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Soft(a)ware in the English Classroom

This month's column focuses our attention on an important phenomenon in our schools: how implementation of data-driven decision-making positions the needs of information systems above those of our students and educators.

Education Reform and Potemkin Villages: Expanding Conceptions of "Data"

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On a cold December morning, the talking heads of the education reform movement leapt from the heated debates of op-ed columns and television screens to the educational community where I worked as a literacy coach. These giants of the reform movement, Arne Duncan, Joel Klein, then Mayor Michael Bloomberg, and Dennis Walcott among them, were visiting the Mid-Manhattan Alternative Education Complex to announce to the world that the high school equivalency (HSE) world was going to be "modernized." New 21st-century evaluations would rise from the ashes of the old GED, evaluations that would better prepare learners for future success in college and career.

Teachers, administrators, and support staff scrambled to polish every doorknob and ensure that our VIPs would visit classrooms that were positive learning environments replete with visible learning objectives and engaging activities. In the short speeches they delivered, we learned that the new evaluations would be aligned to the Common Core State Standards[1] and that the GED would become a for-profit collaboration between the American Council on Education (ACE) and Pearson, the world's largest corporation in the burgeoning educational market. It was difficult to listen to these announcements with our entire community focused on impressing the external eyes of our visitors.

This approach to external eyes can lead to what I call the Potemkin Village approach to education reform. Potemkin was a governor under Catherine the Great who was concerned when the czarina wanted to directly observe how the settlers were faring in the Crimea. As the settlers starved in the underdeveloped, wartorn region, Potemkin is said to have arranged cheering well-fed actors to populate hastily put-together villages for Catherine's tour, giving the impression of a thriving populace. I argue that much of the current education reform movement operates in a similar fashion, using reductive notions of data to create the *appearance* of growth as opposed to authentic and sustainable growth in pedagogical practice and outcomes.

Data tell a story. How we select, manage, organize, and report those data influences the story in two ways: (1) it reveals our values and priorities and (2) it has the power to shape, highlight, and/or obscure the knowledge it purports to share. Software and information systems play a central role here as the logic they rely on to structure and use data saturates educational practice (Lynch).

During my first year of teaching, I learned a powerful lesson on how data demands and management can shape the learning process. I was working with elementary-level learners in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan. According to the city tests, many of our children had low reading levels.[2] To generate the Potemkin Village version of reading progress, school administrators created a targeted pull-out reading growth initiative in the upper grades. The class was divided into thirds, and only our middle-level readers were invited

to participate. The thinking was this: the highest level readers were already doing well on the evaluations, so teachers should not concern themselves with them. The lowest-level readers were too far from the benchmarks that counted, so it made little sense to expend efforts on them. What made "sense" was to focus on the middle group, the readers who were just below the standard that constituted progress. If enough of these readers tested above the mark, the representation of our school data would show significant progress. Data reports hid the fact that this targeted initiative effectively ignored two thirds of our learners. The story told by our improved data was a Potemkin Village that made it seem as though our entire community was experiencing meaningful growth.

The way in which data are organized can also obscure undesirable outcomes. One of the loudest refrains from the current reform movement is that more public accountability is needed, and that the forms of accountability in place will lead to greater educational opportunity and equity. However, there are no publicly available data on New York City Department of Education–run high school equivalency programs such as the site where I worked as a literacy coach. Learners can be "pushed out" (Fine) from traditional high schools to HSE programs with little penalty to the sending school's progress report. A common contributing factor to this "push-out" is the learner's test scores, which can bring down the school's standing. Low-achieving learners are converted to data (in this case, "bad data") and then

are sent to the limbo of the high school equivalency world. Though they are run by the NYC Department of Education, HSE programs are legally distinct from schools, so the data demands (that is, the need for publicly available progress reports) and accountability measures are different.[3] As long as students are in these "alternative" district programs, there is no penalty reflected in the sending school's data, and the "bad data" learners are off the books.[4] These young people effectively disappear from the data map while in a HSE program. If and when the learners earn their HSE, their data suddenly reappear in New York City's graduation calculation. In short, the data have been arranged in a way that highlights the positives while hiding the negatives, conveying a particular narrative of progress that makes the system look stronger. This is akin to hiding risk in financial markets before the crisis of 2007–08, when risky

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investments were hidden through derivatives, creating the appearance of a healthy marketplace. In education, this method has both similarities and differences: young people in these programs, who have many strengths and knowledge bases, are measured using metrics that frame them as bad data, and these data are then hidden or adapted using creative accounting. At times, it seems the information systems that are meant to serve as tools to represent or inform strong pedagogies

instead become the end in themselves. In these instances, the educational system's purpose is more about producing certain forms of data than creating powerful teaching and learning opportunities and outcomes.

Some argue that these examples show that we should resist a data-driven approach to the learning process, but I argue that we should neither shy away from the term *data*, nor allow it to be co-opted by the current reform movement. Instead, we must expand our understanding of what counts as data, particularly in our classrooms and within the fields of literacy and English education (Gorlewski). Research in our field shows that language, literacies, and identity are inextricably intertwined (González, Moll, and Amanti; Lewis, Enciso, and Moje), and we must expand our conception of data to include learners' identities, cultural practices, understandings of the world, and out-of-school literacies.

When educators cross paths with the giants of education reform, as my colleagues and I did when Arne Duncan and others used our community for their press release on that cold December morning four years ago, I hope that we will not expend our energy creating our own version of a Potemkin Village. Instead, we might engage them in conversation about what knowledge matters in our teaching and learning practice, and perhaps how this knowledge is not reflected within our current—and limited—notion of what counts as data. Software and information management systems are robust enough to represent learning in rich and

complex ways; there is little to be gained from a pedagogical standpoint when we reduce learning or success to a one or zero.

Editor's Comment

The author's account of a city hiding some students as "bad data" reveals a ubiquitous pitfall in the current reforms: to prioritize data in the ways we are often forced to do is to impose computational logic on the human beings who teach and learn. Information systems and software are capable of more, but only if we ensure our "imagination systems" drive their use.

Notes

1. High school equivalencies (HSEs) became aligned to the Common Core in January 2014. While not engaging debates about the Common Core in this space, it is worth mentioning that alignment of HSEs with the Common Core coincides with their privatization.

When the GED became a trademark owned by Pearson, market competition lead to three HSEs: the GED; the Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC), created by McGraw-Hill; and the Hi-Set, created by the sole nonprofit in the market, the Educational Testing Service (ETS). I leave it to the reader to decide if the reductive notions of data we experience in educational evaluation are the result of concerns for equity, teaching, and learning, or ease and profitability.

2. This was in the late 1990s, and as we know, these sorts of evaluations have intensified in the intervening decade and a half.

3. The NYCDOE also uses this legal distinction to have students waive their federally mandated special education accommodations when they transfer from a school to a HSE program. According to internal NYCDOE data, roughly 20 percent of the learners sent to these programs have individualized educational plans (IEPs).

4. In the New York City Department of Education, a school gains points for each learner who earns a diploma within the allotted time, but loses one half of a point for each student who leaves the educational system or transfers to a HSE program but does not eventually earn the HSE. If the student leaves the HSE program, the student becomes a "negative discharge" and the sending school loses one half of one point on the four-year and six-year cohort student accountability models. *EJ*

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