

Elliot W. Eisner's model of assessment, and the New Zealand Curriculum Framework

Jean Gallia

This paper first examines differing definitions of assessment and evaluation. It considers the position of Eisner, and others, in various contexts within the assessment theoretical field. Eisner proposes new criteria for future assessment and these are described and discussed. Of key interest is the relationship between Eisner's model and the NZCF.

Introduction

Eisner's paper "Reshaping Assessment in Education", from which assessment models presented herein are taken, is included in his latest book, "The Kind of Schools We Need: Personal Essays" (1998). The paper was first published in the third edition of "The Educational Imagination" (1994). This seminal work is based on a collection of papers which discuss the design and evaluation of school programmes.

Defining assessment and evaluation

In this paper "assessment", "new assessment" and "authentic assessment" are taken as interchangeable terms. Evaluation has a different meaning in the educational context. However, because evaluation can be and often is used interchangeably with the term assessment, it is examined in this light where appropriate.

There are six entries under assessment in the Oxford English Dictionary. The sixth concerns combinations such as "assessment- board", the first four are all related to money matters such as taxation, fines, levies etc., and the remaining and fifth is as follows:

5.

- a. *fig.* in gen. sense: Estimation, evaluation.
Educ. The process or means of evaluating academic work; an examination or test.

It is interesting that the Oxford English Dictionary, in its only general and education related entry under assessment, uses evaluation in each instance to define the term. For educators and the general public alike then, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the two words are held to have intrinsically similar and related meanings.

Notwithstanding this, in recent times each word has undergone changes in education-related meaning. "Assessment" changed gradually over a period of approximately thirty years, commencing in the sixties (Eisner, 1998, p.135). Evaluation remained relatively static during that period, and then its meaning changed rapidly over the next decade. Originally used synonymously (ibid, p.132), more recently the two terms have developed the separate and distinct connotations now in current use in education in New Zealand and other places, whilst retaining their overlapping and synonymous meanings in some quarters.

The term assessment was used initially in noun phrases such as, new forms of assessment (Nisbet 1994), new approaches to assessment (Eisner 1994), and authentic assessment (Wiggins 1989). These referred collectively to the various forms of assessment which were gaining in credibility, and becoming more frequently used at the time. Today the single noun assessment is widely used as a generic term which embraces all recently evolved forms of assessment in education. In his paper Eisner mainly uses one or other noun phrase when referring to what in New Zealand we would call assessment. He notes the advent of the single noun usage:

Furthermore, assessment (the new term) needed to be more generous, more complex, more closely aligned with life than with individual performance measured in an antiseptic context using sanitised instruments that were

untouched by human hands. The model needed to be changed and the term *assessment* symbolised this ambition (Eisner, 1998, p.138).

Eisner's definitions of assessment and evaluation

Eisner's concepts of assessment and evaluation are broad and flexible: "(A)ssessment is more an aspiration than a concept with a socially confirmed technical meaning" (p.132). In these few words the essence of both the debate on the complex issues of assessment in present-day education, and his own inclinations, are encapsulated.

Eisner notes the shift in the meaning of evaluation. He speaks of the curriculum reform movement of the 1960s as giving rise to a "richer more complex conception of evaluation", and of the "enlarged focus of evaluation" (p.135). He goes on to note that this "enlarged focus" brought about a subtle but significant shift in epistemology; a shift that he says is best represented by Schwab (1969, as cited in Eisner, 1998). The latter describes it as a shift from a view in which evaluation is seen as a predominantly knowledge-seeking activity, to one in which it is seen as a decision-making one. Thereafter, Eisner notes, evaluation was "...expected to contribute to the enhancement of practice" (p.135). What is identified and described is a shift in the meaning of evaluation from its more assessment synonymous position, to one which emphasised programme modification at the decision making level.

New Zealand documents

It is interesting to note how these meaning shifts, as observed and signalled by Eisner, are precipitated and crystallised in New Zealand by the Ministry of Education document, "Assessment: Policy to Practice" (1994). The key terms are defined as follows:

The New Zealand Curriculum Framework makes it clear that the main purpose of school based assessment is to improve students' learning and the quality of learning programmes. Assessment can also be used for reporting progress and providing summative information (Ministry of Education, 1994, p.7).

and...

Evaluation is the process of making a judgement about the effectiveness of a teaching and learning programme, or about an individual's progress, based on assessment information (ibid, p.10).

Unlike those of Eisner's, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) definitions are distinct and short. Hattie (2001), in notes provided for a class on Evaluation, uses three charts and approximately 4,000 words to apprise future teachers of what they need to know as a starting point to their Evaluation studies. Hattie maintains that there is "...no such thing as neutral evaluation", or in the words of Nietzsche, "no immaculate perception". But NZQA, untroubled by the need to question the relative values of varying perspectives, uses definitions that are short and authoritative. Moreover the use of the New Zealand Curriculum Framework (NZCF), of which the assessment document is part, is mandatory in New Zealand schools. In a developed country with a population of only three and a half million, implementation of this and other curriculum changes are monitored by the Education Review Office (ERO).

Carpenter (2001, p.109) comments, "(S)ince the early 1900s school content [in New Zealand] has never been so structured, so prescribed and so monitored". Seen in this light the widespread adoption at school level in NZ of the two terms as defined above in the Curriculum Framework document is hardly surprising. Evaluation and assessment are distinctly different and usually separate activities in contemporary NZ schools, and that is so because all teachers plan, teach and assess within the guidelines of the NZCF.

Widespread adoption of NZQA terms and policy is a mixed blessing for NZ teachers. They benefit from access to the convenient usage of a pair of complementary terms, terms that afford ready professional understanding. Concurrently, there is the inevitable narrowing of the enlarged focus of evaluation as described by Eisner. It is possible that simplistic definitions can have a blinkering effect.

Further theoretical discussion

The relationship of the two words as defined in NZCF is by no means as unequivocal elsewhere. Walberg and Haertel (1990), for example, include in the preface to their encyclopaedia of educational evaluation a definition of evaluation: "(E)valuation pertains to the study of programs, practices, or materials that are ongoing or in current use" (1990, p.xvii), and "(E)valuation is also characterised by a plurality of methods and approaches" (1990, xvii). The ideas of these authors can be aligned with both the NZQA and the Eisner meanings of evaluation; Walberg and Haertel outline several other varied meanings and uses for educational use of the term.

Ralph Tyler defined evaluation, the term then used for assessment (p.132), somewhat prophetically as "...the process of determining to what extent the educational objectives are actually being realised" (Tyler 1950, p.69). In 1962 Robert Mager's seminal work on how to write instructional objectives was published. Against the background of the political and educational climate of the time, and more specifically the United States congress Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) which allocated an annual funding to each local school district that had evaluated the previous year's federally supported programmes, there occurred what W.J. Popham (1990) calls the marriage of the Tyler objectives based evaluation approach and the Mager objectives formulation approach. So comprehensively was the Tyler/Mager approach espoused that, as Popham comments, many assumed that "...the only bona fide way to evaluate an educational programme was to see if its measurably stated objectives had been achieved" (Popham, 1990, p.190). These two were to become behavioural objectives and as such to be richly endowed with "...socially confirmed technical meanings" (p.132). Notwithstanding this, Eisner (1967) argues against their use in many areas of the curriculum.

Marsh and Willis (1999) enable the positioning of the Eisner assessment model and that of NZQA in the broader arena of educational theory. Marsh and Willis position curriculum theorists in one of four quadrants: system-oriented proponents, system-supportive explorers, system-alternative explorers and system-alternative proponents. A system-oriented proponent proposes the continuation of the system in question. This theorist's proposals are not new or sweeping and can be said to be the most

conservative of the four. A system-alternative proponent is in the diametrically opposed position, this theorist proposes the replacement of the existing system by another. This theorist's proposals are therefore the most radical of the four. The other two categories can be seen to fall somewhere between these two.

Marsh and Willis place Eisner in the system-supportive explorer quadrant, placing him therefore somewhat closer to the conservative rather than the radical end of the spectrum. One of Eisner's more interesting qualities as a theorist is the way in which he couches innovative and powerful ideas in language which somehow renders them apparently moderate and acceptable. Taken singly, many of his ideas (such as the construction of assessment tasks in which an individual can create his preferred response in his chosen medium: 8th criterion below) whilst moderate in principle, in practice would be difficult to accommodate in a traditional school.

In 1967 Scriven coined the terms formative and summative evaluation. The former, referring to evaluation as a tool for the improvement and development of an ongoing activity, product or programme, paved the way for the introduction of a widening variety of assessment techniques. It is perhaps due to this burgeoning of methods, and the proliferation of views as to what is appropriate to assess, that Eisner comes to liken the assessment activity to aspiration (p.132). Eisner has woven so many rich and complex concepts into the assessment tapestry it is fair not only to place him at the new assessment end of Marsh and Willis's spectrum, but to name him as one of its architects.

New Zealand Curriculum Framework (NZCF)

The view of assessment as depicted in NZCF fits very neatly into the more conservative system-oriented proponents category. Through naming diagnostic, formative and summative (p.8), as the three main types of assessment, the NZCF describes only standards-based, achievement-based, competency-based and norm-referenced forms of assessment (pp. 9-10). Although self-assessment and peer assessment are later included under Assessment Procedures (p.16), these are cited under the auspices of useful skills for students, as specified elsewhere in NZCF, rather than advocated as essential assessment practices. Neither Eisner's criteria for new methods of assessment, nor those of any other with a wider view, are considered.

"Evaluation Criteria" (ERO, 2000), which contains guidelines on performance evaluation for schools, is also unequivocal in its stance. Guidelines for assessment come under the title "Managing the National Curriculum" (p.20), and appear to apply only to the methods listed above.

The stance of NZCF renders it difficult for an educator to consider working with any of Eisner's more important ideas in any meaningful way. As signalled above, its confining discourse ensures that the NZCF's position at the most conservative end of the assessment spectrum is maintained.

Nisbet (1994) describes a tension between the functions of assessment as an instrument of management and control, and as a means to support learning. He uses a cognitive map of associated concepts with two axes. On Nisbet's map (p.167), assessment as advocated in NZCF would figure well to the North-West, placing it in the control/accountability quadrant. In contrast, reforms proposed by Eisner in "Re-Shaping Assessment In Education" would figure to the South-East in that of growth/professionalism. These positionings show the 'tension' (to use Nisbet's terminology) inherent in any situation in which a teacher working within the NZCF might seek to assess or evaluate according to the broader spectrum definitions of even a relatively moderate system-supportive explorer such as Eisner.

Within his historical examination of evaluation (here used to mean assessment as we now know the term) Eisner (1998) traces the development of early beliefs that led to the upholding of "measurement, rationality, theoretical explanation, prediction and control" as ideal educational methods that would finally culminate in the standardised achievement test. The latter he calls "...one of the most visible and influential manifestations of scientific technology at work in education" (p134). It also happens to be one of the main threads that links the forms of assessment described in NZCF. However, in outlining the post sixties development of the study of what happens in schools and classrooms as social and educational organisations, he notes that these studies reveal empirically what had always been upheld by Dewey. This is that "(O)ne of the greatest of educational fallacies is that the student only learns what he (sic) is

being taught" (1938). This highlights the need to be open to broader spectrum assessment methods.

Elliot Eisner

According to Eisner, there are five functions of assessment. The first is what he calls a "temperature taking function" (p.139). In this, national assessment can be seen as an indicator of aspects of the nation's educational health. The second function is a gate keeping one in which the results of testing and examination determine entry to courses and institutions.

The third is the determination of whether or not course objectives have been attained. The fourth and fifth, respectively, are the functions of helping a teacher become more reflective about his or her own performance, and the assessment of programme quality. These last two are activities which "contribute to the enhancement of practice" (p.135), and as such, in accordance with NZCF, would be unlikely to occur in the NZ classroom during assessment but would take place during the more infrequent activity designated evaluation.

In describing the features of the new assessment in education, Eisner describes eight criteria "...for creating and appraising new assessment practices in Education" (p.140). Whilst at first glance these appear relatively non-controversial, many have far reaching implications for the shape and style of education itself, or as Eisner (1988) might say, the ecology of the school.

These criteria are paraphrased and cited below, with discussion of some of Eisner's main points.

1. Assessment tasks need to reflect the tasks of the outside world

The purpose of schooling is to equip students to solve problems that are not limited to school tasks and to "deepen and expand the meanings students can construe in daily living" (p.141). One group of people who see context as of vital importance in this equation are the cognitive psychologists who speak of "situated learning" (Greeno, 1989 cited in Eisner, 1998), or "grounded knowing" (Oliver, 1990 cited in Eisner, 1998), and who propose that assessment tasks with little resemblance to life "...may

yield scores that have little predictive value with respect to that life" (Eisner, 1998, p.141).

New assessment tasks will need to significantly resemble the challenges of ordinary living says Eisner, observing that this will require an "...entirely different framework of reference" for their construction (ibid, p.141). The original criterion is so reasonable as to be almost a truism, yet as we would be unable to reframe the construction of assessment tasks, without reframing the construction of the programmes to which they relate, its adoption would result in the individual or collective remodelling or replacement of parts of the school ecology, so recently reconstructed in this country. This criterion therefore has the special hallmark of Eisner in that whilst it is so desirable as to be almost irrefutable, it would be difficult to implement, and more particularly so in a country with a mandatory national curriculum.

2. Assessment tasks should show how students go about problem solving, and not only the solutions they produce

New assessment practices should be concerned with the individual reasoning processes of the student, as "...learning how to learn is a fundamental educational aim" (ibid). Achievement testing, even of the type which allows the marker to track a series of answers, cannot reveal such processes. The construction of tasks which make it possible to draw inferences about learning processes is essential, says Eisner, and a "...prime aim of diagnostically useful assessment" (p.142).

In "Standards For American Schools" (pp. 175-187), in which the value of national standards for student performance is discussed, Eisner says that one of the more important consequences of the existence of such standards is to distract from "...the building of a culture of schooling that is genuinely intellectual in character, that values questions and ideas at least as much as getting the right answers" (p.186). Once again Eisner does not present ready answers; in this instance he invites us to involve our communities in dialogue.

3. Tasks should reflect the values of the intellectual community from which they are derived

Here Eisner argues that the ideas within a subject area or field of discipline are part of an intellectual community (p.142), and that to remove them singly, as is possible within both the teaching and the assessment processes, is to trivialise them. He stresses the importance to the learner of understanding the relationship and interconnectedness of an idea within its field (or community), and refers to this understanding as an aesthetic achievement (p.142), because, he says, in this interconnectedness ideas are attached to their fellows as in an "intellectual tapestry" (p.142).

He argues for the construction of assessment tasks in which students are able to show that they have understood ideas within the context of a wider field, and says that this broader understanding brings with it two key benefits; an increase in meaning and retention, and a higher likelihood that learning will have aesthetic features. Whether or not it is possible to construct such assessment practices, he concludes, we should aspire to do so rather than ignore their importance.

In the essay "Rethinking Literacy" (pp.9-20), while discussing the work of Bruner on narrative and paradigmatic language forms, Eisner states, "(T)he paradigmatic seeks precision through the singular, while the narrative emphasises configuration" (p.11). This might help us in the search for a way to avoid the trivialisation of isolated ideas.

According to our examination of the usage of the term assessment, NZQA with its precise definitions and its minimalisation of the functions of assessment, would align with the paradigmatic, whilst Eisner and others who look to assessment as a means to support learning more broadly, would align with the narrative.

4. Assessment tasks need not be limited to solo performance

In the United States a high value is placed upon individual achievement, and within the education system, grading and marking practices, based on the normal curve or bell curve, operate. Students are in competition with one another, and excellence is considered to be a scarce resource which is conferred upon few.

Individualism is prized and educationally nurtured in this way in much of the western world. This includes New Zealand which has been influenced by the United Kingdom education system with its classical heritage.

The criterion referenced tests of recent years go some way to ameliorate the norm-referenced assumptions of older tests, Eisner says. However, they are still only a measure of individual achievement.

He concludes that much of what is important in life requires group effort. Curricula and assessment procedures must therefore be redesigned to gauge both the success of the group effort, and the contribution of the individual towards that effort.

5. New assessment tasks should make possible more than one acceptable solution to a problem and more than one acceptable answer to a question

Eisner does not enter into a discussion on the desirability of procedural objectivity, but points out that as an aim it places constraints upon what can be asked of a student, as well as upon the kinds of responses held to be acceptable. The problems confronted in everyday living as well as the problems confronted during intellectual endeavours (p.144) have more than one solution, and we therefore must design assessment tasks accordingly so that alternative solutions can be given credit. He acknowledges that the use of procedures able to evaluate and credit more than one response may well be inappropriate for large scale temperature-taking tasks, but believes the seeking of these to be extremely important as they "...may help alter the pedagogical priorities of classroom life" (p.145).

"Responsive Evaluation" (Stake 1980) is a form in which students have the role of sociological informants rather than subjects, and in which it is recognised that the perceptions of both participating students and evaluation researchers are subjective. As Stake mainly refers to evaluation in the same way as does NZQA, i.e. as to a decision making and teacher based activity, the methodology of Responsive Evaluation might be a relatively simple and effective way of opening the window to more broad spectrum assessment and evaluation methods.

6. *Assessment tasks should have curricular relevance, but not be limited to the curriculum as taught*

Whilst a conventional approach may consider it wrong to evaluate that which has not been taught, Eisner here argues persuasively (whilst disclaiming this) for just that. His argument, at once insightful and convincing is as follows: as one of the chief aims of education is to enable students to use what they have learned in other settings, it follows that we should value, and be able to assess, both the transfer of knowledge and the possession of a set of modifiable tools for the acquisition of further, similar knowledge. The implication here, he says, is the need to design assessment practices that are relevant to the curriculum but are also able to assess beyond its parameters. What is needed he says, are, "...tasks that reveal the student's ability to use at the level of principle what has been learned" (p.146).

In discussing qualitative and quantitative assessment in "Standards for American Schools: Help or Hindrance" (pp.175-187), he notes that both require the application of a standard (p.181), and therefore thrive under curricula and assessment policies that do not encourage innovation. In this instance he offers us a clue as to the way forward: "(W)hen we seek to measure such outcomes, we will not be able to use a fixed standard for scoring the work students have produced. We will have to rely on that most exquisite of human capacities - judgement" (p.182).

6. *Assessment tasks should require students to display sensitivity to configurations or wholes and not simply discrete elements*

The thread of Eisner's argument is as follows: outside of text books there are few instances where inquiry would lead unerringly from one step to another arriving finally at a single destination. Rather, genuine inquiry proceeds haltingly, and with the inquirer looking for pattern or what Eisner calls "that elusive but precious quality we call coherence" (p.146), and what Goodman calls "the sense of rightness of fit" (1978, cited in Eisner, 1998). Tasks that can be measured by the typical standard achievement test are therefore inadequate; what is needed are tasks that involve students in broad areas of problem solving, with assessment tasks that enable the assessor to watch and pose questions on the process.

Eisner describes how in a life drawing class a student draws not only the contour of a limb, but needs to record visually its relationship to the rest of the body, which in turn must be carefully related to the paper upon which it is drawn. He observes that it is true of other forms of problem solving also, that the whole must be seen.

A much more radical justification for this construct can be found in the paper "The Meaning of Alternative Paradigms for Practice" (pp.103-115), in which Eisner and Cole (1985, cited in Eisner, 1998) state that mind is itself a cultural achievement, with curricula and teaching methods the means for "creating" minds (p.105). If, as Eisner goes on to claim, the curriculum of which assessment is a part can make a difference to the kind of mind a person owns, then there is no excuse for the piecemeal feeding or testing of this mind.

Educational connoisseurship, a form of enquiry devised by Eisner (1977), could be a way to look at and assess the whole.

7. *Assessment tasks should permit the student to select a form of representation he or she chooses to use to display what has been learned*

Just as in competitive running students start together and cover identical stretches of track, so group achievement tests are almost always conducted with identical papers and items so that the results can be compared. If, however, one's view of assessment is that it may "determine the unique ways in which students interpret or apply what they have learned", then students must be given opportunities to construct their own responses, as well as to choose "...the medium through which what they have learned can be made public" (p.147). The wide variety of options seen as an integral part of new approaches to assessment, is important, for, in the world, an individual will create his or her own preferred response to any given situation. An example Eisner gives is that of how after a vacation, a person may paint a picture, write poetry, show photographs, or talk about their experiences.

Although it is seen that to offer this variety will cause problems for assessors, it does signal an important message for students: "...that personal proclivities matter, that

productive idiosyncrasies count, and that individual interpretation and creativity are values the school cares about" (p.148).

Conclusion

Whilst concepts presented by Eisner in his work, such as those concerned with issues of cognitive development, alternative learning paradigms, and aesthetic appreciation as a mode of understanding, are highly interesting, innovative and thought-provoking, they are not easy to relate to the practical realities of changing the school ecology. This is not to say that they are not matters of great importance, rather that there is difficulty both in grasping and addressing these powerful issues within along established systems, or even within a young and recently established one, such as the NZCF. These systems are, generally, not designed to accommodate consideration of concepts such as Eisner's.

Authentic assessment, says Eisner, is aptly named in contrast to assessment through standardised norm-referenced tests, which he declares educationally inauthentic (p.216). Whichever of its names we may choose to call it, from the Eisner perspective assessment has an infinite number of forms, and requires in its participants the qualities of deliberation, sensitivity to nuance, flexibility, and openness to genre. Its teachers will need to be able to identify and value uniqueness. They will need to possess "...a kind of educational connoisseurship that is sensitive to what is subtle and significant in student's work" (p.216).

Were we able to set about the implementation of authentic assessment over a decade or two, much as NZCF has been implemented, it is reasonable to suppose that it would always be unsuited to certain types of persons and circumstances. Furthermore, the wide variety of forms and value judgements involved would render the whole highly vulnerable to charges of insubstantiality. The principles to be embraced here if we are to have truly authentic assessment are a far cry from the seduction of the easy technological approach with its socially confirmed technical meaning (Eisner P.143).

Whilst Eisner is the first to acknowledge (pp. 141-148) the difficulties inherent in the construction of acceptable assessment tasks, it is not acceptable that we continue to

bypass the finest of educational thinking. There is much work ahead, and great ignorance and lack of understanding to overcome.

In Eisner's words:

Now is not the time for pessimism. What is pessimistic concerning school improvement is an unwillingness or inability to appreciate the complexity that actually exists. What is optimistic is the ability to face up to this complexity and to begin to work together to address the challenging future before us. To do this will require us to give up old habits and traditional expectations, but in the end it might open new vistas before us (p.217).

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