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by Bill Gribbin

SOL's: The Students Speak Up

The "discussion" of SOL's has ranged from the editorial page to the faculty meeting. We have heard from practically every position with perhaps one exception: the students themselves. After all, the students have some high stakes with SOL's, too.

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This spring, I interviewed students in English classes at four different schools: three in central Virginia and one in the Tidewater region. Although I asked teachers and administrators to solicit students from both ends of the learning curve, clearly, the ones who volunteered were the brighter ones, most likely those who do well in school. After receiving permission to conduct the interviews, I assured the students, teachers, and schools that they would remain anonymous. The interviews occurred in mid-to-late April 2003.

I talked first with three eighth graders—two girls and a boy—from a central Virginia middle school. The set-up for this interview ran parallel with that of the other interviews; we sat talking quietly in the back of the classroom while the rest of the class continued with an activity or assignment. With my tape recorder on a desk, I used a legal pad to take notes. In each session, my opening questions were identical: "How do you feel about SOL's ?" "How do you experience them?"

Without exception, each group's initial response ran directly to SOL *testing*, not the *standards*. With no prompting, the students referenced the tests with comments expressing fear ("Oh, Lord"); disapproval ("useless," a male sophomore said; "tests should be given in the seventh grade," an eighth grade girl noted); and respect ("... good idea to know how students are doing," said an eighth grade boy labeled "smart" by the two girls in his group).

The senior high students weren't as charitable about the SOL's as their middle school counterparts. Even when I pointed out to them that I hadn't asked them to discuss testing, two female high school juniors were not deterred: "My teachers wrote the SOL's on the board everyday, but it's [i.e., the teaching done for SOL's] not about the class." The other girl said "I came from another state that had standards but no testing. Here it seems like they're teaching to the test."

I followed up with the question "But are you learning?"

"We're learning a little, but not any more or less that I did in [State Y]."

When I asked students what role their teachers played in focusing the attention on testing, the answer was again unanimous: Their teachers played a huge role in their orientation. "Our history teacher will spend three weeks reviewing what we [should have] learned in the sixth and seventh grades," one middle school student said.

"Teachers teach you to pass the test," one said of the SOL test for English .

There were rare exceptions. One came as a compliment from her students to an eleventh grade English teacher in a central Virginia high school: "Compared to science, history, and math, our English class is not so SOL-based. We're reading a novel right now... It's not going to be part of the SOL's [the tests]."

Maybe the most poignant comment came from another senior high student in English: "... everything's so limited anymore—only to SOL's."

What I didn't anticipate was the students' expressed sympathy for "other students," i.e., the kids who do not earn high test scores. The middle schoolers voiced concern over the peer pressure they felt to tell their classmates how they did on the tests. This pressure showed itself,

the students said, by the tendency of lower ability students to overestimate how well they did on the tests. "Kids will remember the three or four questions they got right," one girl said, "and they'll think they got the others right, too."

But when the results come back, what then? "They're devastated," a senior at another high school told me. "They just about want to give up."

Aside from students' awareness of the misplaced focus on testing and the negative effects of testing on poor test takers, there was also the wide recognition of the damage SOL's were doing to teachers and to teaching. One female senior who "liked to talk" told me that the tests were "limiting"; that is, they placed too much "structure" on the "course and the teacher." She talked about "older" teachers (I was afraid to ask "How old?") who really like to teach "but who are limited to how much they can do." On the other hand she thought SOL's might not bother the "younger teachers" so much because they had "gotten used to going about their teaching in a set way."

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As a result of the focus on testing, the girl said, "we don't have any hands-on learning anymore – none. For example, we used to do more oral presentations, but now those are left out because everything has to be fitted in to get ready for the test."

As a teacher of English methods and pedagogy, I was astounded by how much implicit knowledge these students had about the teaching process. Dan Lorty's oft-cited "apprenticeship of observation" no longer suggests to me the limited nature of student awareness.

With respect to the SOL's, the students "get it." In their view, the standards are not about curriculum and rigorous learning as much as they are about the students' performance on a test at certain points in their schooling. One male sophomore believed the composition of the tests was unfair: "The people who make up that test aren't here. My teacher knows what I know."

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On the subject of the SOL's, perhaps students and their teachers have found common ground. Both "sides" express sympathy for the other – especially the older students who are able to reflect on the effects of the process and see beyond their personal feelings.

Please permit me to conclude this article with the reflections of a college freshman who attended high school in the Tidewater region. In an unedited piece she wrote in response to my questions, she unwittingly confirms what other students have expressed as she touches upon these topics: students, teachers, and teaching.

> While I was in high school, the S.O.L.'s did not count for or against us, testing and score-wise. However, the stress of the "schedule" that we had to keep was very apparent. Classes were a quickly paced, tightly packed block of an hour and a half. The teachers had a list or we would be behind for the next day.
>
> My typical day in English class would be me walking into the class, taking a seat, and immediately looking at the board to write down the SWBAT for the day (Student Would Be Able To). We would then jump right into whatever was set for us to do that day.
>
> With the English SOL [test] came extra work because not only was there the multiple choice, but there was an essay to complete as well. The task of writing the essay is a daunting task at any point, but the fact that

the student and the teacher knows that this essay may make or break their score makes it downright scary for some. The multiple choices, although less scary is also difficult, because it covers a broad spectrum of topics from the entire year, some of which haven't been taught in the class yet because of the early date of the test. This never made sense to me, the fact that the test was given in the middle of the semester, when the teacher has only been able to cover a little more than half of the material that needed to be covered. This isn't fair to the student or the teacher.

I just have to put a little note in about the teachers, because I have seen all that my Dad and his co-workers have gone through with the actual teaching part of the SOL's. The teachers in Virginia are put under a considerable amount of stress. The teachers must teach the required material, in the required amount of time, and they have to get the required amount of high scores from their students or they run the risk of getting fired. This is a problem, because some of the students don't really care about the tests and will purposefully fail them to "make a statement" against the teachers and the school. I don't think that this is fair, because it does not accurately depict the hard work of the teachers as they work day in and day out to teach this material to the students.

My last thought on all of this is about the students in high school now. They are required to pass this test to pass the class. I agree that the SOL's are a good testing tool to see where the students are in a class, but I do not think that this is or should be the only evaluation that matters. The students are taking this class to gain knowledge in the subject, and teachers give quizzes and tests periodically during the semester to judge where the students stand in their comprehension of the material. To have one, and only one test to judge what a student knows about a whole semester of material, is unrealistic and definitely unfair. The stress of this test on the students is hard to imagine. To work hard all semester, get good grades on tests, papers, and quizzes, and then get to the SOL, and fail it would mean that all they worked on all year was pointless. This situation would keep the students from having a positive attitude about school and doing well in school. This is a major deterrent from the main goals of most educational facilities, to encourage the students to learn and succeed. Well that is about all I have to say about the SOL Test. I hope that this helps a bit.

Sincerely,
"R"

Bill Gribbin taught high school English in Pennsylvania for 16 years, during which time he earned a master's in English Education from Edinboro University of Pennsylvania and a Ph. D. in Educational Administration from Penn State University.

In 1980 Gribbin came to Liberty University where he has taught both Freshman English and the English Methods course for over 20 years. He also supervises student teachers in English. Since 1985 he has been dean of the School of Communications at Liberty. He and his wife Phyllis, an elementary teacher, make their home in Forest, VA.

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