment, the English placement exam. This discontinuity in requirements and the standards used to assess performance—in this case the shift from grammatical analysis to the development of an effective argument—is common.

In his first college class, Vince faced another problem associated with standards: They often are applied to students' work in ways that shut down rather than foster learning. In Vince's case, the teacher seemed to value a literary style and rejected as inadequate Vince's more straightforward prose. Such teachers match student work against an internalized model of excellence and find the work lacking, rather than using their knowledge of genre, rhetorical strategy, and style to assess the ways a paper could be improved, given what the writer seems to be trying to do. This kind of teacher functions more like a gatekeeper than an educator. Standards used this way become a barrier to development.

The second, briefer, story comes from a remedial English class at an inner-city community college in Los Angeles. About 30 students are enrolled, most of them from working-class backgrounds and a variety of ethnic origins, ranging from Armenian to Salvadorian. The students have been writing educational autobiographies. And one of the interesting issues they raise involves standards. Some express anger at past teachers who didn't hold high expectations for them, who didn't explain the criteria for competence and hold students to them, who didn't help their students master the conventions of written English that they're struggling with now. Some of these teachers sound as though they were burned out, but others seemed reluctant to impose their standards for philosophical or political reasons or because they thought a less rigorous pedagogy was better suited to these students. One teacher, for example, is described as "hang loose,"

a man who created a pleasant classroom atmosphere but played down the evaluation of students' work.

This episode highlights the important role that standards and high expectations play in good teaching. It also clarifies why so many educators and parents from poor or non-dominant communities—though mindful of the injustices that can occur in the name of standards—are calling for classrooms in which standards are clearly articulated and maintained. Standards that are employed fairly facilitate learning and show students that their teachers believe in their ability to meet academic expectations.

People leery about calls for standards need to remember their benefits and reclaim them for democratic ends, despite the fact that standards and assessments can be used to limit access and stratify students into educational tracks, or can lead to an overly-prescriptive and narrow curriculum. At the same time, the champions of standards need to take a closer look at how standards and our means of measuring student mastery of them can limit, rather than advance, the academic excellence they desire.

To develop our alternative discussion about standards, we must hold Vince's story about the misapplication of standards and the community college students' tale of low expectations simultaneously in mind, in productive tension. As we do so, some questions emerge:

The current drive to enact and enforce standards by statistical measures dominates schooling. But what effects do such measures have on instruction? As people on many sides of current educational debates are saying—see Deborah Meier and Diane Ravitch's blog, "Bridging Differences," for example—standardized measures can limit the development of competence by driving curricula toward the narrow demands of test preparation instead of allowing teachers to immerse students in complex problem solving and rich use of language.

How good are we at explaining our standards to students? Too much teaching is like the instruction Vince encountered in his first remedial course: Teachers match a response or product against an inadequately explained criterion of excellence. To avoid such stifling imposition of standards and to encourage student expression, some teachers refrain from applying their criteria of effective performance. But this can be problematic as well, for many students report that they feel cheated, and sometimes baffled, by such instruction.

How can we reconceive standards so that they function not just as final measures of competence but also as guides to improving performance? Many discussions of standards stay at the level of test scores or models of excellence. Instead of these static measures of attainment, our focus should shift to the dynamics of development. Such a shift would have led Vince's first teacher to make explicit the distinctions he saw between his criteria and his student's performance. He also would have tried to understand the possibilities of Vince's own style and helped Vince enhance it with some stylistic options drawn from his more elaborate repertoire.

What about the transitions students face as they move from one level of the educational system to another? Are the standards we use coherent—that is, is there some level of agreement between secondary and postsecondary institutions about what constitutes competence in a given discipline? What opportunities exist—for example, through university-school alliances—that would help us articulate areas of agreement and disagreement so that students like Vince don't find themselves baffled by very different kinds of curricula and sets of expectations?

Standards evolve through consensus, but it's an unfamiliar consensus to many of our students, so don't we need to make the historical and social processes by which standards are constructed a topic of classroom discussion? Such discussion can help us find out what students perceive our standards to be and illuminate the cultural and cognitive difficulties they might have in adopting those standards. We might discover what lies behind the withdrawal of students like Vince.

How reflective are we about the attitudes and assumptions that underlie our standards? How open are we to considering the provisional nature of these standards and modifying them? In writing instruction, for example, teachers sometimes judge students' work according to idealized models of composing that distort actual practice, or some teachers champion the "great tradition of English prose" without considering the many ways that tradition is modified as audiences and purposes shift. What mechanisms are there within teacher education and professional development to encourage such reflection?

My hope is that addressing such questions will enable us to reframe the discussion of standards, moving it away from the either-or polarities of equality versus excellence, creativity versus constraint, or progressive versus conservative. Perhaps such questions will help us think more fruitfully about how standards are linked to instruction and learning—and how standards can be used to foster competence as well as measure it.

I touched on but didn't explore another dimension to the setting and use of standards and that is the development of the standards themselves. Curriculum specialists come to consensus about what students should know about a particular subject—photosynthesis, for example, or the Civil War. In the cases we just saw involving freshman composition, an exemplary program would engage in discussion about the kind of writing students need to master, the important conventions of that writing, criteria for competence, and so on.

Underlying these issues is a more basic set of questions: What is the role of a particular subject area in cognitive development? Why do we study it? How does it fit into our philosophy of education? On average, such questions come up less often in the process of forming standards. In some cases, the answers to them are assumed—of course students need to know the facts of photosynthesis. Also, in this age of high-stakes testing, the pressure to cut to the chase is intense—the push is to do the technical work of setting standards. But the basic questions are hugely important, for they get to the heart of why we educate in the first place.

During the time I was working on this essay, an article appeared in *Atlantic Monthly* that raised for me these basic questions about subject matter and instruction, and I want to devote the second half of the essay to them. The article deals with college students, but I think it contains lessons about standards and teaching that run across the educational pipeline. The piece is written by an anonymous professor who teaches Freshman Composition and Introduction to Literature at a community college and a small private college. His courses are required, and his students are a diverse, non-traditional group, people who enroll to advance at work: criminal justice, health care, civil service.

The purpose of his article is to challenge the notion that everyone should go to college, and the professor supports his claim with a narrative of student incompetence. His students can't write about Joyce's "Araby" or Faulkner's "Barn Burning." They can't write a research paper presenting two sides of a historical controversy. (Why Truman removed MacArthur, for example.) They haven't read a book in common. This is the stuff of the classic debate on standards—access and equity versus excellence—and the professor uses a familiar story line to present it: the beleaguered teacher fighting the good fight against ignorance.

The professor doesn't come across as a bad guy, and he frets over the grades he doles out. But what struck me—and a lot of other readers—is that

he seems clueless about alternative ways to both enact his standards and engage his students in the humanities, to help them become more effective critical readers and writers. Nor does he seem to grant them much experience or intelligence that could be brought to bear on core topics in the humanities. He appears to be a bit like the instructor Vince—whose case I presented earlier—encountered in his first English composition class.

Standards, particularly in the newer sense of curricular goals aligned to instruction, are a systematic means of specifying what students should learn. But there are other ways to be systematic as well. I want to think about the interaction of subject matter, teaching, and learning in a way that honors the standards impulse, but comes at it in a different way, that methodically considers the broader questions of the purpose of teaching a particular subject (in this case literature), why and how we teach it, its connection to intellectual development and human experience, our beliefs about intelligence and about teaching, and what our goals might be, our expectations. Articles like the one in *Atlantic Monthly* often use examples from literature and the humanities, so I'll focus on James Joyce's "Araby," one of the stories the professor tells us that his students didn't much like or understand.

"Araby," the third story in Joyce's *Dubliners*, has become part of the Western literary canon, a familiar entry in countless anthologies. It was on the Introduction to Humanities syllabus I was given to teach 30 years ago.

"Araby" is set in Joyce's dreary Early-Twentieth Century Dublin and is narrated in the first person by an adolescent boy who is thoroughly infatuated with the older sister of one of his pals. The boy's language is rich, fervid, and his description of his friend's sister is flat-out rapturous. Though he watches her from afar and only directly encounters her once in the story, ". . . my body was like a harp and her words and gestures were like fingers running upon the wires." You get the idea.

The defining moment in the story begins to develop when the girl, in that single encounter, expresses regret that she can't go to Araby, the bazaar that's in town, and our narrator, emboldened, says he will go and bring her something. After an agony of waiting for his drunken uncle to come home with a few shillings, the boy rushes to Araby, arriving at closing time. It is as dreary a place as the city surrounding it. He finds an open booth, eyes vases and tea sets, feels the few coins in his pocket, and realizes suddenly, painfully, the foolhardiness of his desire and quest. "I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity," the story ends, "and my eyes burned with anguish and anger."

There are a lot of things to consider in selecting any piece of literature for a syllabus. Certainly, one's own pleasure with the text matters—it enlivens the teaching—but there needs to be further justification, since teaching literature means reading a story or poem with others to some pedagogical end, a social intellectual activity. Here are some of the things I would think about as I considered assigning “Araby.”

I'd ask myself what it is I want to achieve through teaching the story, and these goals would be the stuff of instructional standards. What about literature and the appreciation of it do I want students to learn? What about the structure of the short story? Or Joyce and his Dublin? Or symbolism and imagery? Or conceptions of romance and gender? And I'd ask these questions if I were teaching “Araby” to a group of high schoolers or to a graduate seminar in English—though, of course, the specifics of what I did in each classroom would be different.

I'd intersect such questions with what I know about the students before me, high schoolers to advanced graduate students. Some of what I know comes from their location in the system: Were there prerequisite courses? What have they already been reading for me? And some of what I know is provided by their performance, by discussion in class, by tests or papers, by comments made in conference. And some of what I know emerges via relation, through what I learn about them as people with histories, interests and curiosities, hopes for the future.

Honoring the histories of the people in the class brings into focus another set of, not unrelated, questions, questions about the politics and sociology of what gets selected into literary canons, of what authors get read. These questions belong in a discussion about standards. So I'd be asking myself: Does my syllabus reflect in some way, to some degree the cultural histories of the students before me, particularly if those histories have typically been absent from the curriculum? There can be great pedagogical power here, and anyone who has taught literature has seen it: Students lighting up when they read stories with familiar languages, geographies, family scenes, or cultural practices that they haven't read before in a classroom. Given this perspective, and depending on who was in my class, I might take a pass on “Araby.” I know that when I first read the story as a college freshman, it seemed as flat and distant as could be. There are many other stories that would enable me to reach my goals about literary technique.

But culture is a complex business, as is teaching. While being responsive to students' cultural histories and practices, we have to be mindful of how easily “culture” can be narrowed and reduced as we try to define it.

Education scholar, Manuel Espinoza, a former student of mine, says it well: there is “no monolithic us,” no blanket African-American, or working-class, or Puerto Rican culture, and thus no ready match-up to writers from these backgrounds. Black kids won’t automatically respond to Alice Walker. How a story of hers is taught becomes a key variable.

So maybe “Araby” shouldn’t be ruled out. . . .

Which leads me to a third frame of reference I’d take when considering “Araby.” And that is my own experience with the story: as an underprepared college freshman from a working-class background, as someone who later taught “Araby,” and as a middle-aged man reading it once again in preparation to write this essay.

As I noted a moment ago, I didn’t much like or understand “Araby” the first time I read it. Though I had a terrific senior high school English teacher—and some wonderful teachers later in college—my college Freshman English instructor was awful. As I subsequently learned more about literary technique in general, and Joyce in particular, and especially as I had to eventually teach “Araby” myself, I came to appreciate it. And reading the story now and thinking back to my own adolescence, it touched me deeply.

I take a few lessons from this brief survey of my own time with “Araby.” If I did elect to teach the story, I would consider in hindsight what didn’t happen with me upon first encounter—which provides another way to think about how to open the story up to others and my goals for doing so.

I missed completely in my freshman year the overlay of the story with my own experience. Like the narrator, I too lived in a sad and taxing place and sought release in my imagination. And, like him, I had a desperate and unrequited crush—in my case on a waitress in the Mexican restaurant down the street. My heart too picked up speed just walking past the front window, hoping that she was at the counter. The important point here is that we sometimes don’t see connection or relevance automatically, readily. This is the place where artful teaching comes in.

Teaching also comes in, of course, in understanding literary technique, the way “Araby” works as a story: the structure of the thing, the boy’s hyperbolic language, the small touches that mean so much. I remember not getting the ending at all: how did we go so quickly from looking at vases and jingling a few coins in the pocket to the crashing “my eyes burned with anguish and anger”? But a little guided reflection on that ending would have revealed a powerful truth, surely known to me as a teenager, and, for that fact, to all the students in the anonymous professor’s class: that our hopes are sometimes dashed through the smallest thing—an overheard remark, a glance

away, an opportunity missed by a minute or two. Now, we are at the heart of what literature can provide: an imaginative entry to human experience. John Dewey makes this observation about subject matter: “[T]he various studies represent working resources, available capital . . . [yet] the teacher should be occupied not with subject matter in itself but in its interaction with the pupils’ present needs and capabilities.” Dewey reminds us of the intimate and powerful relationship between a subject (literature, or biology, or geography) and human development—with teaching as the mediating force. Standards, expectations are a crucial part of the dynamic, though that dynamic can become distorted if we hold to a rigid conceptualization of standards or get consumed in the technical development of them. It is finally our philosophy of education, our fundamental justification for schooling, that gives standards—any definition of standards—their meaning.