

Separating Learning and Evaluation

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Abstract

Learning and evaluation are two very different tasks, so why do most education institutions treat them as one? The classroom is a place of learning, and evaluation can be disruptive to the pure act of learning. Furthermore, an individual may be an excellent teacher but a poor evaluator, and vice versa, so there is no reason for the same person to hold both jobs. Finally, where evaluation is needed at all, it needs to be as fair and objective as possible. How can the need for fair and objective evaluation be served by disparate and subjective evaluators? How many students take a class because the teacher is “easy” regardless of the quality of the education they will receive? This paper will explore four categories of learning (Knowledge, Logic, Craft, and Art), the subjects which these categories relate to, the means of evaluation that are best suited to each category, and situations in which evaluation may be unnecessary. Testing in the classroom does have the advantage of simultaneously testing the subject matter as well as “real-world” skills, like teamwork and meeting deadlines, so this paper will also discuss means of evaluating those skills outside of the classroom through apprenticeship and long-term group projects. An understanding of these topics can lead institutions to establish a system of evaluation not integrated with the classroom. Finally, this paper will briefly explore some of the auxiliary benefits of decoupled evaluation from learning, including: increased ease and practicality of independent study, a natural reduction in cost of education for motivated students, teacher accountability, and a much needed shift in power in favour of the students.

Key Words: Higher Education, Learning, Evaluation, Standardized Tests, Knowledge, Logic, Craft, Art.

1. Two Different Tasks

Learning is the act of acquiring new information or skill. Evaluation is determining whether this information or skill has been affectively acquired. These are not the same tasks and yet these two tasks seem inseparable in most institutions of higher education. Is there any reason to believe that a great teacher is automatically and always a great evaluator, or vice versa?

Having no means of evaluation is not a viable option as it negates an institution’s responsibility to certify the education its students have received.

Unfortunately evaluation and learning are often in conflict. The sometimes subjective and often wildly different approaches to evaluation that teachers take limit the ability of the institution to certify with any objectivity the competencies of the students. Likewise, evaluation is often criticized for interfering with the pure act of learning, affecting the psyche of the class and often limiting the possibilities of what a teacher can do and how they can teach.

However, if we understand that these are two separate tasks then we can treat them as such and we can consider what the best structure and environment is for each as separate entities. If we can do this then we can maintain the purity of learning while meeting the realistic needs of effective evaluation.

2. Evaluation Structure and Environment

In order to examine evaluation as a separate entity from learning, there are some background concepts that need to be examined. For the purposes of this analysis, subject matter can be divided into four categories: Knowledge, Logic, Craft, and Art. There are also practical, “real-world”, skills that do not easily fit the mould of these academic categories of subject matter.

It is important to understand that these categories of subject matter are not the same as subjects of study. Subjects of study include the various physical sciences, social sciences, engineering, the arts, and so on. Most subjects of study contain more than one type of subject matter. As each category of subject matter is described, its relationship with some broad subjects of study will be examined.

Knowledge is related to facts. Knowledge evaluation has one correct answer or a very limited set of correct answers that the student knows prior to the question being asked. Knowledge evaluation usually takes the form of multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, or short answer. Examples of knowledge include the contents of theories and factual information in the physical and social sciences.

Logic is problem solving. Logic evaluation has one or a very limited set of correct answers that the student does not know prior to the problem being posed. Logic evaluation usually takes the form of a problem statement followed by a request to solve the problem. Examples of logic include math problems or applied math problems in mathematics and the physical sciences.

Craft is creating a functional product. Craft evaluation almost never has a single correct answer but is instead evaluated on the basis of a clear list of requirements. Craft evaluation usually takes the form of projects or essay questions. Examples of craft include essays on the application or validity of theories for social sciences, design and implementation projects for engineering, and technical abilities in the arts.

Art is the pure act of creativity. It is questionable whether Art even has correct answers, and it certainly does not have a single correct answer. Some people may vehemently protest this statement, asserting that the form of a dancer, strokes of a painter, or pitch of a singer can clearly be judged objectively. I agree that the craft of dancing, painting, or singing can be judged with some objectivity. When I say pure creativity, I mean decisions like what subject matter to express, how to express that subject matter, when to use what forms, and when to break the proper form. An individual can only critique these decisions on the basis of their perspective and experiences, so unlike craft they either get it or they don't. It is this creative component of the arts that I here call art and evaluation of art usually takes the form of critiques by the observers.

The topic of interest is separating learning and evaluation, so aside from a theoretical basis for approaching the separation how should evaluation be structured as a separate entity from learning? There seem to be two options available, have subjective evaluators or devise a system of evaluation that is somewhat more objective.

The subjective evaluator approach is certainly appropriate for evaluating art subject matter. In many cases a student only needs the critiques of an evaluator for the sake of their own self-improvement. If that is the case then the student should merely attend courses that will allow them to share their work with peers and teachers and should not concern themselves with any kind of formal requirements. Likewise, an institution may be satisfied with evaluating only the craft subject matter for artistic subjects, leaving the art subject matter to the interplay between student and teacher with no formal requirements. On the other hand, some institutions may want to have formal art subject matter requirements for attaining certain types of certification. An informal approach to this may consist of attendance and participation requirements. A more formal approach may require students to participate in a practicum where they will be judged by a panel of evaluators. The latter can also be effective for simultaneously evaluating the craft skills of the student. Whatever approach is used, completion of art subject matter requirements should only be on a pass/fail basis, to encourage freedom of expression. I should reiterate, though, that this is for art subject matter, and more precise grading may, or may not, be appropriate for the craft aspects of artistic subjects.

Knowledge, logic, and craft are not as subjective as art, making subjective evaluation more questionable. An institution not only provides an education, but is also responsible for certifying that education. Neither the student nor the society as a whole are benefited when students are certified as having acquired certain knowledge or skills that they have not acquired. Many classes use attendance, homework, or extra-credit to give students the opportunity to boost their grades. While it is quite nice of a teacher to provide

these opportunities, they ultimately prove nothing in the way of competence; they merely prove that the student is willing to work hard. It may be worthwhile for students to demonstrate that they are hard workers, but that is a practical skill, and to allow it to substitute for knowledge, logic, or craft competency negates the very real need for certifying that students have acquired those competencies.

On the other hand, tests and graded projects lead to anxiety. A poor result sticks with the student forever, as there is rarely an opportunity to relearn the material and reprove their competency. This anxiety causes students to care more about their grades than about what they are learning. As a result, students often ignore material that is not graded and try to cram the material that is graded, with no concern as to whether they will remember it in a year.

Many of these problems come from the fact that evaluation is tied to learning. If you separate evaluation into a separate task you remove the pressures of grades from the learning environment. Separated evaluation is also easier to retake, and institutions could adopt an attitude of encouraging students to keep trying, rather than the more contemporary attitude of finality and almost doom. Institutions can also apply a more appropriate scope to the evaluation process, evaluating just the knowledge, logic, or craft, rather than evaluating all of them and practical skills and maybe even flattery skills in a single grade for a class.

This may sound like standardized testing, because it essentially is. Standardized testing is often criticized and sometimes even reviled. The topic here is not standardized testing, so I am not endorsing standardized testing in general. There are many situations where standardized testing may not be appropriate. It is questionable at best in any primary education context. Also, to apply standardized testing as part of the learning process is not something I would ever endorse, as it too often takes over the classroom, destroying the voice of the teacher. However, the separation of evaluation and learning makes having a standard quite practical, protecting the learning environment from that standard. The ability to retake the tests also offsets some of the concerns with standardized testing, like anxiety, and long-term, often unjustified, consequences for the student or even the institution. Likewise, an understanding of the four categories of subject matter helps in applying standardized testing. The appropriate testing tools can be used for the subject matter being tested, and the testing of art subject matter by standardized means can be avoided.

Hopefully I have convinced you at this point that standardized testing is actually not deplorable under the circumstances I have described. Allow me to reiterate that the topic here is the separation of evaluation and learning. Attaining certification from an institution of higher education should be done on the basis of credits earned, and credits should be earned

through evaluation not through classes taken. This is what the separation of evaluation and learning means. Students can take tests without taking the corresponding courses, and can take courses without taking the corresponding tests. In this way students are empowered to take courses for the sake of learning and self-betterment while they take tests to attain certification.

Allow me to also reiterate that the four categories of subject matter are not the same as subjects of study. What this means is that there will not, and likely should not, be a one to one relationship between courses and tests. Some courses may have multiple tests that relate, some tests may have multiple courses that relate, and just because a course has no tests does not mean that course is useless. Courses should be considered useful or useless on the basis of student demand, not on the basis certification requirements. Tests should be provided on the basis of the need for evaluation. Evaluation and learning will not always and, in fact, may rarely line up perfectly.

As previously mentioned, there are some skills that do not fit the mould of standardized testing. A person's test results may approximate their abilities, but factors like how a person works under pressure, how a person works with others, anxieties, motivation, and other "real world" issues are not captured by testing that merely judges the purely academic achievements of the students. It is certainly within the domain of an institution to require some demonstration of competence in such practical skills. Evaluation of practical skills should be a task separate from the learning process and from evaluation of other abilities, so as not to interfere with the proper functioning of those tasks.

Evaluation of practical skills can most appropriately take the form of long term group projects or internship programs that are included as part of the curriculum and requirements. Such programs should be designed to place students in real world situations in which they have to demonstrate that they have what it takes to participate in the economy as they may be expected to upon graduation. Such a program may not be appropriate for all scholarly pursuits, but for many it is important that students are exposed to real-world challenges as part of the curriculum. The exact functioning of such programs is beyond the scope here, but there are plenty of successful contemporary examples of these kinds of programs.

3. Learning Structure and Environment

Separating evaluation from learning does not necessitate any changes to the culture or structure of the learning component of higher education. It is entirely possible to continue with business as usual with only a few minor changes to structure. On the other hand there are many additional advantages that can be gained by a more progressive institution.

One of the greatest advantages of the separation is that independent study becomes more practical. Classes are expensive. They take the student's time, the teacher's time, and often many other resources. A student can save a lot by learning the material on their own and then taking the test, rather than taking a course, or retaking the course if they did poorly on a test. A system where evaluation is tied to coursework does not easily allow this, and as a result it can be difficult for even a well motivated student to attain a certification if they don't have the money. Independent study possibilities allow students to attain a certification of their abilities with significantly reduced costs if they are willing to put forth the extra effort and study on their own. The separation of evaluation and learning makes this far easier, and far more practical.

Some institutions of higher education may be concerned that class attendance would drop dramatically as a result of the separation. If an institution is concerned with maintaining its culture and atmosphere it could define full-time status in terms of attendance as well as credits attempted. Furthermore, an institution could have attendance requirements in addition to credit requirements for certification. This is easily justified as a collegiate culture requirement; the institution is merely ensuring that every student has been fully exposed to the academic environment. With these two policies in place, an institution of higher education could maintain nearly the same learning culture and atmosphere as they would have without the separation while still benefiting from the many advantages of the new evaluation structure.

However, institutions could take advantage of the separation of evaluation and learning by offering a more diverse assortment of learning environments as standard practice. People learn in different ways, at different speeds, and need different levels of assistance. Likewise different subjects may benefit from different kinds of environments. There are many ways of organizing the teaching process as opposed to the standard large seminar classes that are in vogue at many institutions today, and it becomes possible to pursue more of these options without evaluation interfering.

Even standard teacher centred education, such as large seminars, moderately sized classes, and private tutoring, can be more flexible in its scope or duration. A given class may cover an entire subject, as most contemporary classes do, but there are other possibilities.

There could be more one-time classes designed to cover one aspect of a subject that many students seem to have problems with. There could also be more classes that meet regularly but without a start or end date, such as open discussion forums or presentations on the latest technologies or theories. Such things do exist currently, but are usually not graded and, as a result, are often disregarded. With grading disassociated from the classroom, students

no longer choose their classes based on grading, and therefore may take advantage of a greater variety of class structures.

Another possibility is to have continuously operating classrooms designed for open practice and collaboration related to a specific subject. Teachers would be available in such a setting, but as facilitators of the students. The focus would be on practice over lecture, and peer driven interaction may be more common. This is a particularly reasonable approach for the arts or philosophy, where progress is very individualized and not easily segmented into discreet courses.

With all of these possibilities, a very progressive institution could even eliminate the semester system altogether, as students rely more on independent study and supplement it with one-time classes. Even the idea of full-time status or enrolment could be eliminated, introducing a greater sense of freedom and fluidity, if an institution is interested in such extreme possibilities. These ideas are also more practical due to the aid that computer technology can provide to the scheduling of classroom space.

Regardless of whether the institution is very traditional or willing to explore the possibilities, the students seem to be empowered by this separation of evaluation and learning. Because requirements are met through taking tests, not classes, students are freed to take the classes they want, rather than the classes that are required. If the administration forces students to take specific courses, then it will be very obvious that they are only doing so in order to maintain control over the students, and it will be far more difficult for the administration to defend such a practice. Overall, the adoption of a separation of evaluation and learning encourages the administration to adopt the role of facilitator rather than the role of commander, which is too often held by administrations of contemporary institutions of higher education. Whether the control the administration has in contemporary institutions is with the best intentions or not is irrelevant. It becomes unnecessary with the separation of evaluation and learning.

Furthermore, the shift in the balance of power in favour of students also means the empowerment of quality teachers that are effective at educating and connecting with students. Too often teachers are hired and maintained for what they offer to the administration, and not what they offer to the student. It must be remembered that the students are the customers, not the administrators, and it is the students whose interests must be served by an institution of higher education.

4. Summary

Evaluation and learning are two separate tasks, so it is certainly reasonable to suggest that they should be performed separately. With an understanding of how to evaluate different types of subject matter, it can be quite practical to separate evaluation and learning. Finally, there are many

advantages to separating the two, including greater opportunities for independent study, a greater variety of teaching methods, a reduction in cost for proactive students, and the possibility of a more empowered student body. As with any shift in practice, there are many potential missteps to be had while attempting to separate evaluation and learning. My hope is that I have provided enough insight to navigate the pitfalls and revealed sufficient benefit to make the journey desirable.

Mark Dobbins is an aspiring philosopher from the USA. His interests are numerous but tend to focus on innovation of social systems. He takes a somewhat Socratic approach to philosophy, with an emphasis on open-minded reasoning over scholarship, though with great deference to those who pursue scholarship and what they bring to reasoned argument.