ASSESSMENT IN TEACHER EDUCATION: STAKEHOLDER CONFLICT AND ITS RESOLUTION*

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a polemical discussion of assessment in teacher education. Working from the proposition that assessment serves a number of important purposes for a range of stakeholders (students, employers, quality assurance agencies, government), it argues that there is considerable potential for conflict between the different purposes. In an age of account ability and standards, assessment for learning may lose out to assessment of learning. The paper outlines a range of characteristics associated with assessment for learning and draws on examples of practitioner research to illustrate various approaches and methods of assessment that can improve the balance between these different purposes.

Key words: GCSE: General Certificate of Secondary Education.

INTERDUCTION:

Assessment in schools is never far from the public eye. Debates are constantly arising in the national press over issues such as the testing culture in schools, coursework versus examination assessment or declining standards in GCSEs and A levels. But more quietly and less in the public fora, classroom assessment has been subject to significant development in recent years, with considerable emphasis on the importance of assessment for learning and involving children in assessment. This article focuses on assessment in teacher education rather than school assessment, but the debates are not so dissimilar and the tension between assessment for accountability and assessment for learning is just as relevant. The article aims to debate this issue and consider how assessment in teacher education can resolve the potential conflict. It draws on practitioner research to illustrate potential approaches and methods of assessment that can improve the balance between these different imperatives.

ASSESSMENT:

Assessment is in flux. The social meaning of assessment is changing from something done at the end of a period of study to something that happens as part of that study, and secondly, from something done by teachers to students to something that students themselves get involved in. This shift can be illustrated by looking at four different purposes of assessment, the first two more clearly associated with traditional meanings of assessment and the latter two with more contemporary approaches. The four approaches are:

- Certification
- Quality Assurance
- Student Learning
- Lifelong Learning Capacity

CERTIFICATION:

Certification refers to the idea that key purposes of assessment are:

- To identify and discriminate between different levels of achievement, and between students
- To provide a license to practise in the case of professional programmes such as teaching
- To enable selection of students for further study and employment.

Certification is clearly related to summative assessment, grading and judging students' achievements. It is assessment of learning and is obviously very important – none of us wants to be treated by a doctor who hasn't been judged safe to practise. We do not want our children taught by teachers who haven't reached satisfactory standards.

QUALITY ASSURANCE:

A second purpose of assessment is to provide evidence for relevant stakeholders to enable them to judge the appropriateness of standards on the programme. It reflects the important purpose assessment plays in institutional accountability, because it is primarily students' assignments and examinations which external examiners use to judge whether a programme comes up to standard. With the exception of teaching practice examiners, student assessment is seen as a proxy for the overall value of the programme.

STUDENT LEARNING:

For many of us, student learning is the most important purpose for assessment. Working towards and completing assignments, examinations and practical work should actively promote good quality learning. Overall, this purpose for assessment is formative and diagnostic, and emphasises the encouragement of learning by motivating students, steering their approach to learning and giving the teacher useful information to inform changes in teaching strategies. This is assessment for learning.

LIFELONG LEARNING CAPACITY:

The notion of 'sustainable' assessment was coined by Boud , who considers that students should not just be assessed but should be able to do assessment. He argues that most higher education assessment does not help students learn how to be assessors although, for all professionals, not just future teachers, the ability to assess themselves, their colleagues and institutional practices is an essential part of learning and development. We miss a tremendous opportunity if we don't ensure that students leave university competent in doing assessment. In teacher education, where assessment is so clearly part of the role, this must be more important. So sustainable assessment means using assessment opportunities to achieve an understanding of standards, to learn how to make judgments, to be able to use criteria, to be aware of one's own prejudices and biases in making judgments, to be able to tell when you really understand something. Overall, sustainable assessment is assessment for lifelong learning. This is using assessment as learning.

CONFLICT BETWEEN THE DIFFERENT PURPOSES OF ASSESSMENT:

These four different purposes help us think about the 'point' of assessment in teacher education. They enable us to analyse what the different component parts of our assessment strategies might involve and what they are aiming to do. In addition, the different purposes reflect our changing views of assessment, with the emphasis on **student learning** and **lifelong learning** emerging more recently, reflecting developments in learning theory as illustrated by Figure 1 (page 15) from Shepard (2000).However, despite a shift in direction towards the latter purposes, university assessment quite properly, still places considerable emphasis on the first two purposes. Indeed, it is the effort to combine assessment of learning with assessment **for** and **as** learning that creates a particular challenge to the design of good assessment strategies for teacher education (and all higher education for that matter). There is significant potential for conflict between the different purposes, for example:

- knowing which student has done what, is crucial for certification, but it may prevent you using group assessment because it is impossible to accurately attribute achievement to individual students – indeed you might not want to because it would damage the group ethos
- Unseen examinations, on the other hand, are reasonably robust in terms of assuring that students are only credited with their own achievements, but research shows that they can encourage low level or surface learning unless they are very carefully constructed.
- peer and self-assessment can promote learning that is difficult, if not impossible, by other methods (Black et al., 2003) in pursuit of student and lifelong learning, but may challenge certification if marks are not allocated by an expert

- classroom-based assessment methods such as presentations, debates and role-plays may be very useful for encouraging students' communication skills, but may be discouraged because they are not easily available for quality assurance by external examiners.

These are important conflicts, and experience of examination boards and validation panels suggests that there is a tendency to err on the side of 'certification' and 'quality assurance' (QA) at a cost to **student learning** and **lifelong learning**. Traditional assessment methods are often accepted fairly uncritically, whereas innovative approaches are often challenged by fears aroused by QA and certification. Thus, staff can be cautious and anxious about introducing new forms of assessment that may provoke criticism from those who have not been intimately involved in developing the programme or don't have sophisticated understanding of the assessment method

CHARACTERISTIC OF LEARNING-ORIENTED ASSESSMENT:

- Assessment should have a formative function, providing 'feed-forward' for future learning that can be acted upon. There should be an opportunity and safe context for students to expose problems with their study and get help
- Tasks should be challenging, demanding higher order learning and (for employability) integration of knowledge learned in both the university and practical contexts. Students' skills should be assessed in different learning environments
- Learning and assessment should be integrated with tasks combining learning and assessment
- Students should be involved in self-assessment and reflection on their learning, including the judging of performance
- Assessment should encourage metacognition, promoting thinking about the learning process, not just the learning outcomes
- Assessment expectations should be made visible to students as far as possible
- Tasks should involve the active engagement of students developing the capacity to find things out for themselves and learn independently
- Tasks should be authentic, worthwhile, relevant and offer students some level of control over their work.
- Tasks should be fit for purpose and align with important learning outcomes
- Assessment should be used to evaluate teaching as well as student learning.

ASSESSMENT METHODS:

The following three assessment methods provide examples of tasks that balance the different purposes of assessment:

- Field-based enquiry
- Interactive examination
- Patchwork text.

FIELD-BASED ENQUIRY:

- Involves higher order skills, complexity
- Integrates assessment with the learning
- Encourages independent and active learning
- Involves students in the assessment process (avoiding grades in the early stages) has the potential for authenticity
- Includes formative stages – students can get help and feedback in a low-stakes way
- Involves a level of control and choice over their work
- Attempts to make expectations available to students both in written criteria and embedded in feedback
- Has the potential to integrate learning from university with learning from other contexts.

INTERACTIVE EXAMINATION:

Interactive examination has many of the characteristics of learning-oriented assessment, it:

- Demands higher-order thinking, application and evaluation

- Involves integration of university knowledge and classroom knowledge
- Allows authenticity
- Involves students in assessment, judging themselves against the expert solutions
- Gives the students feedback (from expert solutions) and requires them to take action on it
- Involves reflection on their work
- Helps students understand the assessment criteria, as the exam marking scheme is shared with them before the exam and used to frame questions for their self-assessment.

PATCHWORK TEST ASSESSMENT:

This is an innovative approach to both the learning and the assessment of undergraduate primary students training to be science specialists, and attempts to encourage a critical understanding of science and science teaching. During the module, students write a range of short pieces which require them to personally and critically engage with the subject matter. These include such things as a report on a science enquiry entries about their own learning as a science teacher, a critical evaluation of a current controversy in science and a review of a science-related item in the media, such as a documentary, and an analysis of some implications of an aspect of science for teaching and learning Students bring these 'patches' to sessions, where they are discussed in small groups who give formative comments to each other. The patches are then 'published' to the whole group in electronic format *so the* module develops its own growing resource base of diverse and stimulating student writing.

The final piece is summatively assessed with the title 'Becoming a science specialist primary teacher'. Students are required to provide a synthesis of their patches, reappraising them and identifying emergent themes or other structure to their thinking, which has materialised during their writing. Conversation with their 'critical friends group' is used to help them construct this reflective synthesis. While Ovens faced some resistance from his colleagues, the quality of the work produced by the students and their integration of the understanding of science and understanding of teaching issues was impressive, whereas in former assessment, students had tended to see these as two separate elements. It also helped the students to see knowledge as uncertain and unpredictable. The assignment is emphasising that a broad understanding of the module's curriculum is to be developed through an interactive and collaborative teaching and learning process, which fosters generic intellectual qualities.

CONCLUSION:

The point of assessment in teacher education is at least fourfold and this presents a number of challenges to us in reviewing and developing our assessment methods. It requires us to consider the balance in our programmes between assessment **of** learning and assessment **for** and **as** learning, with a particular focus on selecting assessment methods that successfully combine all these purposes. While teacher education, unlike many university disciplines, has a strong history of assessing professional practice as well as academic knowledge, it is still worth asking whether much of our assessment continues to focus too heavily on the 'academic' rather than the 'operational', valuing writing about 'knowing how', rather than valuing its demonstration. In addition, if we want to help our students in their careers, we need to focus on their 'employability'. Research suggests that employers see professional and academic qualifications 'as the first tick in the box' (Knight and Yorke, 2003). They are more interested in what are called 'soft skills'can candidates manage their own workload, communicate well, learn new things independently, solve problems, instigate change if needed and work effectively with the rest of the team? We need to ask ourselves whether our programmes and assessment suitably value those qualities. In other words, we need to rethink what we are wishing to assess when we certify students.

Above all, perhaps we should make sure that we link our own assessment practice to that which we are advocating that students use with their pupils, helping students understand the essential principles involved in making assessment a constructive experience for all.

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