



**Moore's Musings:  
The Bias Against "Bias:" In Defense of  
Subjectivity**

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I know I shouldn't read the "Letters to the Editor" section of our local paper, but I can't help myself—despite what it often does to my blood pressure, it's an addiction, and usually a source of entertainment as well as depression. Even though I know what's printed there doesn't reflect a random slice of humanity, the material is frequently an amazing source of material for my work in intellectual development—or lack thereof. Occasionally I'll get the special bonus of finding something that provokes some reflection about assessment, and of course that partial reinforcement only feeds the habit more!

Last week, in a commentary on the recent election results for Washington's governor, a writer made the following comment: "Washington state allowed the counting to continue until the original, unbiased machine tabulation was overturned by more fallible, biased human beings." There was an obvious ideological slant to the letter clearly coloring the perspective, but I'd like to set that aside for the time being and take this statement at face value, as

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**Creating Effective Learning Environments**

The date for submitting proposals to present at the Pacific Northwest Higher Education Teaching and Learning Conference has been extended to February 28, 2005. Be sure to check out the conference site and take a few moments to submit a proposal in one of four strands: The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Institutional Assessment and Campus Change; Distance Learning/Instructional Technologies; and Learning Support Services. In addition, you will find information on conference fees, lodging, and Schedule At-a-Glance. Online registration is also available.

This year's opening keynote address will be brought by John Parker. Parker has taught most subjects from grade one to college in Canada, the United States, and England and has won innovative teacher awards from the Association of Canadian Community Colleges and a North American Master Teacher Award from the University of Texas. In addition to the keynote address, Parker will present a concurrent session on both Thursday and Friday of the conference.

## Classroom Strategy: Giving Feedback that Promotes Learning

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I still remember the feedback I got on the first essay I wrote in freshman English. I had worked on it for a full week: writing, revising, rereading, rewriting. I wanted to wow my professor with my creativity. I wanted him to read my essay and break into song. (Okay, so I was eighteen.)

If he did break into song, apparently it was a dirge. With red ink, he circled a handful of spelling errors. (This, of course, was before spell-check.) Atop the first page, he wrote one lone and chilling sentence, which I now quote verbatim despite the intervening two score and four years: "Young man, this is hardly a good start on a college career." Like most first-year students, I was at least as smart as a rat in a Skinner box, so I quickly discerned what was important here. I turned my energy to correct spelling. One of my roommates, it turned out, was a human spell-checker and glad to help. After that, I submitted hurriedly prepared, bland, pasty writing with impeccable...er...impeccable spelling. I passed the course but, in retrospect, wasted the semester. John Dewey was right that the collateral learning is often more powerful than the lesson the educator intends to teach.

Lo these many years later, here is one of my guiding beliefs as an educator: Human beings are either protecting or growing, and, for the most part, these two approaches are incompatible. While protecting, we contract toward safety. While growing, we expand toward learning. Therefore, to encourage learning in my students (especially my struggling students), I need to create a learning environment safe enough for them to choose the risks of growth over the safety of protection.

In my experience (both as a student and instructor), few things make learners feel less safe than judgment. By "judgment," I mean an evaluation that spills over into a stated or implied criticism of the person. A "judgment" oozes self-righteousness. A "judgment"

says, "You are 'less-than.'" The finger of judgment waggles in the face of a grave and personal deficiency.

And here's what makes judgment even more complicated. Though I may not intend a judgment, students may still perceive one. Whether real or perceived, judgments wound all but the most confident, and when wounded, many students replace learning with protecting. Protecting often shows up as "fight or flight." In higher education, we see "fight" when a defensive student snaps an insult or files a groundless grievance. We see "flight" when a student withdraws or evaporates for no apparent reason. Anyone looking for a dissertation topic? How about a study exploring the impact of judgment on attrition in higher education? I think we'd be shocked to discover how much impact judgment has on students jumping ship.

Here, then, are four strategies I have found helpful in extracting judgment from evaluation and, thus, improving students' ability to learn from and act on corrective feedback.

1) **FIRST, FIND THE GOOD.** As experts, we can easily spot weaknesses in students' efforts, especially because what's "wrong" often dwarfs what's "right." But when I consciously look for something positive, I ALWAYS find it. So, first off, identify something praiseworthy about a student's comment, assignment, or test. Be specific and genuine. For example, "I was intrigued by your opening anecdote. It really grabbed me." (even though I am totally confused by what follows) or "You worked the first three steps of this problem beautifully. Bravo!" (even though the student's ultimate answer is miles from correct).

2) **OFFER CONCRETE SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT.** What could the student do better or differently next time? Again, be specific: "I think adding an example would go a long way towards helping me understand what you mean in your second paragraph." Or, "Please review pages 67-71 in our text book about multiplying two negative numbers. Then take another look at step 4."

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## STUDENT VOICES

This issue features a descriptive essay for English 101 taken from the 1997 *A Gathering of Voices*, an Anthology of Student Writing at Whatcom Community College. The essay writer says of this piece: “*A Day at Sea*” was a vivid recollection of a very influential experience and being able to communicate to others in written form brings a permanence the experience never had before. I am grateful for the opportunity to share my adventure with others.

### A Day at Sea

**Student’s Comments:** “A Day at Sea” was a vivid recollection of a very influential experience and being able to communicate to others in written form brings a permanence the experience never had before. I am grateful for the opportunity to share my adventure with others.

*-Brenda Apt, Student*

The sea and the wind roared like a million screaming voices only we could hear. We held on to the boat with all our strength, deftly handling the lines and sails in hope of gaining a glimmer of control over the powerful, unrelenting forces of nature. It seemed as if that night would never end; hour after hour the might ocean continued to pursue us, creeping so close we could feel the salty, mist laden air. Our insignificant vessel was catapulted ever higher, pausing for a brief moment, then falling down the other side of the immense waves. Water surged under the boat and away, continuing on into the vast, black night.

I awoke with a start from a fitful rest, remembering the events of the night before and immediately became aware that the voices had been silenced. From my bunk a glimmer of the morning sun danced on the cabin top. The storm had passed, a bright new day had begun, another possibility to experience the offerings of life.

Our sailboat insisted on leaning over a constant 30 degree angle, which made even life’s basic regimens challenging. I pulled myself out of my warm,

cozy bunk and struggled over to the gimbaled stove. I savored the 7-grain cereal that awaited me. Hot, pungent tea soothed my tired, aching body. I tidied up the small, compact cabin, making sure everything was stowed properly. The dishes sparkled from their salt water bath.

I then navigated the four stairs between the confining inside world and the huge expanse of aquamarine blue that awaited me on the other side of the companionway. The sails, filled to perfection by the force of the wind, looked glorious, the cockpit immaculate. A brilliant periwinkle sky dazzled overhead, melting in to the ocean for as far as I could see. It seemed the world had once again regained a sense of order.

As I contemplated the vast differences between this moment and the moments of the previous night, the intrusive urgency of the radio broke the silence. Out came the voice of humanity. Radio hobbyists, our link to the “real world,” greeted us daily. They spent their evenings in warm, comfortable homes talking to boats in the middle of the ocean. It seemed odd to me that they would want to talk to us or us to them, for that matter. I suppose we did so to fill voids in each other. They enjoyed arm chair traveling without the risk or inconvenience, and we enriched our daily routines with their spirited conversation. We shared information about weather and current news events and, when necessary, they provided our only link with family members in case of emergencies. As quickly as they had come, the voices faded back into the radio, leaving us once again to the peace of our daily routines.

As the sun rose high in the midday sky we kept a close vigil on the chart, our only resource that knew where we had been and how far we had to go. That day we gained another 100 miles, a mere “inch” on that long expanse of blue paper. Our journey had taken us from San Juan Island, down the coast to San Francisco, and from there across the Pacific Ocean. We had many more inches to go before we’d be able to see the waving palm trees and smell the fragrant hibiscus flowers of our island destination, a small speck on our chart known as Nuka Hiva, an island located in an island group known as the Marquesas.

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Afternoon eased into evening. The sky became a giant canvas splashed with the brilliance of the day, changing constantly from moment to moment until the sun embraced the sea and bid us farewell for another day. The boat diligently held her course as dark settled over the sea.

I think angels were looking down on us in that darkness, almost as a reward for the day's labors. Billions of lights, twinkling in the heavens, surrounded us and I, riding wave after wave, was keeping good company with the stars.

That day was one of many spent at sea, and it wasn't until several years later that I came to realize there had been more to my sailing than an exciting endurance test. This experience had provided a spiritual arena to test my limits as a human being, to work through so many issues which in day to day life can easily be ignored, walked away from and forgotten. Wanting to quit when the going got tough and surviving through difficult hardships were two of my most trying challenges. Many days on

that boat I yearned to just get off, to have just a moment where I wasn't being tossed around, to have a full night's rest or to just go for a walk around the block to clear my head. The ocean afforded me no such luxury. The spiritual growth that experience has given me carries over into all my endeavors. I strive now for personal challenges, knowing I will be a better person for them.

Now my days are filled with children to be taken care of and endless tasks to complete. Memories sneak up and catch me off guard, all the feelings and emotions stir in me, and I am once again rolling with the sea. I gather from these memories the personal strength to carry on, to see things through, no matter how difficult, and to persevere.

Thank you, O' Mighty Ocean, for the life lessons you so patiently taught me.

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### AAHE Cancels June 2005 Assessment Conference

The American Association for Higher Education has cancelled the June 2005 Assessment Conference. Although this decision was a difficult one to make, the financial risks this year were simply too great.

The good news is that AAHE is as committed to assessment as it has always been. They are refocusing and redirecting their effort in ways that they believe will serve the assessment community even more effectively.

As part of that refocusing, AAHE has already begun to enhance the range of resources they provide for the higher education community. By June 30, 2005, they will have run seven regional assessment workshops in the last academic year, and plan to expand efforts in regional workshops and small conferences next year. They have also initiated a community of practice called Practical Assessment on this website and a listserv on assessment ([prassessment@webcenter.aahe.org](mailto:prassessment@webcenter.aahe.org)). AAHE will feature work on new directions in assessment in AAHE News and will be redesigning an assessment site within the AAHE website to make it both useful and user-friendly.

In other words, AAHE will provide, through different means, the same kind of exposure to cutting-edge work, as well as many opportunities for collaboration and interaction, to which attendees at the June conference had become accustomed. Assessment research and practice will remain a central part of AAHE activity.

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I think it does reflect a deep-seated and culturally-based, genuine bias against subjective human judgment (the so-called "bias" in the above quote). While there are some countervailing trends in recent years, in large measure sparked and sustained by the assessment movement, this attitude is widespread in America and seems to be growing, reinforced no doubt by ideology, tradition, and ignorance. Rather than explore the root causes underlying this perspective, though, in the space I have here I'd like to reflect on its negative impact on meaningful assessment work and challenge its core assumptions. Despite its prevalence, those of us who care about teachers and the powerful role real assessment can play in improving teaching and learning need to actively resist this bias, not ignore, or worse yet, yield to it.

**If judgment is bias, then machines—as well as assessment instruments—are not "unbiased."**

To state the obvious, machines and tests are created by human beings who make a series of judgments and decisions in the process of designing and building the tools they create. In looking at the end product, of course, these judgments are invisible, but that doesn't mean they don't exist—just that it takes a little extra effort to understand them. Moreover, a level of error—fallibility if you will—is inevitable and assumed; the best one can hope for is to minimize and control for this error. For voting machines, that error might take the form of the now infamous hanging chads or stray and extra marks; for tests and assessments, the list of possible sources is considerably longer, including some basic issues like how well the items reflect the fundamental construct of the particular domain or topic being assessed and the consistency of responses on the items. [Don't worry—this isn't the time or place to rehash in great detail the graduate courses that many of us took on these issues, much less the arguments about how well, and in what ways, conventional psychometric notions apply to complex educational assessments. Maybe later, if you ask nicely J...For a thorough description of the reigning paradigm in this area, see *American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education. (1985). Standards*

*for educational and psychological testing.* Washington, DC: Authors.]

**Neither machines nor assessment instruments can "think."** Despite numerous science fiction scenarios to the contrary, the field of artificial intelligence is a very long way from creating machines or tools that truly capture the complexity of human intelligence. The best ones currently—like the chess program that holds its own against grandmasters—work by applying what machines can do better than humans, namely, sheer speed, to a defined set of human judgments given a very large but relatively finite set of scenarios and parameters. Very few areas of learning and expertise are as circumscribed or as well-defined as chess, however, and therefore it is extremely difficult to be as successful in other arenas. Several years ago I had the opportunity to be involved in a project attempting to apply "neural net" software, a kind of programming allegedly more closely resembling the process of human judgment, to the assessment of intellectual development in college students. The work was intriguing, but ultimately unsuccessful, in part because of the complexity of capturing and codifying the full range of contextual decisions and judgments involved. We should definitely be working to increase our understanding of these judgments, in this area as well as with other complex educational outcomes, and to the extent that we do it should be at least theoretically possible to improve the capacity of computers and assessment instruments to mimic such judgments. For the foreseeable future, however, an active human intelligence will remain the best option for making trained and rigorous judgments. This human intelligence can be applied to making those judgments directly, or it may be applied to the design of tools to reflect those judgments in an effort to do assessment on a larger scale in a more cost-effective way, but in pursuing the latter approach we shouldn't denigrate or disguise the critical role of the very human judgments involved.

**Subjectivity should be celebrated, not silenced in an illusory quest for an objectivity that doesn't really exist.** Somehow the notion of "subjectivity" has come to suggest an arbitrary

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perspective (the Microsoft Word thesaurus lists “bias,” “prejudice,” and “partisanship” as its three suggested synonyms), but that’s not the primary definition of the term, which to me has more to do with conveying a sense of a personal vision/judgment grounded in an individual’s particular context. I’m not a philosopher, and I expect serious students of Kant, among others, will have something to say here, but I would argue that while we are all trapped in our respective subjectivities, there’s nothing inherently arbitrary about them. The challenge is to understand, articulate, and refine the bases for our subjective judgments and to be open to learning from the rich tapestry of subjective perspectives others bring to bear on the same topic or issue. Arguing that such subjectivity is bad and therefore should be ignored or actively rejected does a serious disservice to our students and vitiates the opportunity to improve the quality of the individual and collective judgments required for the learning process at all levels. More significantly and insidiously, this bias against subjectivity contributes further to what seems to be an effort to de-professionalize teaching. There’s a current bill in the Legislature that calls for the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to require assessment vendors to

...provide diagnostic instruments...that are inexpensive and quickly administered, easily scored by a teacher or through technology, and designed to provide teachers with enough information to determine student-specific performance on the grade level expectations measured in the assessment.

While I’m reasonably sure that this bill is well-intentioned, its premise and parameters are disturbing. To begin with, the required criteria are internally inconsistent—it’s essentially impossible to provide cheap and effective assessments to address all classroom levels and contexts. My real concern, though, is the subtext—why are we asking external test vendors to create assessments that can only hope to mimic vaguely the kind of

quality, situated diagnostic judgments that teachers make all of the time in helping their students learn? I’ve written before about the power of formative classroom assessment, but I’m under no illusion that all teachers have the skills or time to do this work consistently well. However, [Black & William’s](#) persuasive review of international research supports strongly the central positive role formative assessment and quality feedback (provided by an enormous variety of subjective teachers) can play in student learning—why not invest our scarce resources in helping teachers design and implement better classroom assessments rather than spending the money to have an external vendor create de-contextualized assessments that may or may not really add any diagnostic value to what the teacher already does or should know? Certainly part of the answer is that policy-makers deal in policy areas where they can exert control—sort of like the old joke of looking for your lost keys under the streetlight not because that’s where you lost your keys, but because that’s where the light is—and because the notion of professional development or in-service training seems nebulous and difficult to measure. Intentionally or not, though, the other message is that “subjective” teachers are not to be trusted with something this important; we need “objective” test makers to provide us with unambiguous solutions. I’m all for doing as much as we can to minimize bias in our assessment efforts, but being biased against subjective judgments doesn’t really address that concern, and in the process undermines teachers and the crucial role they already play in assessment-as-learning.

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**3) PROVIDE AN OVERALL POSITIVE COMMENT...AND RAISE THE BAR.** In summarizing your feedback, offer global encouragement about the student's work: "I find a lot to like about your project." Also offer encouragement about the student's effort: "I can see your hard work is really starting to pay off." Studies have shown the importance of helping students realize that their effort, even more than innate and immutable abilities, makes a huge contribution to academic success. Finally, advocate for an even greater level of excellence. "I have high expectations for your next project, and I very much look forward to seeing it."

**4) USE "I STATEMENTS" WHEREVER POSSIBLE.** This is a guideline I endeavor to weave throughout the first three. "I statements" are especially important when explaining reasons for suggesting a particular improvement. For example, I could say, "Your second paragraph is very confusing, and you should add an example." An alternative that I think helps struggling students hear this suggestion is: "I find myself confused by your second paragraph. I think adding an example would go a long way towards helping me understand what you mean." I know it's easier to use "I statements" in most humanities and social science courses than in disciplines like math and science where answers are more likely "right" or "wrong." Still, instructors in math and science can help students by focusing feedback on the correct answer, not the incorrect person: "The correct answer for this problem is 47%" (not "Nope, you got

it wrong."). If the difference here seems subtle, imagine the words spoken with the wagging finger of judgment pointing at you, and you might better comprehend the inner experience of the struggling student.

Psychologist Abraham Maslow described well the inner battle between safety and growth: "[W]e can consider the process of healthy growth to be a never ending series of free choice situations, confronting each individual at every point throughout his life, in which he must choose between the delights of safety and growth, dependence and independence, regression and progression, immaturity and maturity. Safety has both anxieties and delights; growth has both anxieties and delights. We grow forward when the delights of growth and anxieties of safety are greater than the anxieties of growth and the delights of safety."

With effective feedback, we can help students minimize the anxieties of safety and maximize the delights of intellectual growth. Had my freshman English professor been a bit more skilled at providing feedback, perhaps he would have conveyed to me the importance of dressing my thoughts in correct spelling AND encouraged me to continue growing as a writer, a student, and a lifelong learner.

