

Different strokes for different folks – Tailoring assessment to the needs of the users

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Why are we assessing?

As I came through Hong Kong airport on the way to the Conference, I had to pass through a health check. This consisted of having a detector pointed at me for a fraction of a second and the result was almost instantaneous. I “passed” and was free to continue my journey. Why?

In this case, the purpose of the “assessment” was obvious – the detection of potential carriers of the SARS virus. The burden upon me – the individual being assessed – was minimal. The impact upon me, if I had been found to have the disease, would have been profound. The infection would have been caught at as early a stage as possible and I could have been further checked and treated at the earliest possible. The impact upon the system is also clear – those who might have been in contact with me could have been checked and the progress of the disease held in check.

The same obviousness of purpose, lack of burden and clarity of impact are not always the case when we assess children. We have become rather complacent about the need for assessment, devising more and more sophisticated ways of doing it without, perhaps, pausing sufficiently to consider what burden we are placing upon the individuals nor the impact that the assessment will have upon them or the system.

QCA’s mission

In a recent statement to staff at QCA, our Chief Executive, Ken Boston stated that the mission of QCA was to be the “champion of the learner”.

What he meant by this statement is that everything we do can only be justified if it benefits the learner. QCA is responsible for advising Ministers about the curriculum, developing and implementing the national curriculum assessments regulating the wide variety of awarding bodies and promoting lifelong learning. The difficulty is defining what the benefit to the learner might be. We all have an impact upon different aspects of the educational system, and we hope that the impact is beneficial. In order to do this, however, we need to be clearer about why we are assessing, what we assessing and what we hope to get out of it.

The Scottish Executive's Initiative

Since devolution, the Scottish Executive has had responsibility for education in Scotland. In one of its recent initiatives, the Executive has declared "All assessment is for learning". This is a theme that I shall try to develop in this paper for, unless the assessments we carry out DO benefit the learner, we have absolutely no business asking the learner to agree to be assessed.

In 1989, Paul Black's Committee – the Task Group on Assessment and Testing (TGAT) – on which Tom Christie served, offered the view that assessment could serve four purposes: diagnostic, formative, summative and evaluative. The Scottish Executive's view is that all these can be subsumed in the single purpose – helping the learner to learn.

Over the past few years, the Assessment Reform Group, which comprises some of the most respected experts in the field of educational assessment, have moved the argument forward, first with Dylan William and Paul Black's work on the impact of classroom assessment on learning – the summary of which "Inside the Black Box" has become a best seller on the scene. They concluded that formative assessment could be used to improve learning and that we knew how to improve formative assessment.

In the follow-up pamphlet "Assessment for learning", the Assessment Reform Group goes further: it argues that too much of our assessment is OF learning (i.e. for the purpose of assigning grades or marks) rather than FOR learning (i.e. for the purpose of providing feedback that will help the learner to improve). I have no doubt that this is true within the classroom, but once we leave the environment of the school, we need to consider what information different users need within the system if THEY are to have a beneficial impact upon learning and the learner.

Who needs what?

Learners

Learners – whether they are children in the infant class, secondary school pupils, university students, or employees in the workplace - need to know what works and what doesn't; what their strengths are and what are their weaknesses; and more importantly, learners need to know what to do to improve. It is no use learners being bombarded with facts and figures and exhortations to "do better" if they do not know what to change and in what way.

This is certainly the problem with reporting marks and grades. These may give information about the overall quality or the degree of success that has been achieved, but do not give any basis for improvement. Knowing that you have five out of ten spellings correct does not tell you how to spell the other five. Moreover, as the Assessment Reform Group has indicated, such a focus on grades or marks tends to have a damaging effect upon motivation at both ends of the scale: those with higher grades frequently become complacent while those with low marks lose their self-esteem and give up.

So for the learner, the information they need must directly address the ways in which the learner can improve: “it provides feedback which leads to pupils recognising their next steps and how to take them” (ARG Assessment for learning 1999).

For this there is no need for massive concern about the sort of reliability that comes from highly controlled assessment. It doesn't matter too much if the information is a bit shaky – in fact it is much more important for the teacher to err on the side of caution. If it looks as if the pupil has not yet mastered the area, then it's surely worth going over it again.

This sort of assessment is best left to teachers and may well be informal, in-class, oral or practical. It is the art of teaching – having taught a point, the pupil practises it and through monitoring that practice teacher finds out how far each individual has grasped it. This is true “coursework assessment”. The daily exercises of classwork and homework all contribute to the teacher's knowledge of each pupil's understanding. This needs to be converted not into grades or marks but into new approaches that the student can understand.

It may be that there is only a small problem that stands in the way of understanding. If the teacher can identify this on the spot and give advice to correct it, much time and potential frustration can be saved.

Of course written assessments have their place but, as we shall see below, the information they give is mainly to inform the teacher about strengths and weaknesses of *teaching*. For the vast bulk of formative assessment, formal written tests are unnecessary. The difficulty is that we frequently try to force the informal approaches into a formal system. This results in additional record keeping, additional bureaucracy to standardise the results and additional burdens on teachers. We need to put the emphasis on teachers informing themselves, so that they can help the learners to learn.

Teachers

Teachers need feedback too. They have produced the lessons and learning experiences that they think will create the environment in which the learners will be able to progress. But they do not know how well they have succeeded in that aim. They need a mechanism for finding out the effectiveness of their teaching. The trouble is that it is very difficult to measure teaching effectiveness. There is a big variable factor: the learners themselves. Any teacher will be able to identify lessons that worked for the vast majority of classes but failed miserably with others, or situations in which very bright students have appeared to be completely foxed by a particular concept while many usually less able pupils have caught on straight away.

So the teacher needs feedback. One way to get this is through peer review: observation of classes by one's colleagues. The problem with this is that it is time consuming – the pressure on teachers' time is probably greater now than it has ever been and there is little available for anything other than preparing and delivering one's own classes. But as with teacher assessment it is frequently the best way to deal with small problems that might otherwise become a major concern. There is immediate feedback from someone who can also point the way to improve. This is assessment for learning.

The teacher may want to find out more about what the children have learned and what needs to be reviewed. This is more of an assessment of the quality (or at least the effectiveness) of the teaching, rather than of what the pupils know and can do, but it still involves assessing the pupils to provide the information. This may be in the form of a more formal test. The question is how to make the information useful to the teacher?

A set of assessment paper scores is as little use to the teacher as the individual scores are to the learner. Knowing that only 30% of the pupils got the correct answer to question 5 is very little use. The teacher needs feedback that will identify the areas that have been grasped across the class and those which are still only shakily understood. But just as the learners need help to identify the ways of moving on from where they are now to where they would like to be, so the teacher needs to be provided with additional strategies to improve the effectiveness of the teaching.

Parents

There are certainly times when the needs of the parents are the same as the needs of the learner. If the learner is having particular difficulty in one area, it is important that parents are aware of what the problem is and what steps are needed to move on. In this way parents become part of the educational process. But again it is important that they know what they can do to help. Telling parents that their child is doing "badly" in comparison with other children does nothing to improve the learning environment. This is one of the difficulties with the mass assessment programmes that we have in the UK and elsewhere. It is true that the original intention of the national curriculum was to have clear "Statements of Attainment", which could become the lingua franca of assessment. Everyone would be able to understand what a Level 3 or a Level 5 meant. We had good intentions but sadly it hasn't turned out like that.

For a start, there has never been a description of what is required to achieve a Level 3 in English, or geography or science. There are descriptions of performances in different aspects of English such as reading comprehension, writing, spelling, listening and speaking, but how these are amalgamated into overall performance in English is certainly not an area that parents could be expected to understand. The same is true in all the subjects we have developed.

So the idea that the level is shorthand for the more detailed description of performance is largely a myth. For parents it is no more than a mark: level 3 is better than level 2 and not as good as level 4. It has similar effects on parents as it has on children: those whose children have high grades are proud and those with low grades are ashamed. What good is either of these emotions to the children? The most important contribution parents can make to the education of their children is to be interested and supportive of the school.

Parents need to know how well their school is teaching their children. This is absolutely right. The question is how we provide them with that information in a way that allows them to influence the learning. What impact do School Performance Tables (or “League Tables” as they are more commonly known) have on parents? The answer is that they have little impact upon teaching and learning: parents who have the ability to choose can move into the area of a school with better results. This means that schools with better results gain more pupils with parents who are interested in their children’s schooling. The problem is that the school from which they have moved is deprived of the very parents who could have made a difference.

Selectors

One of the major uses of assessments is to enable selectors to choose from amongst a range of candidates. Here reliability becomes of the utmost importance: if the decision to select one candidate rather than another is to be based entirely on the outcome of the assessment, we need to be as sure as we possibly can be that the basis of that selection is sound.

On the other hand, we need also to make sure that the assessment is valid – in the sense that it is fit for the purpose that we are putting it to. Past attainment may not be a sufficient guarantee of what the candidate may do in the future. If it is possible to *artificially* inflate the candidates’ scores by some particular form of coaching (or cramming, as Joy Cumming called it), they are useless for the selector.

I emphasise the word *artificially inflating their scores*: in other words training them to pass the exam. I do not want to be interpreted as rejecting the idea that teachers – or parents, other students, friends and colleagues – should help learners. That is what we should all be doing. The whole purpose of education is to improve the performances of pupils and we must not suggest that helping learners to learn more effectively is in any way wrong.

So what is the difference between what is acceptable and what is not?

The purpose of teaching is to enable pupils to learn, to have the independence to tackle new problems on their own. If all that is done is training them to answer questions on the test paper, then that is not a true test of their independence.

For this we need to ensure that assessments that are to be used for selection are good predictors of success in the future.

Policy makers

Policy makers are about as far from the teaching-learning process as it is possible to get. On the other hand, their decisions have a massive impact upon it. They determine what is to be taught, when, how teachers are to be trained and in what disciplines and, of course, they determine the resources to be spent and how they are to be deployed.

So what interest should they have in assessment?

They certainly cannot be interested in the performance of individuals (except to encourage teachers to use such assessments as part of their teaching). What they need is an overview of the system.

The difficulty here is that the best way of obtaining information about the system is by assessing the children on the whole range of the curriculum, to see what is being taught and how well the children are performing across the whole spectrum. There is a limit to the amount of assessment that children can be subjected to, and the national assessment system places considerable burdens upon them, probably already the maximum that we can permit.

In Scotland and in New Zealand, the policy makers have retained the systemic assessment systems that were developed in the 1970s. In England, the Assessment of Performance Unit (APU) undertook national evaluations, using a much wider variety of assessment tools and across much more of the curriculum than is possible if all the candidates have to take the same test. Paul Black, whom I mentioned earlier as one of the protagonists of assessment for learning, was the director of the APU's science unit. He estimated that it would have taken 36 hours for a single student to have covered all the areas dealt with in the APU science test, but each individual student had to sit a test of no more than a couple of hours. What we have in the national curriculum assessment is a very sophisticated assessment of a very small part of the curriculum. It is a very poor instrument for evaluating the system as a whole.

But there is movement. We are embarking on a pilot at key stage 1 – 7 year olds – in which the main assessment will be that of the teacher. This will be a judgement, made on the basis of the information the teacher has acquired in all those informal assessments made over the year. The teacher will be able to use a bank of materials to gain a feeling for national standards that will help moderate those judgements, but the decision will be that of the teacher.

This has the potential to be a great step forward. It should reduce the amount of formal testing and return the assessment to the teaching-learning process where it should always have been. Moderated teacher assessment is respected elsewhere and there is no reason why it should not provide teachers, parents and support agencies with the information they need about individuals. From the policy makers' perspective, it has the added advantage that pupils are no longer overburdened with assessment. It might therefore be possible to reintroduce something like the APU to give policy makers the type of information about the system that they are currently lacking.

Conclusion

Assessment is a major tool in the teaching-learning process. It can provide both the teacher and the learner with the feedback necessary for improvements to take place. It is important, however, that the information is translated into useful steps for action, not presented in its raw state: both learners and teachers need to know what to do next.

For other users, further from the teaching-learning process, the type of information needed is different and it is dangerous to put too much emphasis on the results of highly specific assessments of narrow sections of the curriculum. Such an approach gives little information about the curriculum as a whole but tends to have a negative backwash by narrowing the curriculum to those aspects that feature largely in the assessment.

Moves to a greater emphasis on the use of assessment within the classroom for learning may allow us to identify other ways of providing the information that is necessary for other parts of the system.

We need to be more careful in deciding why we need to assess students, what it is we need to know, and most importantly, how we are going to use the information to improve teaching and learning.