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Assessment Issues for the Twenty-First Century

Paper presented by Áine Hyland to the CORI Conference on Assessment

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I will start with a number of quotations which emphasise the extent to which assessment drives the curriculum. "Assessment is the tail that wags the curriculum dog".[1] "Assessment commonly has a backwash effect on the curriculum and on the processes of teaching and learning which go on within it".[2] "Assessment operationalises our educational goals as much as it reflects them".[3]

It is generally accepted that changes in educational assessment should be planned in accordance with changes being proposed for curriculum. Curriculum and assessment reform should be undertaken together, with planned coherence, otherwise assessment reform will simply shape the curriculum by default.[4]

For many generations of educationists, assessment has tended to be synonymous with terminal examinations. This approach has a long history dating back to Chinese civil service examinations which commenced in the seventh century and continued into the early twentieth century. For much of its history, selection into the Chinese civil service was determined by several levels of examinations, each of which contained numerous gruelling exercises. These examinations were administered first at local

level, next in provincial capitals and finally in the national capital. For some levels, as many as 20,000 men would be housed in individual cells within an examination hall. Supervised by soldiers, they were left to answer written questions from before dawn on one morning into the evening of the following day.[5] The Chinese civil service examinations were examples of "high stakes" examinations. Those who were successful could anticipate great status and honour. Success provided a stepping stone from poverty to relative wealth and status. Inevitably these examinations grew to have a significant effect on teaching and learning in China and eventually came to influence selection systems throughout the rest of the world.

In the sixteenth century the Protestant German teacher, Philip Melanchton, in his *De Studiis Adolescentum* wrote that "no academical exercise can be more useful than that of examination. It whets the desire for learning, it enhances the solicitude of study while it animates the attention to whatever is ~~thought~~ taught".[6] In the sixteenth century, the Jesuits developed and introduced a system of examinations in their schools and colleges across Europe. The Jesuits can probably take credit for the widespread use of examinations as a means of raising educational standards in European universities.[7]

In time, examinations also came to play an important part in influencing the payment of teachers. As early as the mid-fifteenth century a teacher in Treviso in Italy was paid by the town council according to the levels of his pupils' attainment. This attainment was measured by an oral examination, and based on pupil performance the school master received four different levels of reward.[8] Payment by results schemes were subsequently introduced in many countries and by the nineteenth century

Ireland, the UK, the US, Jamaica and Australia were among the countries which had such systems in operation.[9] The detailed administration of these schemes varied somewhat. For example, in Ireland in the nineteenth century, payment by results at national (elementary) school level was based on an oral examination of each pupil by an inspector employed by the national authorities.[10] In the case of intermediate (secondary) schools, payment by results examinations were formal written examinations which took place outside of the school environment at the end of the school year. Examination papers were set and corrected by external examiners employed by the Intermediate Board of Education.[11] While payment by results was popular from an administrative point of view it had many critics. Matthew Arnold, a school inspector in England, described it "as a game of mechanical contrivance in which teachers will and must learn how to beat us. It is found possible by ingenious preparation to get children through the examination in reading, writing and ciphering without their really knowing how to read, write and cipher." [12]

By the beginning of the twentieth century, payment by results had been phased out in most western countries.[13] However, that is not to say that the influence of the written examination faded, only that the payment of teachers was no longer tied in with pupil performance at examinations. At second level in particular, written terminal examinations continued to have an important influence on teaching and learning.

In Ireland, the period 1900-1922 saw a refocusing of emphasis at primary level. The narrow examinable three Rs type curriculum was replaced by a revised programme of instruction - informed by child-centred philosophies. Individual difference was

recognised and this was reflected in a more flexible system of inspection than had previously been the case.[14] With the setting up of the Irish Free State in 1922 however, the focus changed again, this time to a curriculum which was nationalistic in its emphasis.[15] In 1927 a Committee on Inspection of Primary Schools recommended the introduction of a state primary school certificate which would "testify with the full authority of the Department to the creditable completion of a primary course and which would have a standard value all over the country".[16] This examination, initially in Irish, English, Mathematics, History, Geography and Needle Work for girls, was optional but only about twenty-five percent of eligible pupils sat for it throughout the 1930s.[17] Although it was opposed by the Irish National Teachers Organisation, it was made compulsory in 1943 with Irish, English and Arithmetic as the three subjects which were tested by written examination at the completion of sixth standard. The then Taoiseach, Eamon De Valera, was a key voice in the introduction of the compulsory Primary Cert and was not prepared to respond to the concerns expressed by teachers. He stated "I am less interested in the teachers' method of teaching than I am in the results he achieves, and the test I would apply would be the test of an examination".[18]

It was not until 1967 when free second level education was introduced that the Primary Cert was abolished. Its critics have argued that it did little to improve the standards within primary schools. On the contrary, they would suggest that it led to a narrowing of the curriculum with an over emphasis on the three tested subjects and the espousal of methodologies which best contributed to examination success. Pupils who were unlikely to pass the Primary Cert were often left in fifth class and never

went beyond it.[19] They and the pupils who failed to reach the pass standard in the Primary Cert were effectively certified as failures. And apart from exceptional situations they did not proceed with their education.

In secondary schools, the terminal written examination continued to dominate after 1922. In some subjects such as Art and Music other forms of assessment were in place e.g. performance, oral an aural tests in Music. The essay type answer continued to be sought in many subject areas and very little change in the format of the second level examinations (Intermediate and Leaving Certificate) took place between the 1920s and the 1990s.[20]

As regards vocational schools, it is of interest to note that following the passing of the 1930 Vocational Education Act, when continuation education was first introduced, a deliberate decision was taken not to introduce a national examination. It was felt that since local circumstances differed and since the needs of individual localities would be different, assessment should be locally developed to take account of this difference. However, following pressure from teachers during the 1940s the Day Group Certificate examination was introduced in 1947 - a national examination which assessed the performance of continuation pupils at the end of a two year programme. Although the Group Cert was a national examination, it incorporated many practical forms of assessment, and teacher involvement in the assessment of their own pupils was a normal feature of the Group Cert.[21]

With the introduction of the Junior Certificate in 1989 the Intermediate and Day Group Certificate examinations were abolished and it was initially the intention that the new Junior Certificate would encompass and include the most appropriate forms of assessment from both of the previous certificate examinations. In practice, however, there was a tendency to emphasise terminal written examinations and many of the more exciting forms of assessment that had been associated with the Day Group Certificate examination disappeared.

The terms of reference of the Curriculum and Examinations Board which was set up on an interim basis in 1984 emphasised the integrity of curriculum and assessment.[22] In the early years of the Board it was expected that full responsibility for the examination system would be transferred from the Department of Education to the Board as had been indicated in policy documents of Fine Gael during the previous decade.[23] This was not to be, however. There seemed to be a strong view within the Department of Education that examinations should continue to be administered by the Department in spite of the heavy demands that such work made on the inspectorate. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s in the context both of the Curriculum and Examinations Board and its successor, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), the debate on the relative role of the Department and of the Board, subsequently the Council, continued. It now seems clear, in the light of the wording of the 1997 Education Bill (No. 2) that the responsibility for administering the examinations will continue to be vested in the Department of Education.[24] This division of responsibility for curriculum and assessment between the Council and the Department is in my view an unfortunate one and makes it difficult to ensure that

assessment is an integral part of the teaching and learning process. Moreover, in some subject areas at both Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate levels there appears to be a lack of congruence between the stated aims and goals of the syllabus and the format and content of the written examination and this is precisely the concern which led to calls in the 80s and early 90s to integrating the advisory and administrative role in relation to curriculum and examinations.

As we move into the twenty-first century a number of important issues are on the agenda. The White Paper on Education (1995) recognises that the revision of the second level curriculum needs to be supported by changes in teaching methods. It states:[25]

> "The development of teaching methodology seeks to ensure that the methods used are appropriate to the objectives sought. Teaching methods employed are central to the process of innovation and change … The importance of complementing traditional methods with a wider range of teaching strategies is a key element in realising the objectives of the restructured second level curriculum. New strategies will also help to harmonise approaches between primary and second level schools."

The White Paper and the documents of the NCCA[26] present an exciting vision of education as it is to develop in the twenty-first century. They recognise that our educational goals should promote a broad range of outcomes and a wide variety of educational achievements. However, if this is to be the case it is essential that these goals be reflected in an equally broad assessment policy. Given the power of assessment to shape curriculum, teaching and learning, imbalance in assessment will likely create imbalances in these.[27]

Assessment must be differentiated in terms of what teachers assess - the process of work (how the students set about collecting, organising and interpreting the information) and the product (the presentation of the ideas, the quality, the quantity of the work). Usually precedence is given to the assessment of finished products, since assessment is commonly viewed as an attempt to quantify outputs within a product oriented view of learning.[28]

Examination and assessment in this country has traditionally been product oriented and has paid little attention to the significance of process in the learning situation. Hargreaves, Earl and Ryan suggest that traditional patterns of examination and assessment have the following features in common:[29]

⇒ They are predominantly applied out of context, once the required learning has been completed;
⇒ They are usually paper and pencil tests;
⇒ They are usually norm-referenced or criterion-referenced;
⇒ They provide the basis for scores and grades which can be used as measures of performance at individual, school, district or national level;
⇒ They tend to privilege intellectual-cognitive aspects of achievement and the subjects in which these forms of achievement are pre-imminent;
⇒ They only recognise a fraction of the multiple intelligences described by Gardner.

Increasingly throughout the United States and other countries, the importance of authentic assessment is being recognised. Authentic assessment refers to forms of student work that reflect real life situations and challenge students' ability to test what they have learned in those situations. Authentic assessment has the following features:[30]

⇒ It is based on actual forms of what we want the pupils to be good at e.g. doing research, solving problems, creating artefacts, etc.
⇒ It requires more complex and challenging mental processes;
⇒ It acknowledges more than one approach or right answer;

⇒ It emphasises uncoached explanations and real products;
⇒ It has transparent criteria and standards;
⇒ It involves trained assessor judgement.

It is notable that many of the new and innovative programmes which have been introduced in Ireland to respond to the needs of pupils whom the traditional system of curriculum and examination has failed, do in fact incorporate authentic forms of assessment. This is true both in second level junior cycle and senior cycle and in further education. Programmes which are notable in this regard include the Junior Certificate Elementary Programme, the Transition Year Programme, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme, and the Leaving Certificate Applied. Of particular significance is the work of the National Council for Vocational Awards which for a number of years now has been actively engaged in developing what might appropriately be called authentic forms of assessment. The NCVA was set up by the Minister for Education in 1991 and among its terms of reference was one which required it to "establish guidelines, criteria and standards for the assessment of participants' performance by individual course providers".[31] It also certifies and accredits participants' performance. Since its setting up it has worked in partnership with a wide range of centres and interest groups involved in education and training to establish an assessment framework for a range of vocational awards. In contrast to the traditional public examination system in Ireland with its subject driven curriculum and written terminal examinations, NCVA modules are described in terms of outcomes; what a learner will demonstrate in terms of knowledge and skills on completion of the module. The means by which learners achieve these outcomes are described as performance criteria which specify what evidence of the outcomes has to be presented and what standards the work should attain.

The experience gained by the NCVA in the past decade is valuable in the Irish context. Predictably there were initially difficulties to be overcome and problems to be solved. These difficulties and challenges are similar to those encountered in other countries when authentic forms of assessment were introduced. For example, the importance of training for those involved in assessment is paramount and this is recognised by the NCVA. Research carried out by Mary Liz Trant, Project Officer in the NCVA, highlights significance of teacher/tutor induction and training. She states:[32]

> "In-service seminars provide valuable insights on the inclusive, flexible, ethos of the assessment approach and the function and inter-relationship of hitherto unfamiliar elements such as learning outcomes and performance criteria and an understanding of tutors' central role in the process as curriculum developers and assessors. Evidence from tutors at the centre examined as a case study indicates that assessment programmes which were not accompanied by adequate induction were a source of confusion and frustration, which was in turn transmitted to learners. In contrast adequate in-service training enhanced the same tutor's feelings of professionalism and control and subsequently these programmes were successfully implemented."

There is no doubt that there will be increasing pressure in the years to come on the education system to introduce more varied and authentic means of assessment. This is already evidenced in the expectations of employers and industry but there is a marked reluctance within mainstream education to respond to this call. Some of the fears both of the teaching profession and of the higher education institutions are understandable when seen in the narrower context of traditional terminal written examinations where knowledge was emphasised and there was often little opportunity to test skills.

If we are to introduce more authentic forms of assessment, we must not lose sight of some of the fundamental principles which should inform assessment. Among these we would include quality, validity, and reliability but in addition, we should now add principles such as appropriateness, transparency, openness, and rigour. We must also keep in mind the importance of administrative and economic feasibility when coming up with new and innovative forms of assessment.

In considering and evaluating newer forms of assessment, it is not appropriate that they be evaluated using the yardstick of terminal end of year examinations. It seems to be that this has been one of the problems encountered by the Leaving Certificate Vocational link modules in the current debate about their recognition for university entrance. Those who attempted to compare the written examination paper of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme with a subject of the academic Leaving Certificate Programme missed the point completely. In the first instance, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme allocates only forty percent of the marks to the written terminal examination with sixty percent of the marks allocated to a portfolio of coursework assembled over the two years of the programme. Moreover, the programme itself emphasises the development of key skills such as:[33]

⇒ Effective communication skills;
⇒ Greater student autonomy and personal responsibility for learning;
⇒ Teamwork;
⇒ Problem solving;
⇒ Adaptability to change.

These educational objectives are cognate with objectives pursued in universities and would appear to be particularly important in preparing students not only for the world

of work but for the world of lifelong learning including higher education. The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme link modules would appear to satisfy the key principles enunciated above and it is important that our institutes of higher education recognise and give due credit to a programme assessed in this innovative way.

In conclusion, we must recognise that different individuals learn in different ways.[34] Our education system at all levels needs to take this on board and provide appropriate forms of teaching and assessment in response to this realisation. It may not always be easy but a first step must be the acceptance and recognition of the need for change. Models of good practice in authentic forms of assessment have been developed in this country and in other countries in recent years and it would behove us to draw from and build on these models as we move into the twenty-first century.

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