



education review // reseñas educativas

editors: gene v glass gustavo e. fischman melissa cast-brede

a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

April 20, 2010

Arizona State University
ISSN 1094-5296

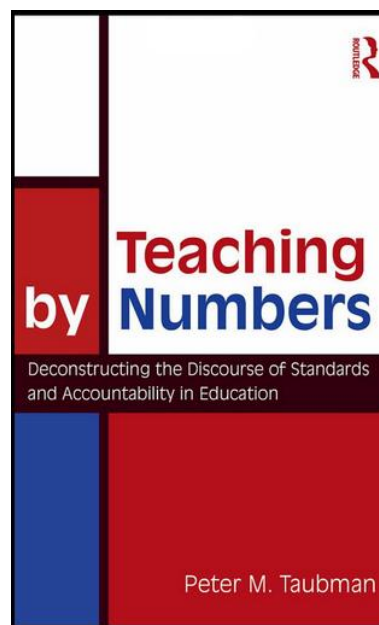
Taubman, Peter M. (2009). *Teaching by Numbers: Deconstructing the Discourse of Standards and Accountability in Education*. New York: Routledge.

Pp. xiv + 236 ISBN: 0-415-96274-9

Reviewed by Amy L. Boelé
University of Colorado at Boulder

In his quest to map the evolution of discourse pertaining to standards and accountability, Peter Taubman exhausts the literature as he reviews a wide array of sources that range from policy reports, scholarly articles and books, newspaper articles, and speeches. Readers will find themselves reflecting on their own perceptions of the purpose of education, their definition of learning, and the heavy burden of responsibility placed on today's educators.

In addition, readers can expect to find a pervasive sense of paradox throughout the book. From the statistical impossibility of all students meeting grade level standards, to the punitive hierarchy created among the very groups meant to be helped by standards, to teachers' powerlessness resulted from surveillance that is intended



Citation: Boelé, Amy L. (2010 April 20) Review of *Teaching by Numbers* by Peter M. Taubman. *Education Review*, 13. Retrieved [Date] from <http://edrev.asu.edu/reviews/rev909.pdf>

to provide autonomy, the elucidated contradictions are fascinating. Perhaps the ultimate paradox, explored in chapter six, is public education's embrace of a system that ultimately contributes to its demise.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Taubman begins this introductory chapter by artfully drawing a comparison between the acts of painting by numbers and teaching by numbers. This metaphorical analysis sets the stage for the remainder of the book, in which the author fleshes out the phenomenon of how teaching has become a prescribed form of art, more, a science, in which standards and numbers determine the success—or failure—of our nation's educational system. The predetermined, 'teach by number' prescriptive approach acts in tandem with the system of standards and accountability, and it results largely from rhetoric that depicts teachers as incompetent.

This chapter also introduces the idea that American education is becoming thoroughly indentured to the fields of science, medicine, and business, which results in "a direct assault on the intellectual, aesthetic, and ethical life of teachers," and it presents a "radical misunderstanding of teaching" (p. 5). The supposed neutrality and exactitude of numbers imply fairness and pacify critics of education because of the numbers' perceived objectivity.

Chapter 2: The Current State of Affairs

Taubman refers to numerous writings since *A Nation at Risk* that continue to declare disaster in education. In each, the authors critique our educational system as mediocre, dysfunctional, and the primary source of society's ailments, such as racial inequality. Their solution: good teachers, as measured by and manipulated by good student test scores. This is epitomized in the 2002 movement for educational reform, No Child Left Behind.

Taubman subsequently outlines counterarguments to the rhetoric of shock and fear, which were largely unheard by

Peter Taubman is Associate Professor of Education in the School of Education at Brooklyn College, where he teaches graduate courses in education and English. His scholarly work includes the construction of teachers' and students' psycho/social identities. Recently, he has focused his work in the context of urban public schools, and he helped develop the Bushwick School for Social Justice in Brooklyn.

the public. Scholars attempted to refute the claims of crisis by showing that these claims were “manufactured,” “exaggerated,” and “fabrications” from “ambiguous data” (p. 11), but to no apparent avail. As Taubman so insightfully points out, the reform of standards and accountability, meant to offer reprieve to the so-called educational crisis, paradoxically induced a far greater sense of crisis, with cries for a hasty cure. Of course, the cure was (and is) supposed to be found in the mere act of testing, which cyclically serves to reproduce the crisis. The cure extends to implementing best practices and research-based practices, which are intended to produce good test scores and to legitimize teachers’ work by “achiev[ing] the status of physicians and engineers” (p. 15).

Chapter 3: Tests

This chapter maps the ubiquity of tests in education from multiple angles: K-12 testing, NCLB, teacher testing, and testing in higher education. Taubman is astute to point out the tests’ financial strain on the educational system but conversely the large gain for testing companies, such as McGraw-Hill, IBM, Pearson, and ETS. Despite teachers’ concerns for a loss of teaching time due to the ever-increasing amount of tests, and despite scholars’ concerns of tests’ validity, particularly in the resulting uses and consequences, and despite severe budget cuts, the system of education remains bound to a system of testing.

Providing examples from several high-stakes tests, Taubman reveals items in which more than one answer choice could be argued as correct; what’s more, the correct answer could be argued as incorrect. Taubman’s critiques of the “recipe-like approaches to teaching” (p. 47) as a result of narrow and invalid tests are integral in understanding his broader concern with the degradation of teachers as a result of standards and accountability.

Taubman devotes a section of this chapter to efforts of activism and opposition to the current system of high-stakes testing. He concludes that the opposition has not been successful, in part because of a lack of media attention and

in part because educators have not been in solidarity with the opposition's efforts.

Chapter 4: The Language of Educational Policy

In this chapter, Taubman compares the discourses of federal, state, and local government, along with educational organizations affiliated with corporations, and the educational establishment.

The section on federal, state, and local government aptly begins with a speech given to the 2007 Presidential scholars by President Bush, followed by remarks made by Secretary Spellings to the Manhattan Institute earlier that year. As Taubman discusses, their sentiments are rife with analogies of education and financial investments, implications of teachers victimizing their students, the objectivity and definiteness of numbers, and the responsibility of teachers for our nation's economic and militaristic health. Taubman proceeds to demonstrate how state and local governments tie education to the corporate sector, as evidenced by policy claims (National Governor's Association) of American students' ill-preparedness to compete in a global economy and of the necessity for education to partner with businesses.

Taubman boldly surmises that the educational establishment, which includes educational policymakers and those who claim to represent the views of educators, has embraced the discourse of standards and accountability because "the educators who sit on boards with CEOs and politicians can enjoy the sense that they are now with the movers and the shakers, and can hold onto the illusion that at last educators are being treated as professionals" (p. 75).

Chapter 5: Audit Culture: Standards and the Practices of Accountability

Taubman paints Foucauldian surveillance as the underlying force behind standards and accountability. Surveillance comes from afar: "school report cards, national rankings,

admission numbers, test scores...” (p. 94), but it also is placed within individuals, through self-evaluation practices. Additionally, Foucault’s notion of governmentality treats a population as in need of an intervention. Hence, the audit culture implies that teachers weren’t already doing their jobs. Taubman suggests that holding teachers and students under a microscope creates a diversion from larger systemic issues, such as the resegregation of schools, which have thus essentially become invisible.

Critiquing neoliberalism and the corporatization of education, Taubman reasons that education’s relationship with the business world deters teachers from risk, innovation, ambiguity, and difficulty. Additionally, a business approach to education is detrimental because of its inherent relentless pursuit of self-interest, regardless of any incurred consequences. Taubman provides a long list of ways in which the corporate sector has intruded upon education, along with a thorough list of additional critical works of a market approach to education.

When information is commodified, it lends itself to common standards, so that the work is interchangeable, and it can be outsourced to cheaper producers. Taubman points to the incredible contradiction around educational standards, such as the statistical impossibility of all students achieving a grade level average. He similarly notes that standards are meant to render diverse groups similar, but they actually create inequalities, since “disparities of resources, power, histories, abilities, and interests” exist. Furthermore, standards create a hierarchy of differences and are “cast as the fault of the schools, the students, the teachers, or the families” (p. 114). And as a result of accountability, “the autobiographical, the subjective, the situational, the temporal, the relational, the contingent are ignored or veiled” (p. 122).

Chapter 6: The Seduction of a Profession

In this chapter, Taubman explores educators’ lack of resistance to the hegemony of the audit culture. He points

to four reasons that education has in fact embraced the audit culture: fear, shame, fantasies, and lost ideals.

Like the dehumanizing prevalence of surveillance cameras, police presence, and scanning, especially in urban public schools, the audit culture serves to control from afar, inducing an uneasy sense of fear, but acting under the disguise of help and protection. Furthermore, teachers have been driven to embrace the audit culture by their fear of dwindling resources and the potential loss of their professional legitimacy. Fears of so-called failure, largely decried by the corporate sector, lead educators to feel ashamed of their work. Taubman again refers to *A Nation at Risk* to elucidate the blame that is placed upon educators for the problems in society. Educators and non-educators alike attribute inequities in education to the fault of the schools. If only teachers were better prepared, worked harder, were more culturally sensitive, then they could eradicate racism and other inequities in education. Taubman ultimately suggests that when educators criticize within, they only perpetuate systems of accountability, which destroys public education. Exacerbated by stories in movies and books, successful educators are seen as those who sacrifice everything for their work. Educators' fantasies lie in the belief in perfect practices or curriculum to obtain meaningful work, which leads them to believe that they are contributing to a greater good.

Chapter 7: Intellectual Capital: How the Learning Sciences Led Education Astray

According to Taubman, one final force in educators' embrace of the audit culture is found in the learning sciences. Discourse of the learning sciences uncritically embraced by educators leads to an embrace of medical models, positivist science, the military, and the ubiquitous corporate sector. Taubman traces the history of the learning sciences to behaviorist and militaristic roots, and he draws connections to common "best practices" in education: task analysis, fixed demonstrable outcomes, instructional objectives, and at the foundation, learning as something to be observed and thus measured. Taubman even critiques

the focus on metacognition and problem-solving; metacognition is critiqued because of its simulation of surveillance in self-regulation and problem-solving because of its usefulness in the business world.

Taubman then critiques three concepts central to the learning sciences: the environment, motivation, and behavior. To Taubman, designing classroom environments is both prescriptive and stimulus-oriented, and the learning sciences' approach to environments excludes any consideration of human subjectivity. Motivation presents contention for Taubman, as it implies another means by which to delimit definitions of learning. By trusting in predictable and controllable behaviors to produce desired outcomes, educators simulate consumerism through manipulation. Taubman likens the learning sciences' conception of learning to behaviorism, in that the demonstrated performance, a response, is "both the determinant and the measurement of what constitutes successful pedagogy and curriculum" (p. 179). This is problematic because "[E]ducation or teaching comes to focus on *controlling* thinking rather than on the messy, complicated give and take of struggling with questions and problems" (p. 185).

While I certainly share Taubman's concerns about teaching as manipulation, I suggest that he views the learning sciences as monolithic. In doing so, he ignores approaches to learning that advance notions of complexity and that counter his critiques of a behaviorist approach. For example, cultural-historical activity theorists consider the dialectic between the individual and social. Additionally, complication and contradiction are considered integral in the processes of learning.

Conclusion

Reading the book as a former special education teacher, I was eager to find discussion of ableism and ability-related commodities, in addition to the stated commodities of information. Ideologies that accompany standards and accountability certainly have implications for current systems

of *diagnosing* and *treating* dis/abilities through students' observable and measurable products that get placed on a hierarchy; however, this was not addressed in the book. Regardless, I wholly appreciate Taubman's efforts to critique the climate of blame and defamation in defense of teachers. Peter Taubman is fervent in his language, thorough in his literature review, and provocative in his arguments. In his conclusion, he advises educators to embrace a constant state of mystery and questioning, rather than an assuredness that they know—and can ever obtain—the best way to educate students. In doing so, educators challenge the discourses and practices of standards and accountability.

About the Reviewer

Amy Boelé is a former special education teacher of six years. She is now a doctoral student at the University of Colorado at Boulder in the department of Educational Equity and Cultural Diversity.

Copyright is retained by the first or sole author,
who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*.
<http://edrev.asu.edu>

Editors
Gene V Glass
Gustavo Fischman
Melissa Cast-Brede
