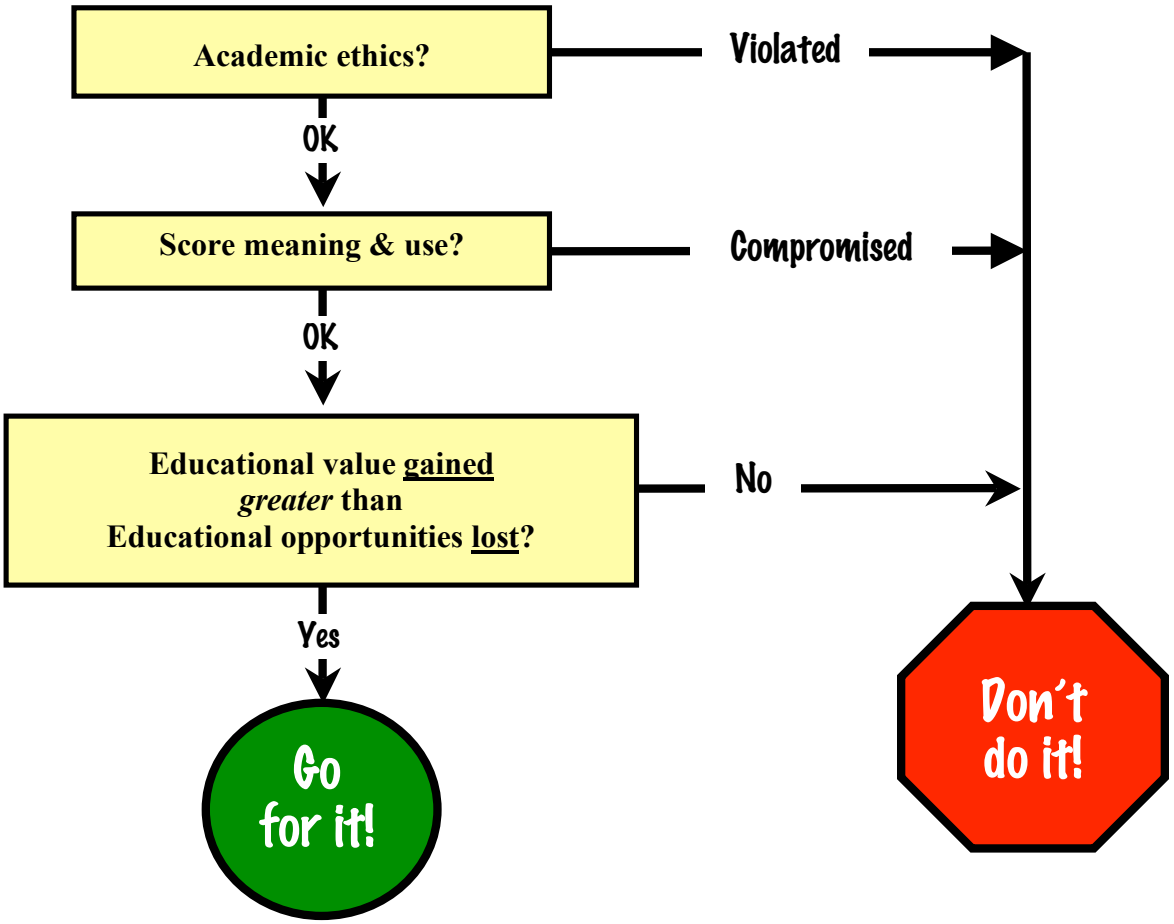
Part 4: How can the appropriateness of a test-preparation activity be determined?

The appropriateness of a given test-preparation activity is not solely determined by whether or not it could be construed as "cheating" or the "misrepresentation of student achievement." This criterion is actually part of a broader one dealing with academic ethics. In addition to academic ethics, two other criteria should be considered when evaluating the appropriateness of using a particular test-preparation activity—score meaning & use, and educational value.

These three criteria—academic ethics, score meaning & use, and educational value—are interrelated. Thus, if a test-preparation activity fails to meet one of these criteria, in most cases the activity would fail to meet the others as well. But because the "problems" associated with particular test-preparation activities are not always easily identified, it is useful to consider these criteria in a stepwise fashion, starting with the most easily recognizable problems and then moving to the more complex and somewhat fuzzy issues. That is, first determine if the action results in a violation of academic ethics. If there is no apparent violation, then consider if the action might compromise the meaning and use of the scores. If the meaning and use of the scores would not be compromised, then determine if there is any educational value gained in using the activity. If there is educational value, the final consideration is to determine if the educational opportunities being gained by using the activity outweigh those that are lost.

This stepwise process has been summarized in the figure below and is being used as the framework for the remaining portion of this part of the module. These three criteria will be presented one at a time, and will examine the types of factors that should be considered when determining if the criteria have been satisfied. In addition, the potential negative consequences associated with the use of a particular activity that does not adhere to one or more of these three criteria will be identified.


Academic ethics?
Violated
OK
Score meaning & use?
Compromised
OK
Educational value gained
greater than
Educational opportunities lost?
No
Yes
Go for it!
Don't do it!

Criterion #1: Academic Ethics

Objectives:

1. The action should not contribute to the misrepresentation or falsification of information [Iowa Administrative Code, Chapter 25, Standard III(e)].
2. The action should not be perceived by students, parents, or the community as being dishonest.
3. The action should not result in a violation of district policy or copyright (e.g., an illegal act).

Standard III of IAC Chapter 25

> 25.3 (3) **Standard III.**
>
> … … … *misrepresentation, falsification of information.* Violation of this standard includes:
>
> *e.* Falsifying or deliberately misrepresenting or omitting material information regarding the evaluation of students or personnel, including improper administration of any standardized tests, including, *but not limited to*,
> changing test answers,
> providing test answers,
> copying or teaching identified test items, or
> using inappropriate accommodations or modifications for such tests.

What does it mean to "misrepresent" a student's achievement? In the context of the *Iowa Tests*, misrepresentation results from reporting scores that are not an accurate reflection of student learning as it relates to the areas covered by the tests. The examples listed in Standard III are the most obvious types of actions leading to the misrepresentation of student achievement, but there are many other less obvious actions. These less obvious actions can be identified when determining if Criterion #2 has been satisfied (i.e., score meaning & use).

Negative consequences associated with using activities that violate academic ethics include:

- Parents/community might question the integrity of the teacher/school.
- Parents/community might lose confidence in the teacher/school, doubting the trustworthiness and sincerity of future actions.
- Students might start to question the teacher's/school's trust in their ability.
- Students might believe that "cheating" is an appropriate practice.
- Teachers or administrators might be suspended, fired, and/or have their license revoked.
- Teacher/school could be sued by the test publisher for violation of copyright.
- School/district is classified by the Department of Education as being "in need of assistance" (i.e., placed on the SINA & DINA lists) because inaccurate scores were reported.

Do these types of things really happen? You bet … … … consider some of these examples taken from newspapers around the nation.

Type of Action	Real Examples from the Headlines
Changing test answers	**Obvious:** Principal told the teachers to correct student's wrong answers. (*Education Week*, November 13, 1996) **Not so obvious:** After the allotted time for testing, a teacher told students to fill in answers for questions they had left blank. (*St Louis Post-Dispatch*, April 30, 2005) Note. By allowing additional time the teacher has given students the opportunity to "answer" questions that would have been scored incorrect due to being left blank.
Providing test answers	**Obvious:** Teachers prompted students with hand signals and pointed to answers. (*St Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 24, 2005) **Not so obvious:** Teachers signaled students by tapping them on their shoulders to let them know an answer was wrong. (*The Huston Chronicle*, May 5, 2005) Principal instructed teachers to encourage children to retry specific questions if the teachers thought the children knew the answer but had missed it on their first try. (*St Louis Post-Dispatch*, March 21, 2006)
Copying or teaching identified test items	**Obvious:** Curriculum coordinator improperly kept copies of previous exams, and allowed teachers to copy some of them and use them for practice. The so-called "previous exam" was the same version of the test that was subsequently administered to the students. (*Education Week*, November 13, 1996) **Not so obvious:** Teachers reviewed tests in advance and tailored their instruction to match specific questions. (*Education Week*, November 5, 2003) Teacher took notes based on the test administered last year and created worksheets for her pupils for this year's test. She also shared the worksheet with other teachers. Some of these other teachers, not knowing the origin of the questions on the worksheet, alerted the principal to similarities between the worksheets and this year's test. (*The Baltimore Sun,* March 28, 2006)
Using inappropriate accommodations or modifications	Reading test was read aloud to students, resulting in the performance for these students being treated as "non-proficient," regardless of their scores, due to the use of inappropriate accommodations. (*Education Week*, October 22, 2003)

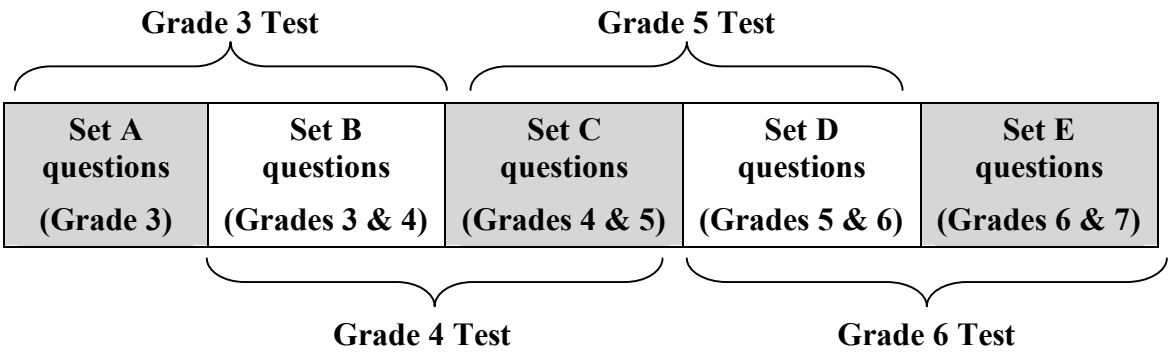
In some of these cases, teachers *unknowingly* used questions from the same test that was to be administered. If you don't know that the questions would be the same, does that make it OK? No, when it comes to the law, ignorance is not an acceptable basis for pardon. Although the intent behind the actions was probably different, the outcome was the same—the scores misrepresent student learning. The educator's lack of knowledge might lighten the sanctions, but it has limited value towards mending the teacher's/school's lost integrity. In addition, due to the fact that the scores no longer are an accurate reflection of student learning, not only has an opportunity to help students in need been lost, but also the school and district will now be treated as a "school in need of assistance" (SINA).

Although teachers should be expected to question the source of materials made available to them for test preparation, additional directives are also needed. One simple solution to making sure that students are not exposed to the test questions in advance of testing is to simply state that no *ITBS/ITED* test materials should ever be used with students prior to them taking the test "for real," or even afterwards. This admonition, however, can carry more weight if educators are aware of particular features of the *Iowa Tests* that can turn good intentions into very negative outcomes.

Important features of the *ITBS/ITED* and how these tests are used in Iowa

1. There are two different versions of the *ITBS* and *ITED* that are currently being used in Iowa—Forms A and B.
2. The test questions on each form of the test never change. The exact same test booklets are used again.
3. These two forms are used alternately in consecutive years. That is, if Form A was administered last year then Form B will be administered this year, and Form A will be administered *again* next year.
4. On each form of the tests there are items that overlap between adjacent grade levels.

   The *ITBS* and *ITED* are designed to find out what *all* types of students know and are able to do. Consequently, the collection of tests across grade levels is developed so that some of the exact same questions are asked of students at adjacent grade levels. For example, some of the questions on the tests designed for grade 4 are also on the tests designed for grade 3, and another set of questions on the grade 4 tests will also be on the tests for grade 5. By having these "overlapping" questions it is possible to more accurately distinguish the achievement level of students performing above or below grade level. This overlap is illustrated in the following figure for a given test form. (No questions on Form A are also on Form B, or vice versa.)



So what's the big deal?

Tests are reused every other year. Thus, both Forms A and B are "live" test forms and should never be used for practicing with students.

> Even if you think you are using last year's test for practice, it is easy to make mistakes and to use the same exact test that will be administered to your students this year.
>
> If last year's test is used this year for practice (which would be a violation of copyright), the same students will see about half of these exact same questions next year when they take the test at the next grade level. For example, if you used the fourth-grade test from last year (using the above illustration, this test would be comprised of questions from Sets B and C) with this years fourth graders, next year when these same students take the test in fifth grade they would already have been exposed to about half of the questions—those in Set C. The extent to which this previous exposure assists students in obtaining a higher score next year, contributes to the misrepresentation of achievement.

Let's now turn to a real-life example to illustrate how good intentions and lack of understanding resulted in a very troublesome situation … … …

The Washington Post, February 24, 2002

Amy, the chair of the math department routinely looked at tests in advance to "extract concepts"—to check that she had taught what her students would be tested on. She said that she considered it common practice, a way to make sure her kids had a fair chance to look good.

A few days after the test booklets arrived, the test coordinator (who was also the assistant principal) gave Amy the math portion of the test and told her to "look at them and then lock them away." Amy subsequently made copies of the questions and distributed them to other teachers during a math department meeting, giving the same advice: "Look them over, then lock them away."

On the morning of the test, one of the students raised his hand and told the test proctor "I've done these questions in math class."

Upon investigation, it was determined that one of the math teachers had been absent the day that Amy had distributed the test copies and said that he obtained them from another teacher. That colleague had sat through the meeting but said she was not paying close enough attention. Both of these teachers gave the test questions to students for practice, and both said that they thought they were using routine test-preparation materials.

What was the outcome?

Fired: Assistant principal

Suspended: Amy, the teacher who distributed the copies (*5 years)*
Teachers (two) who used the materials as test preparation (*1 year)*
Principal *(temporarily)*

Thrown out: Test scores

What is the lesson to be learned?

- Don't use test-preparation materials for which you cannot determine the legitimacy of the source.
- Don't make copies of the tests or take notes regarding test questions—for any reason.

What about copyright issues? Does the "fair use" allowance for educational purposes in the copyright law make it OK to use questions from copyrighted tests? No!

The copyright statement for the *Iowa Tests* includes the following guidance:

> *These tests contain questions that are to be used solely for testing purposes. No test items can be disclosed or used for any other reason. By accepting delivery of or using these tests, the recipient acknowledges responsibility for maintaining such security that is required by professional standards and applicable state and local policies and regulations governing proper use of tests and for complying with federal copyright law which prohibits unauthorized reproduction and use of copyrighted test materials.*

If items from any of the *Iowa Tests* are used to prepare students for testing, it is very likely that the students' scores will no longer be an accurate representation of their achievement. In addition, it is possible that The University of Iowa (the copyright holder) and/or The Riverside Publishing Company (the publisher) might seek damages for copyright infringement. According to the Association for Test Publishers (www.testpublishers.org/copyrightFAQ/htm), the penalties for copyright infringement may include both civil and criminal penalties, with civil remedies

consisting of an award of monetary damages (statutory, up to $100,000, or actual damages), attorney fees, injunctive relief against future infringement, and the impounding and destruction of copies and equipment used to make the copies.

For example, Educational Testing Service (ETS) sued a former teacher for purportedly distributing "unreleased" forms of the SAT (i.e., forms that were not explicitly made available for public consumption) for "practice" (*Newsday*, April 8, 2004). The outcome of this suit has not been publicized.

Time for reflection and/or interaction:

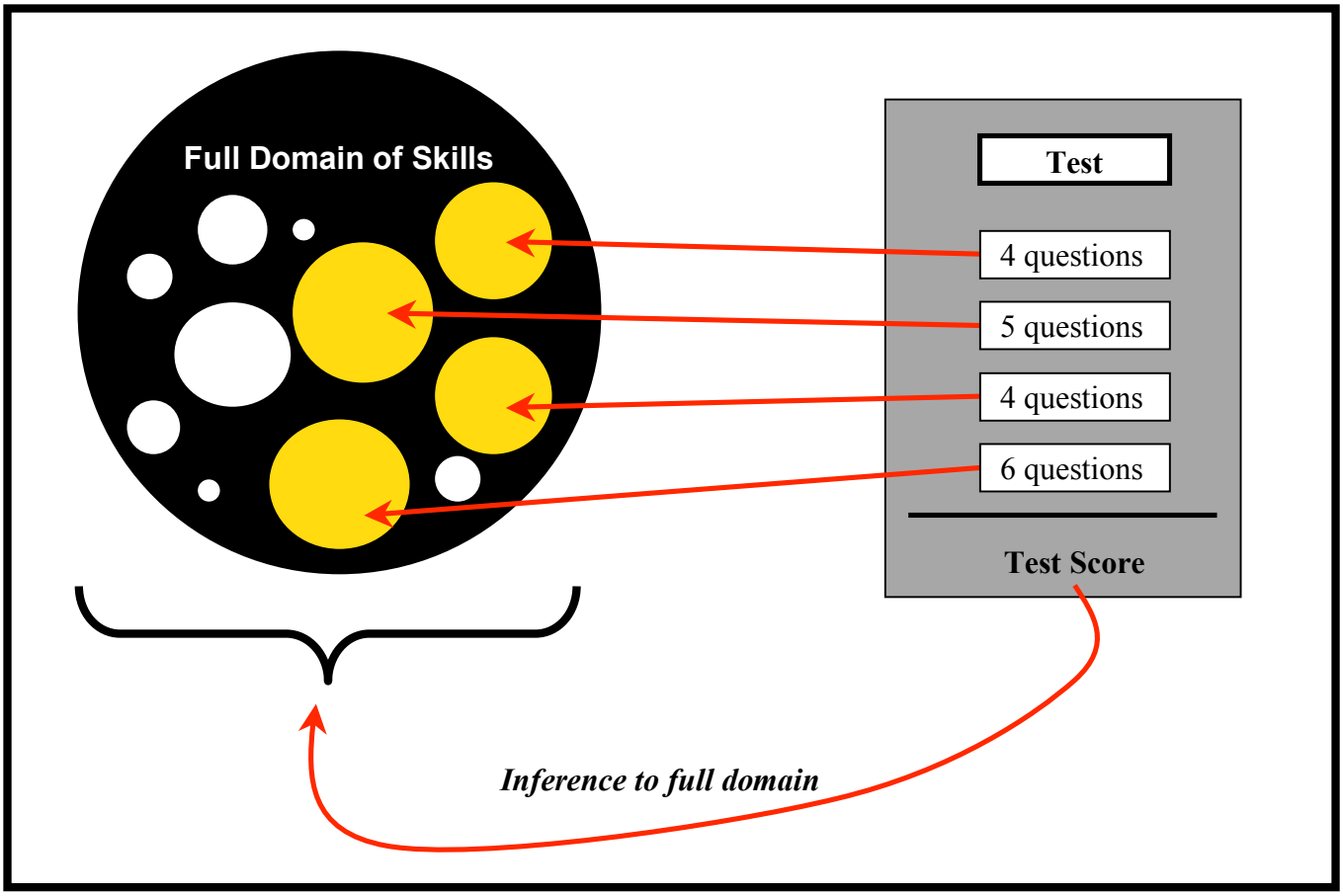
Do you have (or have access to) any copies of the Iowa Tests (old or current)?
If so, how are you using them? What should be done with them?

Criterion #2: Score Meaning & Use (also known as "validity")

Objectives:

1. Test scores should accurately represent student learning related to the specific set of content and skill areas covered by the test.
2. Test scores should not be influenced by a student's inadequate test-taking skills or limited familiarity with the item formats used on the test.
3. Test scores should allow the user to make an accurate inference regarding student learning related to the larger domain of content and skill areas (i.e., beyond the specific questions on the test).

To help illustrate these three objectives, consider the following figure. The circle on the left represents the full domain (or set) of skills that define a given curricular area the test was designed to measure, such as science. A test that is constructed to measure a student's attainment of these skills, however, very rarely is able to include questions that completely represent the full domain—due to time constraints and the format of the questions. Instead, a test consists of only a sample of the skills representing this domain, depicted by the shaded circles in this figure. There are often other important skills (depicted by the white circles), such as writing a science lab report, that tests like the *Iowa Tests* are not able to assess. Even for those areas that are covered by the test (i.e., the shaded circles), the actual questions included represent a very small sample of the questions that potentially could have been asked.



The first objective associated with score meaning & use, is to have a student's score be an accurate representation of what the student knows and is able to do in the specific content and skill areas covered by the questions on the test—the shaded circles in this figure. One way to help ensure that this objective can be achieved is to make sure that the student is familiar with the format of the items used on the test, as well as other critical test-taking skills (objective #2). Describing student achievement as it relates to a particular set of questions on a test, however, is not very informative. Instead, nearly always you want to be able to make accurate inferences regarding a student's learning related to the larger, full domain of content and skill areas (objective #3).

Negative consequences associated with having scores that are higher than they should be include the following (in addition to consequences cited for violations of academic ethics):

- lost instructional assistance for students because of inaccurate scores (i.e., students lose out on additional help because their test scores indicate they're doing OK),
- interference with identifying areas of the curriculum/instruction that need improvement,
- inability to use the data to help make correct decisions regarding the effectiveness of a particular type of instructional intervention (if scores are high enough, it's assumed the intervention worked), and
- inability to make meaningful/accurate comparisons across students, classes, or schools (fairness/equity issue) for a given year and/or across time.

Anytime actions taken by a teacher and/or administrator contribute to test scores that do not represent student learning accurately, there is the potential that these actions have directly contributed to the misrepresentation of information. Misrepresentation of student achievement leads to incorrect decision making, and is also considered unethical.

But, isn't test preparation for accountability testing essential so that students will score just as high as they can? According to the guidance provided by Iowa Testing Programs on the development of district policy regarding test use, test preparation, and test security as it relates to the *Iowa Tests* (Iowa Testing Programs, August 2005):

> Not really. Obtaining the highest possible test score is not necessarily the primary goal. The notion of test preparation is often associated with students preparing to take a college admissions test such as the ACT or SAT. On such tests, students want to maximize their score to optimize their chance of being admitted or being eligible for scholarship aid. Test-taking strategies that promote the highest possible score are used in conjunction with practice tests to foster greater confidence in anticipation of taking the actual test. However, the purpose of using an achievement test, like the *Iowa Tests*, is to find out just how well a student has achieved. Trying to get the highest possible score, at seemingly any cost, is not consistent with that purpose. There are no particular consequences for the student (no admission decision, for example); the test score should represent what the student knows. Scores that are artificially high are likely to cause some students to get less teacher

> attention than is needed and to keep the students from various instructional programs that might help them improve. Thus, scores that misrepresent a student's performance are more likely to be harmful than helpful to that student. Test preparation or test-taking practices that promote artificially high scores could harm students who need extra instructional attention. The use of inappropriate preparation practices may keep a school off the "Watch List" or from being designated as "in need of assistance," but it will not serve the interests of low achieving students whose scores disguise their actual level of achievement. Nor will it serve the needs of the school or district to understand the true achievement of all students so that instructional programs can be modified based on student needs.
> (pp. 7-8)

Let's now look at a scenario illustrating the use of practice tests and consider in what ways this practice might result in compromising the meaning of the resulting test scores.

Mrs. Thompson typically uses last year's Advanced Placement (AP) exam to prepare her students for the exam they will be taking in the spring. She also uses ACT practice tests for the same purpose. Therefore, she thought nothing of taking questions from an old *ITED* and then using them to practice certain elementary areas her advanced students hadn't been exposed to for a few years. Prior to using the questions, just to be on the safe side, she modified them so that they were not exactly the same as the originals. For a week prior to the test, Mrs. Thompson used ten of these "modified questions" as warm-up activities. If any of the questions proved to be trouble areas, she conducted mini-review lessons with her students.

To determine how this practice might impact the meaning of the resulting scores, it's very helpful to once again consider the guidance provided by Iowa Testing Programs (August 2005).

To begin, what if Mrs. Thompson decided to use questions from Form A or Form B? That is,

> **Is it ever appropriate to use the actual test forms (those used in the current or subsequent year) for test preparation?**
>
> No, providing students with test items or test answers in advance of the test is highly unethical. Such activity puts the focus on getting particular test questions right rather than on measuring student achievement in the subject area represented by the questions. It is highly rare that a given test item is so important that its content should be learned by all students or taught to students directly. The questions on a test represent only a small sample from all the questions that could be asked when measuring achievement in, say, science or math. When the exact test is the focus of instruction, the test scores lose their meaning, and they portray an achievement result that is dishonest. (p. 5)

What if Mrs. Thompson used test questions from old forms of the *ITED*—forms that are no longer being used in Iowa—without modifying them? Beyond the issue of violating copyright,

> **Is it ever appropriate to use previous forms of the assessment (e.g., Forms K and L of the *Iowa Tests*) for preparation purposes?**
>
> No, the use of previous forms of the accountability tests for practice or preparation purposes also is unethical. Different forms of the same test are designed to be similar in content and skill level so that scores from them can be used relatively interchangeably to estimate growth and improvement. Although the content on a previous form is not exactly the same as that of the current form under use, the similarity is great. Preparation with the previous test form narrows the focus of student learning and restricts the ability of the user to generalize broadly in interpreting the students' scores. (p. 5)

Given Mrs. Thompson didn't use existing *ITED* questions, but modified them before using them—does that make it OK? According to the guidance from Iowa Testing Programs:

> **Is it ever appropriate to develop practice tests locally that are similar in content or format to the actual test forms currently in use?**
>
> No, when practice materials that essentially "clone" the operational test that is in use are developed, the situation is somewhat akin to using a previous form of the test, ... Limiting the focus of instruction to such materials, even for a brief but intense time period just before testing, creates limits on the generalizability of the test scores. Furthermore, such "practice tests" move the focus of instruction to isolated bits of content instead of the broader skills that should be the target of student learning. (pp. 5-6)

Sometimes the question of how similar a question used for practice can be to a question that is on the *ITBS* or *ITED* (on current or "old" forms) before it is "too similar," is difficult to answer. The simplest advice that can be given regarding this issue is that if students practice with questions that are modeled after the specific skills and content areas depicted in *ITBS/ITED* test questions, then the practice questions are *too similar* and the use of this practice is *inappropriate*. This type of targeted practice results in the inability to make accurate inferences regarding student learning related to the larger domain of content and skill areas.

Time for reflection and/or interaction:

What was Mrs. Thompson trying to accomplish with her test-preparation activity?

How could she accomplish this purpose in a more acceptable way?

Let's now turn to a scenario illustrating the review of tested content/skills and consider in what ways this practice might result in compromising the meaning of the resulting test scores.

Teachers and administrators at Southwest Elementary are concerned with their students' low reading scores and they are anxious about how well their students will perform when taking the *ITBS* in November. So, they've decided that for the month of October all teachers will spend 10 minutes during the first morning period working on reading passages with students—focusing specifically on inferential types of questions. The passages that have been collected for this practice are from a wide variety of sources, including some that were written by teachers, but none had been taken from the *ITBS*. The questions are almost exclusively in multiple-choice format because the teachers believe that it's important to give their students experience in answering these types of questions.

Is it appropriate to provide students with a review of content covered by the test (in this case, *inferential understanding*) as a form of test preparation? According to the guidance from Iowa Testing Programs (August, 2005):

> It depends. A review of content is a common instructional strategy used prior to many forms of classroom assessment. But when the review is narrow and limited to the exact skills that will appear on the accountability assessment, the practice is more questionable. And when such reviews are conducted during the period immediately preceding the administration of the assessment, the practice is unethical. Some forms of review are ethical, but the more closely the focus is on the subskills to be assessed and the more likely the goal is to enhance short-term learning, the more inappropriate the activity would be. Content review geared toward enhancing retention of skills learned previously, however, is a form of sound instructional practice.
>
> The distinction between appropriate and inappropriate subject matter preparation is not always clear. Activities directed towards specific content known to be on the test and conducted shortly before testing time are probably inappropriate. When the purpose is drill for short-term retention, as cramming typically is, the practice is inappropriate. When the purpose is an additional opportunity to review and learn material for which instruction was provided previously, and the focus is on skills that may or may not be covered directly by the upcoming test, the practice is more appropriate. Here are two relevant questions to ask in trying to make the distinction:
>
> - Would the same content-oriented test-preparation activities be used if the current accountability assessment tool were replaced by another that aligns with the district's content standards?

- Would these same content-oriented test-preparation activities be used as scheduled even if the date for administering the assessment were to be moved to two months later?

If the test preparation is designed primarily to fit the accountability assessment tool, or if it needs to be given just before the assessment is scheduled to be given, the activities are probably too narrow in focus and directed too much at short-term effects. They would be considered inappropriate on either basis. (pp. 6-7)

In the Southwest Elementary scenario, teachers were providing focused instruction on inferential understanding of various sources of text. This skill area is a critical component of reading and would likely be included in the district's standards as well as on most tests designed to measure reading comprehension. However, the timing of this additional assistance is suspect. By implementing this focused instruction the month before the test is to be administered, it appears as if the intent is to raise scores rather than to foster the students' long-term retention of this important skill. This is the sort of instruction that would be most beneficial if delivered throughout the year.

What about the fact that the questions were almost exclusively in multiple-choice format? Is this OK? According to the guidance from Iowa Testing Programs (August, 2005):

The appropriateness of any proposed practice should meet either of the two following standards:

- It will promote the learning and retention of important knowledge and content skills that students are expected to learn.
- It will decrease the chance that students will score lower on the test than they should due to inadequate test-taking skills or limited familiarity with the item formats used on the test.

Activities that do not meet one or the other of these criteria are more likely to be unethical, to promote only temporary learning, or to waste instructional time. (p. 4)

If teachers at Southwest Elementary rarely use multiple-choice questions to assess their students' understanding of what they've read, students might be unfamiliar with how best to answer these types of questions and would likely benefit by having *some* practice so that their scores are a more accurate reflection of how well they understand what they have read. An over reliance on multiple-choice questions on classroom assessments, however, can restrict the type of information that teachers can obtain through their assessment process. This type of restriction often results in some important achievement targets—as defined by the standards and benchmarks—not being assessed.

Time for reflection and/or interaction:

What might teachers at Southwest Elementary do more appropriately to build students' inferential understanding?

Criterion #3: Educational Value (gained and lost)

Objectives:

1. The action should promote the learning and long-term retention of important knowledge and content skills that students are expected to learn, as defined by the district's standards/curriculum.
2. The action should provide students with knowledge and skills that have applicability to a broad range of situations/contexts—not just completion of a set of multiple-choice questions.
3. The amount of instructional time dedicated to test preparation should be warranted in light of the types of educational opportunities being replaced/lost.
4. The actions should be matched with the needs of individual students.

Negative consequences associated with lost educational value include the following:

- Student learning is short-term or is lacking in importance.
- Students are not learning all important educational outcomes due to the reallocation of instructional emphasis.
- Students are not being given the opportunity to apply their knowledge and skills to a broad range of situations.

All of these consequences are worse (for students) than if the school makes "the list."

Let's turn to a scenario illustrating the use of multiple-choice questions on classroom assessments and consider in what ways this practice is related to educational opportunities gained and lost.

Mr. Newton, a 7th grade science teacher has become annoyed and overwhelmed by the continuous edicts from the administration to "get those scores up." Though he's adamant about not changing the curriculum, he has decided that one logical and beneficial thing to do is to structure most of his classroom tests like the *ITBS* so that students are familiar with the format and language used on the science assessment. To do this, he reviewed the *Interpretive Guide for Teachers and Counselors* and saw that a large number of questions on the Science test were related to scientific inquiry—a skill he teaches but very rarely assesses on his regular classroom tests. Thus, he has made a concerted effort to include multiple-choice questions on his regular classroom tests to measure skills related to scientific inquiry.

It appears as if Mr. Newton has decided to integrate test preparation into his regular instruction instead of right before the *ITBS* is administered. Is this appropriate? According to the guidance from Iowa Testing Programs (August, 2005):

> **How far in advance of testing should test-preparation activities be used, or for how long prior to the start of testing should each activity be used?**
>
> Ideally, test preparation should be an integral part of the regular instructional program rather than an add-on activity. In that way, instructional activities that support test preparation likely would occur throughout the year rather than in a concentrated block of time just prior to the test administration. Activities that occur just prior to the testing tend to have a short-term effect, whether the temporary impact was intended or not. Also, intense practice or attention to testing during the weeks immediately before testing tends to put undue pressure on some students, causing them to be less prepared psychologically for performing at their best. (p. 5)

So, integrating the practice into regular instruction is a good thing. But what about the fact that Mr. Newton has structured most of his classroom tests to be similar to the *ITBS* in terms of item format and language used? What, if anything, has been gained or lost? Do the benefits outweigh the loss?

The emphasis that Mr. Newton has placed on scientific inquiry—a skill directly covered by the *ITBS*—is not problematic because it is a valuable learning outcome as defined by his school's curriculum and because he did not use questions from the *ITBS* as a model of what he should include on his regular tests.

In addition, helping students with the format of the test helps ensure that errors are a result of lack of achievement and not because of a lack of understanding based on how the question was worded. However, if he makes most of his tests resemble the *ITBS* (i.e., nearly all multiple choice questions), he will miss out on other aspects of science achievement, such as use of lab equipment and the written summaries of lab results, which are not easily measured by multiple-choice questions.

As a final scenario, let's look once again at an example of how teaching of test-taking skills might be implemented.

At South Central Junior High, "*ITBS* Week" is a time when everyone comes together in a unified effort to motivate and prepare students for the tests. The counselor has developed a test-taking skills curriculum, and every teacher uses this curriculum with his or her 2nd period students the week before the test for two full class periods. Skills that are practiced include strategies for answering multiple-choice questions, what to do when you get stuck on a problem, and tips for pacing and timing. The curriculum is also designed to motivate students to try their best.

The staff at South Central Junior High are using practices designed to review test-taking skills rather than content that will be on the test; it is encouraging that the efforts are designed to help students do their best on the tests so as to get the most accurate scores possible. However, two full class periods on these skills might be a bit much and probably takes away from other important learning objectives. Additionally, doing the practice right before the test might place undue pressure on some students. This pressure could result in them not being able to do their best, and may result in only short-term learning of these important skills. A few students might benefit from such intense work, but most likely won't. Thus, the activity helps a few and wastes the time of many.

But, what about the fact that <u>all</u> students are being taught this test-taking skills curriculum? Is it important to make sure that all students are treated the same way? Once again, turning to the guidance provided by Iowa Testing Program (August, 2005):

> **Should all students be provided an opportunity for test preparation in advance of the actual test each year?**
>
> Not necessarily. Test-preparation activities probably should be limited to assisting those who need help rather than for use en masse. Younger students may need more help than older ones, lower achieving students may need more than higher achieving ones, and some students in special programs may need more than those in regular programs. Just as general instruction often is individualized, so test preparation (which is a form of instruction) should be individualized. It should be based on need. In addition, the potential negative consequences of test preparation should be considered. Outcomes such as elevated test anxiety or overconfidence about the easiness of the test tasks can result from poorly designed test preparation emphasis. (p. 7)

Scenario Activity:

You have now completed Part 4. The examples provided in this part of the module were selected to illustrate some of the most common practices used by teachers in an attempt to prepare students for the *Iowa Tests*. Additional scenarios are available for you to apply what you have learned regarding how the appropriateness of test preparation can be evaluated in terms of <u>academic ethics</u>, <u>score meaning & use</u>, and <u>educational value</u>.

Although you can work through these scenarios on your own, working together in a small group would probably be more beneficial because of the opportunity to interact and exchange ideas and perceptions. There is no need to work through the scenarios sequentially or to complete them all at once—each scenario is independent of the others. Thus, if you are not able to work through the scenarios at this time, you might want to consider using part of them when you return to complete the module as a way of reviewing previously learned concepts before returning to Parts 5 and 6.

The expanded flowchart in the following figure provides a summary of the general questions to be considered for each of the three criteria. (A print-version of this flowchart can be obtained from the "Downloads" page.)

Flowchart:
Considering the Appropriateness of Test-Preparation Activities