

## TEACHING

# I Make My Own Bacon: How I Learned to Love Assessment

JULY 11, 2010 *Shawn*

*What's more, I want the assessment of their learning to be as real as botulism.*

I was asked by the ineffable @mctownsley to share my experiences aboard the SBG Express with a class he was teaching about modern assessment practices. The kicker: the participants were all local Iowa teachers. This was one of the scariest things I've ever done.

"You're an expert, as long as you're 100 miles from home." They say.

Clause not met. These are teachers in the districts in my area. These are teachers whose students play my students in football. (and who we mercilessly crush — Go Spartans!) Needless to say, there are no smoke and mirrors here. This puts a little more stress on ye ol' guest speaker to be meaningful and applicable; these people could be my colleagues.

So, I did what I always do when I have to talk to people about teaching: I bring up bacon. Everyone loves bacon. Even vegetarians at least recognize the transcendental state that bacon elicits. I love bacon so much that I make my own.

You know how Alton Brown says, "you should develop a close relationship with your butcher/baker/candlestick maker/sommelier/fishmonger/etc..."? I'm the guy that listens; I have an organic pork farmer, and we email regularly.

Producing my own bacon is a relatively new thing for me, so I remember the learning process vividly. First, I had to find a trustworthy source for a recipe/explanation. Luckily, serendipity brought me into social contact with one of my wife's student's parents, who was currently taking a tour through a whole hog that he had recently purchased. Sources, check.

Next I had to learn the chemistry. You'd think this would be a snap for a science teacher, but you'd also be surprised about how little of what you learn is truly applicable. If I ever get to teach chemistry, bacon making will be a unit, you can bet the organic farm on that.

Next, to nitrite or not to nitrite? (Fun Fact! "Nitrite Free" bacon from the store is not free of nitrites. They use celery juice, which has more naturally occurring nitrites than the amount that would normally be added. The FDA has some seriously jacked up rules about labeling, so they can lie right through the plastic at you, and you can feel safe.) The moral of the story is that you can't really make stress-free bacon without a little nitrite, it makes sure that the bacterium responsible for botulism gets the axe.

Aside's aside: If you're worried about your nitrite intake, perhaps you should first be worried by the fact that you're eating enough *bacon* to be worried by your nitrite intake.

Then came the curing, the waiting, the drying, the smoking, and FINALLY the glorious-



## SHAWN CORNALLY

### Curriculum Vitae

Hello! I teach physics, calculus, object-oriented programming, and gastronomy at a rural Iowa high school. I also moonlight as a lecturer at the University of Iowa.

I love curing bacon, the Oxford comma, and getting students into the narrative arc of a lesson. I hate traditional grading, non-sparkling water, and being boring.

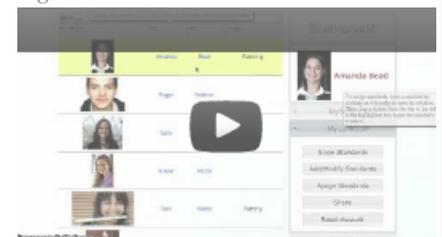
Yes, I want to be a part of your next project: shawn dot thinkthankthink at gmail dot com

I do NOT speak for the Solon Community School District (IA). They don't swear as much, not even close.

@ThinkThankThunk

## BLUEHARVEST

I built this so we can all grade nicely together:



www.BlueHarvestFeedback.com

rapture-esque-OMG-I-can't-believe-I've-been-living-a-lie BLT.

I now walk by the bacon section at my grocery store with contempt. Part of me wants to smuggle in some of my bacon and just leave it in their cooler case marked, "Unwitting Taste Buds: Free!"

Where's the assessment in this? The tasting, obviously.

What's an even better analogy, is that curing your own meat can be dangerous. If I do it wrong, I kill my family with any number of food-borne illnesses. This is assessment. A real assessment, and this is what I want for my students. I want them to see something, a question, a goal, a project, an inkling, and I want them to want the knowledge as much as I wanted bacon making skills. What's more, I want the assessment of their learning to be as real as botulism.

## The Responsibility Monster:

High Schoolers are more responsible, more abstract, and just plain more than society gives them credit for. They recognize real issues. They have real curiosities. They have real lusts and desires, and yet we tell them they're infants.

Our assessment practices are no different. "Learn this because it's good for you," we prattle. They think, "I'm not so sure, the only reason I needed to know about parabolas was for this class, so if the only reason I need to know about the number  $e$  is for the next one, I just won't take that one." That line of thought breaks my heart, and I hear it every year.

Furthermore, I want the assessments that my class and I employ to be natural and genuine. I don't want to give a quiz because "it's about time" I want to give a quiz because it's the best way to find out where my kids are, and where they need to be headed. My first bacon was a little too salty, next time I'm going to use more sugar in the dry cure. There's no difference between that and, "Timmy, why did you employ the second derivative test here instead of the first? How can you identify which to use in the future?"

This is why a philosophy like SBG is so important for a more natural classroom. When assessment becomes more than a grim reaper of grades, and becomes something both students and teachers welcome as information gathering, that's when you've made it. You've made the currency of your classroom about learning, and the points are just placeholders. Hallelujah.

The students will finally adopt the responsibility you've been thrashing about trying futilely to teach (and grade). They do it because they know that their grades aren't damning, their grades are now dynamic and actually tied to what they know. If respecting that isn't coupled to maturity and responsibility, then I'll go back to flaccid McDonald's bacon. All of my students from freshmen to seniors all say the same thing, "This [SBG] let's me show you what I know, not how well I can do on your tests."

So, I implore you, please stop making students organize notebooks *your* way. If it's so important, they'll figure out the best way for them. Stop grading homework. If it's so important, they'll figure out how much they need to do.

Please respect your students enough to reward them for remediation, don't punish them for having a sticking point. If they cure the bacon wrong, it will taste bad, and they'll get a stomach ache.

No one gave me any points for measuring the saltpeter correctly, but I still did it. Chew on that.

Finally, if you'd like to know more about the waning art of curing and smoking, I would recommend the book "Charcuterie" by Micheal Ruhlman and Brian Polcyn. Can you say "Duck Prosciutto?" I knew you could!

## BLOGROLL

[Action-Reaction](#)

[Always Formative](#)

[dy/dan](#)

[MeTA](#)

[Point of Inflection](#)

[Quantum of Progress](#)

[Research In Practice](#)

[TEACHING|Chemistry](#)

## MOST RECENT

[Like Moths to a Flame \(Help?\)](#)

[Inquiry Stylee: First Day of Physics Fall 2012](#)

[Standards-Based Grading: Every Thursday, A Love Note](#)

## RECENT DISCUSSION

[Shawn on Like Moths to a Flame \(Help?\)](#)

[Shawn on Like Moths to a Flame \(Help?\)](#)

[Julia on Like Moths to a Flame \(Help?\)](#)

[Evan on Like Moths to a Flame \(Help?\)](#)

[jsb16 on Like Moths to a Flame \(Help?\)](#)

## USAGE AGREEMENT

© 2012

I feel a little silly putting this here, but I've been asked about reproducing this blog's material more than once, so here's the copyright info: United States fair usage applies. An [email](#) would be nice for anything using more than a few paragraphs.

## The Physics Recognition Evaluation

### If Only This Were an Isolated Incident: A Victory (?)

Comments are disabled.

12 thoughts on "I Make My Own Bacon: How I Learned to Love Assessment"

#### SBG Express: I've got a ticket to ride « Sustainably Digital *says:*

AUGUST 29, 2010 AT 9:25 PM

[...] 2010, Shawn Cornally (back) [...]

#### Gilbert Bernstein *says:*

JULY 15, 2010 AT 4:00 AM

I'm curious after this how you deal with low confidence students. To continue the metaphor, what if your student botched the bacon and got botulism. Then your student decides that they just weren't meant to make bacon. Best to leave it to the professionals.

I suppose there's also the issue of whether your student even likes bacon. (Yes it's possible. I can't eat it myself so I find it very unappetizing) I'm more interested in self confidence than motivation, but I'm still curious if you have any insights for how to deal with students who have low investment in a topic, inquiry, or question.

#### Think Thank Think » If Only This Were an Isolated Incident: A Victory (?) *says:*

JULY 14, 2010 AT 11:31 PM

[...] really mulling right now is the time-line problem. I got this question while giving my trite little talk on Friday at @mctownsley's [...]

#### Roger Sweeny *says:*

JULY 14, 2010 AT 3:55 PM

"Stop grading homework. If it's so important, they'll figure out how much they need to do."

Ah, if it were only that simple... At the beginning of my first year teaching physics, I told my students, "More than any course you've ever taken, this course builds on itself. We have homework almost every night, which I go over the next day. I do not assign homework as busywork. Homework tells you if you're getting it and gives you practice so you can move on to the next day's work. If you don't do the homework, it will be very difficult to understand the material and get a good grade. Because it is so important and because you are responsible Honors 11th graders, I count on you to do it; I will not take class time to check it."

Several months later, I had a very personal understanding of why the Lord's Prayer includes the line, "lead us not into temptation."

The next year, my first day included telling them the same thing but that I would check homework at irregular intervals.

- [Live Traffic Feed](#)



See your visitors in RealTime! Get the Free Live Traffic Feed [Get Feedjit Now!](#)

A visitor from Davenport, Iowa viewed "[To Drop or Not to Drop: A Well-Tempered Discussion | ThinkThankThink](#)" 0 secs ago

A visitor from Oswego, New York viewed "[ThinkThankThink | Dealing with the fear of being a boring teacher.](#)" 58 mins ago

A visitor from Minneapolis, Minnesota left "[ThinkThankThink | Dealing with the fear of being a boring teacher.](#)" via [shawncornally.com](#) 1 hour 16 mins ago

A visitor from Minneapolis, Minnesota viewed "[ThinkThankThink | Dealing with the fear of being a boring teacher.](#)" 1 hour 18 mins ago

A visitor from Grants Pass, Oregon viewed "[Standards-Based Grading: Math \(1 of 7\) | ThinkThankThink](#)" 1 hour 49 mins ago

A visitor from United States viewed "[Riled Up: Stop Grading Homework, Please | ThinkThankThink](#)" 2 hours 6 mins ago

A visitor from Tempe, Arizona left "[ThinkThankThink | Dealing with the fear of being a boring teacher.](#)" via [shawncornally.com](#) 2 hours 14 mins ago

A visitor from Edmonton, Alberta left "[ThinkThankThink | Dealing](#)

This year started better than any other. More kids were getting things quicker than ever before. But somewhere in second term, everything slowed. So many people who had been “getting it” now weren’t getting it.

After this had gone on way too long, I shared my frustration with one of my classes and a student piped up, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world, “that’s because you stopped checking homework.”

It was true. I don’t like checking homework and I want my students to be self-motivated. I thought they had personally learned from the first term how important doing homework was.

These are kids who are desperately trying to build a resume so they can get into a “good college.” Their days are filled with activities and hard courses. When the choice is between spending time on physics homework or saying, “he’s going over it tomorrow anyway; I have so many other things to do,” it is easy to pick option number 2. So many of them are used to cramming before a test that they fall back on what has worked so many times before even though they know (at least somewhat) that it won’t work this time.

**Jena says:**

JULY 13, 2010 AT 10:01 AM

I was in that class you spoke to and I loved your talk! Good work!

**Shawn says:**

JULY 13, 2010 AT 12:05 PM

@Jena: Thanks! I loved being there. I hope that some real applicable things got hashed out during the rest of the day!

=shawn

**Elissa says:**

JULY 12, 2010 AT 6:42 PM

“You’ve made the currency of your classroom about learning, and the points are just placeholders. ”

I love that line.

**Shawn says:**

JULY 12, 2010 AT 9:03 PM

@Elissa: Thanks!

@Rob: I love it. It’s probably obvious from the blog that I’m a foodie. Thanks for the analogy.

**rob mcentarffer says:**

JULY 12, 2010 AT 10:56 AM

Excellent musings! I've been thinking about some parallels between the "slow food" movement and education lately (maybe we need a "slow assessment" movement, or at least a "locavore" version of assessment?). Great thoughts about why we should think about purpose FIRST when assessing. (and, for the record, my bacon of choice is cottage bacon from a place called Kvam farms here in southeast NE. I'm not smoking my own yet, but your argument is convincing)

**AmberCaldwell** *says:*

JULY 12, 2010 AT 7:00 AM

I love this! Two of my favorite things too: bacon and SBG. I love the analogy. I have to present SBG to my math department (I am the chair and the only SBGer in the building) and I am terrified! Thanks for the thoughts. And by the way, if you love bacon, you should check out this site: <http://www.thinkgeek.com/brain/whereisit.cgi?t=bacon>

Everything bacon you could ever want.

**Shawn** *says:*

JULY 12, 2010 AT 7:38 AM

Good luck presenting SBG! Let me know if you'd like any support, it can be scary. I recommend bringing some sort of FAQ sheet about responsibility with you, that's always the main concern for people who believe they can grade responsibility.

**Tweets that mention Think Thank Thunk » I Make My Own Bacon: How I Learned to Love Assessment -- Topsy.com** *says:*

JULY 12, 2010 AT 5:10 AM

[...] This post was mentioned on Twitter by Chad Sansing, park\_star. park\_star said: awesome post by @ThinkThankThunk, I might warm up to SBG someday...

<http://bit.ly/d5CLhL> [...]