

Studying for Life, Not for School

By Bryan Stafford

I have been teaching high school and college courses part-time for many years now, first as a substitute, then as an adjunct, and now in a more structured role. Two+ colleges and a high school, and a stack of graded assignments that I still do not fully enjoy putting a number on. I say that up front because it matters to the rest of this. I love the teaching. I do not love grading. It's not the task, that's easy. It's more about the underpinning, and the gap between those two things is what this whole piece is really about.

I should be clear about why I teach in the first place. I do not do it for the money. The money would not be worth the hours if that were the point, considering what I do. I do it because it makes me whole. It allows me to make an input at a critical life point. When I walk into a classroom and get to share what I have learned from a career of actually doing the work, something in me lights up. Yes, it is tiring. It can run long. There are nights when I am worn out before I even start. Then there is writing the lectures in an engaging manner. And yet, with all of this, it gives me energy rather than taking it. I came to teaching because I did not have someone doing this for me when I was younger, and I wanted to be that for someone else. In my own quiet way, I think of it as a kind of calling—my own ministry. I get to help young people prepare for their careers and the life ahead of them. That is reason enough to keep showing up.

But there is something that bothers me. It is the thing I keep circling back to after every class, after every graded test, after every assignment I hand back. It sits with me on the drive home. It weighs heavily on me. And it took me a long time to name it.

I am a practitioner who teaches

Here is how I describe myself, and I mean it as anything other than a fact. I am not a professional teacher. I am a practitioner who teaches. That distinction is important to me. I did not come up through education programs and pedagogy theory, nor did that excite me. I will never be the teacher's teacher or an expert on education. I came up through doing the work, making the mistakes, learning the lessons the hard way, and building real competence (and perspective that hopefully leads to wisdom) over the years. What I bring into the room is not a textbook. It is a life of practice. That is my whole value to the students, and it is also the source of my discomfort.

The discomfort is this. I do not care for grades, and I am not very comfortable assigning them. Over the years, I have learned to do it better. I built rubrics, and they genuinely

helped, so I hold to them. I designed assignments that push learning forward rather than just checking a box. A lot of my assignments are pass or fail, and they focus on application, on building toward a bigger picture rather than memorizing for a moment. Not about simple memory recall or abstract process flow. I lean on reflection papers, where students tell me what they took away, how they processed it, and how they might actually use it down the road. I set clear SMART goals for each student that we return to all term long. I have tried, in other words, to build a class that serves learning.

And still the question will not leave me alone. When I sat with this past term and really thought about it, one question rose above the rest. What is best for the future of the people I teach? What actually builds skill into true competence? What gives them real confidence in their own ability? What prepares them best for the life that is coming?

I will be honest about my own limits here. Today's students cannot fully appreciate what they need now to be ready later. That is not a knock on them. It is just the nature of being young. And while I may have a little more perspective, I am limited too. My past is not their path, and many teachers misunderstand this relationship. My environment was not their environment. On top of that, the world is changing faster than any of us can keep up with, with technology and culture shifting beneath everyone's feet. So, I am trying to prepare people for a future none of us can clearly see, using my own road map that may already be out of date.

That leaves me with real tension, and I want to lay it out plainly. Should I lean on the metric that is traditional and easy to understand, the test score, the clean number in the gradebook? Should I be more hard-nosed, offer less grace, and care less about the messy progress of learning so that I can point to a tidy instrument? Or should I keep my focus where my gut tells me it belongs, on the learning and the growth, even when that is harder to measure and harder to defend?

The line that put it into words

Then Pastor Aaron Schultz of Immanuel Lutheran Church said something that landed exactly where I needed it. He was opening a lesson and mentioned a friend of his who, somehow, knew more of the verses than he did, and he was the pastor. He wondered why that was. His answer was the thing I had been reaching for without the words. He said that he, as a pastor-in-training, had been studying for school, while his friend had been studying for life.

Studying for school, or studying for life. That was it. That was the whole thing I had been chewing on for so long, said in one clean line. I will admit it fits my own worldview, so

maybe I was ready to hear it. But it did more than agree with me. It articulated what I believe in a way I had never managed on my own. The reason that distinction matters so much is that the two kinds of studying produce two very different people. One walks away with a grade. The other walks away with something they can use for the rest of their life.

So let me make the case for studying for life. And let me be fair about it, because there are real limits and real reasons we lean on tests in the first place. But I want to come back, in the end, to where I started.

What the research actually says about cramming

Start with the most familiar thing in all of school. The night before the test. The cramming. We have all done it, and most of us suspected even as we did it that we were not really learning, just renting the information for a few hours.

It turns out the research agrees, and it is not even close. One of the most established findings in the science of learning is something called the spacing effect. The simple version is that if you spread your studying out over time, you remember far more in the long run than if you pack it all into one session. A massive review of this research by Cepeda and colleagues (2006) compiled hundreds of experiments and found that the pattern holds again and again. Spreading learning out beats cramming, and the advantage grows the longer you need to remember the material. More recently, Mawson and colleagues (2025) examined real classrooms, not just lab settings, and found the same pattern, with a robust effect favoring spaced learning over massed learning.

Notice what that means. Cramming is almost perfectly designed for one purpose: to pass a test tomorrow and forget the material next week. It is studying for school in its purest form. If our assessments reward cramming, we are quietly training students to do the one thing the research says guarantees they will not keep what they learned. We are teaching them to rent when we want them to own.

The trouble with the test itself

There is a second problem: it concerns the test as an event. For many students, the high-stakes exam does not measure what they know. It measures how they perform under pressure on one particular morning.

Test anxiety is real, common, and has been studied for decades. A thirty-year review of the research by von der Embse and colleagues (2018) found that test anxiety is consistently and negatively related to a wide range of educational outcomes, including

standardized tests, entrance exams, and grade point average. Earlier work by Cassady and Johnson (2002) showed that the students with higher levels of what they called cognitive test anxiety, the worried, racing thoughts kind, scored lower on exam after exam. The number on the page did not tell the whole truth about what the student understood.

Here is the part I find most useful, though. Brady and colleagues (2017) dug into what specifically does the damage, and it is not the pounding heart or the sweaty palms on their own. It is the worry, the interpretation, the story the student tells themselves about what the racing heart means. In their study, a short message from instructors that reframed exam nerves as normal and even helpful actually improved performance for first-year students. In plain terms, a chunk of what a high-stakes test measures is not knowledge at all. It is a student's relationship with pressure. That is worth knowing about, and it is worth being honest about when we treat a single exam score as the truth.

I want to be fair here, because the picture is not one-sided. Not every study finds a strong link between test anxiety and results. Jerrim (2022), looking at high-stakes exams in England, found little clear relationship once other factors were accounted for. The honest summary is that test anxiety hurts a lot of students some of the time, and hurts some students a great deal, even if it is not a universal law. But it harms many of the people I teach, and that is more than enough reason for me to take it seriously.

Tests are not the enemy, and this is where I have to be fair

Now I have to argue against myself for a moment, because the easy version of this essay would pretend that all testing is bad. It is not. And there is a piece of research here that genuinely complicated my thinking, so I want to give it real space.

There is a well-documented finding called the testing effect. The short version is that the act of pulling information out of your own memory, which is what a test makes you do, actually strengthens your memory more than reading the material again. Roediger and Karpicke have spent years on this. Their work (Roediger and Karpicke, 2006, and Roediger, 2010) shows that retrieval practice, the effort of recalling something, often produces large gains in long-term retention compared to simply studying. In one striking study, Karpicke and Roediger (2007) found that repeated retrieval was the key to remembering, not repeated reading.

So tests, when used for practice, are among the best learning tools we have. That is real, and I am not going to wave it away. But look closely at what kind of testing the research is praising. It is low stakes. It is frequent. It is repeated over time. It is testing for

learning, not testing as a final verdict. What helps is retrieval, not the high-stakes drama of one big graded exam. In fact, Roediger's work also found that retrieval practice helps people transfer what they learned to new situations, which is the whole point of studying for life. So the research does not tell me to stop testing. It tells me to change why and how I test. Use the quiz to build the skill, not just to rank the student.

Studying for life has a name in the research, too

If cramming for a high-stakes test is studying for school, then studying for life has its own body of research, and it goes by a few names. Two of them are transfer of learning and authentic assessment.

Transfer is the ability to take what you learned in one context and apply it elsewhere, especially in the messy real world. That is the entire reason we educate anyone. Nobody wants a nurse who can pass the written exam but freezes at the bedside. Nobody wants an engineer who aced the quiz but cannot solve a problem that does not look exactly like the homework. And here is the uncomfortable truth that Grant Wiggins (2020), a major voice in assessment, put bluntly. Traditional tests tend to reveal only whether a student can recognize, recall, or plug in what they learned out of context. They often do not tell you whether the student can actually do anything with it.

Authentic assessment is the answer many researchers point to. It means giving students tasks that look like the real work they will eventually do, projects, cases, simulations, reflections, performances, the kind of thing they will face on the job. A systematic review by Sokhanvar and colleagues (2021) found that authentic assessment improves both the learning experience and the skills that make students employable, such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking, problem-solving, and self-confidence. A broader review by Vlachopoulos and colleagues (2024) reached a similar conclusion: that this kind of assessment builds the very skills the modern workplace keeps asking for. When I read that list, I realized those are exactly the things I have been trying to build with my pass or fail projects and my reflection papers. I just did not know the research had a name for it.

There is even a warning in the literature about what happens when we go the other way. When a system leans too heavily on high-stakes tests, teaching itself narrows. Demir (2021) found that heavy high-stakes testing pushed teachers toward drilling multiple-choice questions and away from deeper teaching, squeezing out individual attention and the harder-to-measure lessons. A review of high-stakes final exams by French and colleagues (2023) went further, concluding that many of the supposed benefits of big final exams lack strong evidence, while the drawbacks are well documented. In other

words, our heavy reliance on the traditional test is more habit and convenience than proof.

But we cannot just throw out the gradebook

Here is where I must slow down and be honest about the other side, because I do not want to pretend this is simple. If it were simple, I would not have spent so many years stuck on it.

We need metrics. We need them to be clear, definable, objective, and repeatable. A grade is a promise to the outside world. When a student passes my class, an employer, another professor, a licensing board, somebody is trusting that the grade means something real and that it would mean the same thing if a different instructor had taught the course. Learning that only lives in my head, in my sense that a student really got it, is not fair to anyone. It cannot be checked. It cannot be repeated. It can be quietly shaped by my own biases without my even noticing. The rubric exists for a reason. The number exists for a reason. Objectivity protects the student as much as it constrains them.

There are other honest limits to studying for life, and I do not want to skip them. Not every student is ready for it. A self-directed, application-heavy, reflective approach asks a lot of a learner, and some students, especially early on, need more structure, clearer steps, and the simple motivation that a graded deadline provides. Not every subject fits, either. There are bodies of knowledge, in medicine, in safety, in the law, where you genuinely do need to know the facts cold, and a test is the right tool to confirm it. There are pitfalls in the open-ended approach, too. Authentic projects are harder to grade consistently. They take far more time. They can drift into vagueness if you are not careful. The research that praises authentic assessment also repeatedly admits that it is labor-intensive and that many instructors are not trained to do it well. And there is a fairness question hiding in here. Tasks that depend on real-world context can quietly favor students who already have that context, which is its own kind of bias that a clean exam can sometimes avoid.

So the answer is not to burn down the gradebook. The honest answer is harder. It is to build assessments that are objective and repeatable enough to be fair, while still measuring what matters in life rather than just for Friday's exam. That is the needle to thread. We need instruments that are clear and replicable but also informed by the real world and the actual culture our students are heading into. That is hard work. It is the work I have been fumbling toward with my rubrics and my SMART goals, trying to make the messy thing measurable without killing what made it worth measuring.

Where I have landed, for now

I do not have this fully solved, and I am suspicious of anyone who says they do. But the research helped me trust my gut, and Pastor Schultz gave me the words for it. So here is where I have landed.

The point of what I do is not the grade. The grade is a tool, and a necessary one, but it is not the point. The point is whether the person sitting in my classroom will be more capable, more confident, and more ready for the life and the work ahead of them. The science backs this up. Cramming for a test builds knowledge that evaporates. Spreading learning out, practicing real retrieval, and tackling tasks that look like real life all build knowledge that lasts and transfers. Studying for school produces a transcript. Studying for life produces a person who can do something.

So I will keep my rubrics, because fairness matters and objectivity protects my students. I will keep some tests, because retrieval practice genuinely helps, and some things you simply must know. But I will keep aiming the whole enterprise at life, not at the exam. I will keep building assignments that ask students to apply, to reflect, and to imagine how they will use this when I am long out of the picture. I will keep treating the gradebook as the floor and not the ceiling.

I came to teaching because no one did this for me, and because doing it makes me whole. That has not changed. What has changed is that I finally have a clear way to say what I am trying to do. I am not trying to get my students through school. I am trying to get them ready for life. And if I have to choose, and most days I do, I will choose life every time.

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