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Since then, the AJC has cleared out its archives, so it is now only available in the form in which I originally submitted it to Maureen Downey's Get Schooled education blog.

### **When a Teacher Teaches in a Lonely Forest**

Peter Smagorinsky

*When a tree falls in a lonely forest, and no animal is near by to hear it, does it make a sound? Physics, 1910, Mann & Twiss.*

If good teaching takes place in a classroom, and no assessment is there to record it, does it make an impression?

Most of us have heard some version of the question above posed by Mann and Twiss. Folks have pondered such mysteries for centuries, perhaps beginning when the Irish philosopher George Berkeley wrote *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* in 1710.

Honestly, though, the question has never made sense to me, at least if reality matters in philosophical debates. Trees are teeming with life, often more so when they're dead than when alive. And unless the tree is out completely in the open, which is unlikely in even the loneliest of forests, there's a whole lot of life going on all around it, much of it with ears. A tree that falls in a real forest without anything hearing it defies everything that science has unearthed about ecosystems.

I'm also troubled by the idea that the only life that matters is that which is visible to the human eye, or in this case, audible to the human ear. There's too much life underground in any ecosystem for the tree's falling not to make a thunderous, visceral impression. Soil is one of the most species-rich habitats on Earth. To accept the premises of the question about trees, forests, and sounds, you have to assume that in this lonely forest, there's no life underground, in which case the tree would die. Then maybe we'd hear it fall, along with all the bugs, birds, and other creatures living in it.

The question about trees falling in forests oversimplifies a very complex set of relationships in order to raise a philosophical question that I might find interesting if I thought that trees were not part of larger, interweaving systems of forces, actions, and senses. This point brings me to the second question posed above, which is my extrapolation of the original to 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. education, especially the assessment mandates that accompany No Child Left Behind and Race To The Top. I should note that even conservatives are running from these programs, [placing the blame on Ted Kennedy](#) and determining post hoc that they are liberal policies, even as they use test score data to help dismantle public schools.

My reformulation of the philosophical question as an educational conundrum replaces trees with teaching and forests with classrooms in the Age of Accountability. In this world, good teaching

can only register on specific occasions, those on which an assessment is conducted. There are quite a few of these assessments in Arne Duncan's America, although not quite enough to prevent teaching and learning from taking place at times. Unfortunately for teachers, these occasions don't matter in their annual evaluations.

What else might be happening that does not involve answering multiple-choice questions, but that might be indicative of high quality teaching? Perhaps an English teacher will be teaching students how to think about complex problems as part of instruction on how to write about them, and teaching kids how to phrase their ideas according to conventions that advance their ability to express them convincingly. History teachers might raise questions about the consequences of different economic structures or geographic formations and have students discuss their ideas as they formulate their own interpretations of human events. Health classes might involve discussions of real behaviors engaged in by teens and how to construct healthier, happier lives in the face of temptations and influences to take health risks.

Such classrooms are teeming with life, rather than being barren landscapes where trees can fall unheard, or where the only sound heard is that of #2 pencils filling in bubbles. That classroom life is what makes learning so vital and important, the stuff of important personal and academic growth. It is multifaceted and multisensory. Questions have more than one possible answer. Learning is challenging and worth doing, and assessment is open-ended and authentic. It's what we go to school for, both teachers and students: those occasions when engaging with ideas produces moments of realization and understanding, when school assessment is an extension of genuine interest in meaningful discussions and compositions.

On those days, the tree does indeed fall in the forest. A classroom full of kids is there to be part of it and have it recorded in their memories for many years. In most such cases, their senses are engaged in their learning—they are up and about, doing things, negotiating ideas with others, measuring their success in terms of their purposes for working, speaking and listening. But there is no assessment near by to hear it, at least one that has value in the quest for accountability.