

Tension in assessment for communication and assessment for curriculum

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“One of the richest opportunities teachers have to work with colleagues is when they share the evidence they have of their students’ learning.”

(Fran Baker, 1997)

Imagine, if you will, this scenario playing at a school near you

A Bruce Willis movie is playing on the television screen. It’s a hot Sunday evening in early December and the summer holidays begin at the end of the week. You are sitting on the floor surrounded by folders, checksheets, evaluation booklets and profiles. You haven’t looked at any of this since last June, around report time, the last time you filled any of it in. You take the top one, check the name, think pleasant thoughts about this child and then merrily tick down the blank columns or mark a few M’s for mastered while keeping half an eye on Bruce Willis as he single-handedly wipes the evil scum from the face of the earth. You stop with an apprehensive thought. “Can Mary-Jane really do 35 backward skips while not allowing her heart to race more than 120 beats per minute?” Tick, tick, tick. “I’m sure she can,” you smile. “After all, her mother runs marathons and is on the Board of Trustees.”

Meanwhile, across town, your colleagues Tina, Sandy, Peter and Sue are watching the same Bruce Willis movie, ticking the same assessment checksheets, hoping that they too can be ready by Friday.

Means and purposes

There are, of course, many reasons for assessment, evaluation, data gathering and recording. Black (1993) loosely describes three broad functions of assessment as

- direct assistance to learning,
- the certification of individual students, and
- public accountability of institutions and the teachers within them.

(Black, 1993)

Within a New Zealand context schools are required to ...

- I monitor student progress against the national achievement objectives.*
- II analyse barriers to learning and achievements;*
- III develop and implement strategies which address identified learning needs in order to overcome barriers to students' learning.*
- IV assess student achievement, maintain individual records, and report on student progress.*

(Education Gazette, 30 April 1993)

Both Broadfoot and Crooks have highlighted a potential danger that may arise in schools if there is an imbalance between the need for assessment for curriculum and assessment for communication (Broadfoot, 1992:2; Crooks, 1988).

Assessment for curriculum can be described as being “part of the process of learning; the way in which it can be used to create the right kind of learning environment, to provide for diagnosis and feedback to guide pupils and teachers in a way that makes it an indivisible part of the process of learning.” (Broadfoot, 1992:2). Assessment for communication includes the more structured role of accountability and reporting to others; the sharing and disseminating of information and data.

No one involved in any institution of learning, either administrator or teacher, would doubt the importance each of these fields of assessment have. A recent Ministry of Education initiative *Assessment for Success in Primary Schools* labelled the ‘green paper’, advocates in its stated principles the need for schools to address *both* aspects of assessment (Ministry of Education, 1998:11-16). But do both aspects of assessment receive the same focus and attention, or is there an inexorable struggle accentuating an underlying tension between two opposing perspectives and philosophies on classroom practice and management?

This is a contentious issue that is difficult to delineate into black and white. Each school and each classroom has its own culture. Much of what we read on this matter must be interpreted within the context of our own experiences and in the light of our own philosophies on teaching and learning. Within any school you will generally find teachers and administrators with almost contradictory opinions on just about any educational issue. Assessment is no different.

The Crooks research article has helped me to crystallise a lot of my thoughts on this matter. Crooks (1988) has found that the classroom assessment practices of teachers is one of the single most powerful influences on student behaviours and outcomes. Yet he went on to conclude that although teachers judge evaluative practices to be important they are “often concerned about the perceived inadequacies in their efforts.” (Crooks, 1988:440).

Inadequacies born out of an historically technicist paradigm

I wonder why so many teachers appear to have “perceived inadequacies.” I must comment on my own experiences. I left training college in 1983 and for the next 15 years have been on many professional development courses from “Reading Recovery” through to “Safety in the front row of a rugby scrum.” Issues of assessment were sometimes alluded to within the context of training received within each curriculum area. But in all too many cases, assessment was a very minor issue as each course leader focused more directly on the *teaching* and *content* of their area of the curricula (I would have to say that Reading Recovery was an exception). “Classroom evaluation currently appears to receive less thought than most other aspects of education.” (Crooks, 1988:467).

I believe that there has been a neglect in developing teachers’ competence and expertise in the formative, ipsative, diagnostic forms of assessment. The malaise would appear to be more chronic and widespread than just the domains of Aotearoa. Indeed it is being wrestled with by educators on a more global scale.

“There are strong arguments for helping teachers to improve these nontest forms of evaluation.” (Crooks, 1988:440).

“We further urge that steps be taken to provide teachers with the training and materials so that formative assessment can be carried

out with the rigour and reliability necessary for it to be effective in improving pupils' learning." (Harlen, Gipps, Broadfoot, Nuttal, 1992:222).

"Most of the resources for the development of national assessment went into producing test materials with little support for teacher assessment or training." (Harlen, 1994:73).

I would venture to say that the opposite scenario is possibly true for the development in the field of *assessment for communication*. Black supports my claims. "Most of investment in assessment and testing, whether in practical operations or in research and development, has been devoted to the certification and accountability functions, to the neglect of the formative function." (Black). He goes on further to cite a 1980 study conducted in Scotland which "revealed that whilst 87% had a policy on assessment for reporting, only 29% had one for non-reported assessment, and only 26% of this latter group had their policy in written form." (ibid.). Our school assessment policy mirrors these findings. It's little wonder that some teachers feel a perceived inadequacy in their efforts. My personal experiences are one of very little direct support within class diagnostic, formative assessment techniques from management, administrators, or outside professionals. This is despite participating in two whole school teacher-only days and many staff meetings on the subject of assessment. The difference is that this form of professional development was only interested in developing a policy and a system for collecting and recording data for a communication role. Because of its technicist assumptions it spawned an assessment paradigm that still does not fit comfortably on the shoulders of most staff members. I could argue that the information we collect on each child is very full and thorough, yet it does little to paint a realistic picture of that child's achievements, growths, accomplishments, or indeed, even their disappointments.

I have also seen the testing, gathering, recording regime gather momentum as management reacts to the pressure of having a small group of teachers within the system whom they feel are struggling with their classroom commitments to quality education. They see further sample collection and testing as a way of ensuring that teachers who are perceived to be weak are doing their job properly, assuring if you like. Much of my readings point to the opposite effect.

"It became clear to some that educational standards are not raised by mandating assessment practices or urging tougher tests, but by

increasing the quality of what is offered in schools and by refining the quality of teaching that mediated it.” (Eisner, 1993:224).

I began with a tongue in cheek scenario that had more than an element of truth in it. It was a picture of an institution organised and controlled by thinking, founded and ensconced in a very deep seated *technicist paradigm* (Willis, 1994). The educational changes that occurred in New Zealand in the late eighties and early nineties came at an unprecedented helter-skelter pace. I believe that many schools were not well prepared for comfortably dealing with the rapid dismantling of one system and the constructions of another. Free market policies, decentralisation, and self-management supposedly gave schools the freedom to make quality decisions based on their needs and aspirations. Many principals, teachers, and members of Boards of Trustees have had educational experiences formed in the cauldron of a schooling system guided by a social science steeped with a history of “measurement, rationalist, theoretical explanation, and eventually prediction and control.” (Eisner, 1993:220).

On top of new systems for localised administration and management, educators also had to deal with implementing many new curriculum documents and try to offer meaningful professional development. This was all done against a backdrop of a prevailing political ideology which emphasised and promised values “of positive individualism, competition, and consumer choice.” (Codd, McAlpine, Poskitt, 1993:25).

Schools that I am familiar with suffered from becoming firmly bogged down in a technicist mindset. Control became a focus. New policies were written for every conceivable scenario. Policy writing committees brainstormed a multifarious catalogue of procedures and eventualities that teachers had managed to cope with previously with little managerial intervention. One result from all this was a large number of my colleagues leaving the profession stating an overload in pointless paperwork as one of the main factors influencing their decisions. Assessment did not escape the technicist paradigm.

“Reform has typically focused on the development and implementation of a range of assessment methods with scant attention to the ideological and theoretical assumptions that underpin the practice of in-course assessment in schools new directions in assessment are handicapped by a previous and outmoded assessment culture.” (Willis, 1994:162).

While it is not the purpose of this assignment for me to look too closely at the effects that outside spheres of influence or agents for change impinge on a school environment (external examinations, ERO, pressure groups, National Education Monitoring Projects, employers, etc.), it is worthwhile to note that these influences exert pressures, ranging from the overt through to the more subtle, that do affect assessment in schools markedly. While the effects that external examinations have on secondary education is obvious, profound, and well documented, it is equally possible for outside political influences to insidiously and unduly affect what educators do.

“While the demands of the new curriculum are pushing assessment policies in one direction, the demands of the New Right for national accountability continue to push them in quite a different direction.”
(Codd, McAlpine, Poskitt, 1992:23).

There has long been a call, despite the double messages inherent within our education system, for more authentic assessment based on the higher-learning, deep-thinking goals advocated in the curriculum.

“Such authentic assessment is likely to involve ..., the use of open-ended tasks; a focus on higher-order or complex skills; the employment of context-sensitive strategies; being performance based, sometimes over an extended time period; involving either individual or group performance; and possibly involving a considerable degree of student choice.” (Harlen ,1994:27).

“Assessment should get away from over-measuring simple learning outcomes and move toward higher order learning and thinking.”
(Codd, McAlpine, Poskitt, 1992:23).

As I highlighted in my review of Crook’s article (1988), we often have assessment procedures that are quite contrary to our stated educational goals, emphasising and rewarding lower cognitive levels, while ignoring and de-emphasising longer term metacognitive strategies, deep thinking, and social and interactive skills. In short, many of our assessment procedures do nothing to identify and reward the learning we hope is taking place, nor do they foster the types of classroom cultures we strive to develop. A technicist paradigm does nothing to remedy this impediment. Many schools are looking for another assessment structural framework.

Nurturing hope within a professional educative environment

Thankfully, I believe that a lot of schools have moved away from the rather bleak picture that mirrors some of my experiences to a more professional *educative paradigm* (Willis, 1994) that does not diminish accountability but on the contrary, “may encourage teachers to question the existing culture of teaching and to engage in development activities that will not only increase their professional knowledge and understanding but also contribute to more meaningful and effective accountability.” (Willis, 1994:161). Management teams in a professional educative environment have not absolved themselves from their obligations or their position of accountability. Instead they have tried to make assessment for communication work, not only for parents, caregivers, ERO teams, Boards of Trustees, and other schools and institutions, but also for the classroom teachers themselves.

Crooks outlines in his recommendations that this “more professional approach to evaluation would demand regular and thoughtful analysis by teachers of their personal evaluation practices, greater use of peer review procedures, and considerable attention to the establishment of more consistent progressions of expectations and criteria within and among educational institutions.” (Crooks, 1988:467).

This to me is a fairly good prescription for an educative professional model with which I would like to become involved. I think that for too long teaching practices have suffered because of the isolation most teachers experience. In the main, teaching is very insular in that meaningful contact with peers and colleagues is limited by time and physical constraints. We take each others word for many of the events and happenings that become our daily routines.

Group moderation is a way of breaking down some of our insular barriers and developing a collegial interdependence that will help to naturally and effectively develop meaningful dialogue. Teachers will evaluate their own classroom practices in a new light. Assessment doesn’t lose it’s validity (the main problem with mandated testing whether externally or internally), and gains in reliability (the main dilemma faced by management and administrators trusting and depending upon teachers’ judgements).

Teachers gain in professional development whenever they meet with their colleagues and clarify or challenge their own points of views, or become exposed to new, fresh

ideas and outlooks.

“The reason for advocating such models is not that they can turn teachers into good examiners but that it can help them become better teachers. Many teachers believed that they had developed professionally ... and they had acquired skills of observing and analysing children’s learning and refining their judgements in relation to both assessment and curriculum.” (Harlen, 1994:136).

Ingvarson (1991) claims that group moderation in Victoria, Australia, has provided “opportunities for genuine participation in decision making about matters close to teachers’ workplace concerns, such as curriculum and assessment and the setting of standards.” (Willis, 1994:171).

The gains from such a change in outlook on assessment have larger implications on professional development within a bigger picture, i.e. development of teaching strategies and styles. Involvement in moderation is a way for teachers to “set their classroom practice in a broader context.” (ibid.). Teachers are empowered by participation within a group moderation process, and although this is not a guarantee of success, I believe that it is much more preferable than the traditional closed technicist ideology focusing on selection and control. “It is therefore significant that educative school-based assessment has led teachers to feel more responsible to colleagues, students and their parents.” (ibid.).

A final reflective thought

Portfolios may well be the tool for recording, storing and disseminating information about a student’s progress and for celebrating their achievements and successes, and triadic interviews may be the preferred way of reporting progress to parents, but it is important to note that both of these devices may still be used in a technicist environment that still does nothing for teacher’s professionalism or self-development, nor the fostering and encouragement of higher learning skills. The success of these tools is dependent upon a philosophical change in thinking by both teachers and management, and the development of a true partnership.

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(Absolum, 1995; Baker, 1997; Black, Year unsourced; Broadfoot, 1992; Codd, McAlpine, & Poskitt, 1992; Crooks, 1988; Education, 1993; Education, 1994; Education, 1998; Eisner, 1993; Harlen, 1994; Harlen, Gipps, Broadfoot, & Nuttal, 1992; Lowe & Bintz, 1992; Willis, 1994)