

Missing the MARK

Controlled assessment not only doesn't solve the problem of cheating; it exacerbates it, explains a frustrated Phil Beadle...

Back in the days before middle age bit down hard – when sex wasn't on war-time rationing, certain drugs were borderline permissible and when rock and roll was occasionally literate – the formative marking of English coursework was considered to be quite the done thing. In innocence and in a sincere desire to do my best for my classes, I would mark their essays: it was the moral choice. The students would redraft their work, I'd take it in, nod approvingly, put a number on it indicating how well they had done, then transfer that number onto a spreadsheet.

At the time my colleagues in the English department would look on with a combination of fear and awed respect, as they remarked on, "all that lovely marking you're doing." They considered it, as I did, a sign of professionalism and commitment that I'd sit and pore over Year 11's books as the first thing I'd do every, single morning. It was the moral choice.

And being the moral choice it was worth the bother. Their second drafts were substantially better formed than the first blind attempt, the grades were better, and – crucially – you could guide them through the process of constructing their first real essays. What happened, through the process of redrafting, was that the students learnt the form they were working in. Through the process of practising

and reviewing their practice with the aid of expert guidance they got better at the thing they were meant to get better at. A comment at the end of the work asking for, "In your next draft I want to see more comment on Basil Rathbone's eyebrows and some suggestion as to how they might be taken as an objective correlative for the nature of guilt" would find that comment incorporated in the second attempt.

I worked once with a co-teacher who wrote the essays for the kids. It was obvious he had done so, as they read like the output of a somewhat verbose English graduate from a red-brick university, rather than a scuffling first attempt at literary analysis. I told him off and refused to enter the work. I also worked with kids who, though struggling to master the basic tenets of English as an additional language, would hand in essays fluid with high order analytical terms. It was obvious, though the students would swear blind they had written it themselves, that a cousin's assistance had been sought and entailed: a little comparison of the work in their books would be enough to convince them they'd been rumbled. Of course, I told them off and refused to enter the essays. Some students would also attempt to cut and paste their responses from the internet. Even a buffoon could work out they had done so with the help of Google. They, too, were in receipt of a telling off, and 'their' 'work' lodged in the bin.

It seems though that some teachers were not entirely able to operate at above buffoon level, and would enter the work they had written themselves, that had been written by an adult at home, or had been copied from the internet. And the exam boards were not sufficiently able to mobilise beyond buffoon level to be able to detect the presence of these sins from the coursework samples. Despite the fact that any English teacher can tell instantly when an essay has been written by an educated adult.

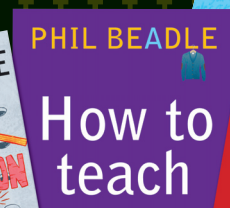
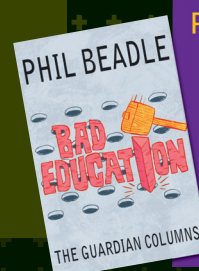
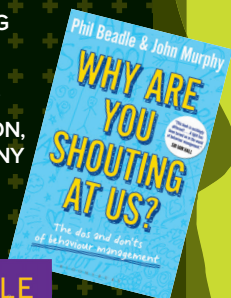
As a result we're on our third year of *controlled assessments*. The result of which is that students no longer learn through the process of redrafting (which is

perhaps the most valuable lesson in writing there is); teachers have to endure/manage a slew of controlled assessment regulations in their absurd minutiae; and the morality of formative marking has reversed, so that it is now the choice of the corrupt.

When a commentator as estimable and as sympathetic to the plight of teachers as Fiona Millar is raising the spector of cheating for the attention of Guardian readers, it is time we had a look at the causes rather than just the effect. And, for crimes marginally more sophisticated than just putting the wrong grade on an essay or giving the kids the answers in exams, the cause goes by the name of controlled assessment.

Controlled assessment is an unnecessary and counter-productive regulation that actively prevents students from learning important skills. It is as open to abuse as the old coursework, has reversed morality so that marking is cheating, and is caused by exam boards not being able to act above buffoon level in terms of detecting the obvious. Drop it. And let's get back to marking as the moral choice, and dispense with the gross idea that being rigorous and professional in its application is now cheating.

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