



Personalisation seminar series

Seminar 3:

Assessment, technology and learner voice: How can we involve young people in determining the focus and means of assessment systems?

Report

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1. Continuity and overview

The provocation paper for this seminar sought to open up the current assumptions around assessment and stimulate new ways of thinking about it. The themes raised in the paper were drawn from the issues raised at the second seminar, specifically measuring how children learn as well as focusing on what they learn, and enabling students to be assessed in different mediums.

2. Key headlines

2.1 Personalised context

- Personalised learning and powerful learning are terms that allow us to gloss what we mean. There was the sense that in order to use them meaningfully, they needed to be picked apart.
- Personalising in terms of assessment should be about how children see their own development with the focus on comparing yourself to yourself not to others, thus on your own developmental process. It is an ipsitive approach, which allows you to compare yourself to how you were.

ICT and personalisation

- The old issue of whether ICT should be discrete or integrated was raised briefly.
- This was followed by a warning that using ICT does automatically lead to a personalised system:

The current driving test is totally ICT-based assessment. There is no requirement or space for reflection; the learning that went along with it only took place before hand. It is tempting to create an assessment system like that and call it personalised, but actually it is only personalised in terms of time. In terms of the driving test the individual could have gone to an arcade and played a game where you get continuous assessment.

2.3 Engaging learners

- We need to engage learners in conversation and dialogue; one way that was raised of doing this is through encouraging them to develop narratives which would allow generalisations about the shape and direction of a new learning process.
- This sort of process might encourage learners take ownership of their learning, which would be a powerful force.

What would young people want?

It was felt that it was essential to ask pupils what they want from assessment; however, it was noted that communication was difficult. However, the following were highlighted as likely answers:

- routes to fulfil their passions
- improves access to employment
- flexibility of timing with on demand assessment and the opportunity to opt out
- flexibility of content and pace
- embedded in authentic activity
- show achievement
- formative for the teacher as well as themselves.

2.4 Assessment

Current problems

- It is impossible to get away from the fact that perceptions of assessment and education are historically informed. This means that there is a tendency to look to the past and err on the side of caution.
- There should be clarity around who is assessing and why - a real focus on answering whether the learner is benefiting.
- There is a need to acknowledge how powerful assessment is - we'd like to think that the most powerful force is teaching and learning, but in reality the driving force is examinations, specifications and tests.
- Finally we need to think of the role of business and industry in changing the process, as it is imperative that they buy into new forms of assessment.

Accessibility

- There is currently a clear and dominant focus on text based assessment, it is necessary to think about what other approaches there are to ensure that people are not left behind.
- One of the huge bonuses of technology and assessment is that control goes back to learner - they can choose when they are assessed, why, how and what they do with that assessment

For example, John Guy at Farnborough sixth form college is developing an interesting e-assessment programme. All the students are able to submit written material to an on-line programme that feeds back support and ways to improve the work. It can also be used from home to access portfolio space. The IT resources also allow a huge battery of papers and resources to be stored and easily accessed. Assessment has to become part of learning, not a dreaded summative point. If students feel they are assessing themselves it makes for a very different emotional experience.

Purpose

Gaining clarity on the purpose of assessment was a key theme running through the seminar, introduced by both speakers, and discussed further in all three breakout groups.

- The main purpose of assessment should be to give information to the learner - meeting statutory requirements should be just a small part of it.
- It should recognise and reward diverse skills while giving direction; open and establish routes and choices.
- It should provide feedback to the learner, to assist them with their own personal sense of development.
- It should enhance the employability of the learner.

Implementing change

- It was felt that the issue of teacher responsibility needs to be better defined if they are to play a greater role in assessing a child's learning path.

- Ideally, in the future teachers will provide the scaffolding and the vocabulary for learning, rather than filling in the bricks.
- The mantra of a new learning system should be achievement at stage not failure by age.

Relationship with ICT

- There was a strong message that the adoption of new technology should not be seen as incompatible with the content of assessment. For example, Key Stage 3 ICT tests have been rolled out to 600 schools so far. According to the QCA this represents the single most important project for the current curriculum as it will demonstrate and prove system wide the importance and workability of computer accessed test.

Regulation of assessment

- Technology is moving quickly - it will soon be woven into every part of school life. It will be the record of achievement and the engine of assessment.
- Mary Curnock Cook felt that the QCA could play a huge role in releasing the potential of the teacher through encouraging informal and internal assessment with the help of technology. For example, standardising the marking of exams.
- Technology brings with it the possibility of more informal assessment and self-assessment; there is also great potential for more widespread internal assessment and teacher-led assessment.

Regulation

Equally, this shift to less formal assessment would raise questions around regulation:

- It was felt to be very positive that the new style QCA sees itself as a strategic regulator focusing on using regulation to make things happen and facilitate change, rather than condemn.
- The question is how to use regulation creatively to ensure development of e-assessment and e-learning.

Student self assessment

- The key question raised around this issue was whether self-assessment would have to take place within a public framework of standards. One answer to this was that it is still important to recognise the place for formative assessment, but that it could be used more regularly and be self-led. This was based on the premise that for a child in front of a computer deciding when to do a test, it feels like they are assessing themselves - that is a different emotional place to be in and it enables assessment to become part of the learning process.

3. Assessing what?

3.1 E-portfolios and project work

- There was a strong sense that assessment needs to be something that is living and dynamic and meaningfully captures what learners are doing.

- The benefits of project assessment were felt to be considerable; increased project work would allow for more formative assessment; the learners would benefit from experiencing the development and evolution of their initial ideas towards a definite conclusion, which would allow them to learn more about the process of learning.
- Mary Curnock Cook emphasised that e-portfolios have great potential allowing students to showcase, store and access their work. She envisaged the day when a portfolio could be used at a job interview to allow a potential employer to a survey of a student's work and record of achievement (far more than a conventional CV could do).
- E-portfolios would be transferable from one learning setting to another.
- A changed framework of assessment will rely on a central record of achievement where units can be added throughout an individual's lifetime. Whatever the practical manifestations may be, it is a very powerful concept.
- The idea of learning contracts was also raised. Project work was argued to be more compatible with negotiated assessment than purely examine based assessment. In such a system the learner is able to propose their project work and defend its purposes, creating a learning contract.

Why online?

- It was felt that technology would undoubtedly facilitate and invigorate this process; creating exciting opportunities for project development. Technology would also allow an accessible record of the different stages of the project to be kept.
- This would add a further element to the assessment of the project since assessment could see how far the project had come and developed rather than being assessed purely on the standard of the final result.
- Integrating ICT and assessment might encourage institutions to become community driven, with a stronger understanding of necessary relationships, especially if portfolios were made live and open source as they could then be used to create interested networks.
- This links to the idea of individual and group e-portfolios, which could offer a different way of thinking about which school to send your child to.

Possible shortcomings

- The concept of e-portfolios is very powerful, but there is a danger that it could be controlled at many levels, resulting in the learner still not being in charge. If there is a shift towards independent personalised learning this shift needs to be controlled.
- ICT must enable reflection of assessment; there is a need to develop a language to allow this.
- There is a question around the degree of diversity that learners will be able to capture. Ideally, students would be able to bring their external life into the assessment system showcasing out of school projects, but there will clearly need to be an element of control.

3.3 Learning to learn

Guy Claxton from Bristol University explained the ways in which how children learn can be assessed, not just what they learn.

Gym analogy

- Guy used an analogy of a fitness centre or gym to explain the notion of creating powerful learners and developing the power of people as learners. People go to a gym mainly because they want to get fit.
- Similarly, kids want to get mind fit so that they feel less insecure in the face of challenges of life in the 21st century.
- Going to a gym enables the all round enhancement of fitness as coaches will teach, support and assist individuals in their training. These coaches are central to the process, and provide a direct analogy to teachers; they should offer long-term systematic support. In this context, the curriculum should be seen as the equipment and each subject should exercise a different part of the brain.

Continuing the gym analogy reveals a number of things about the educative process:

The gym gives provides us with two things:

(1) Equipment.

(2) The knowledge to use this equipment effectively.

- Guy argued that the equipment was only useful because of the effect that it has - the impact upon our muscles. Likewise if we think of the content of the curriculum as the equipment it is there to exercise our mental muscles and strengthen them - the idea that students go to find out about the curriculum is equivalent to thinking that people go to the gym to look at the equipment.
- Just as different activities use different parts of our bodies, so different parts of the curriculum develop different parts of learning power.

Key skills

Young people need and should be encouraged to develop the following skills:

- Emotional resilience - to be able to persevere in face of difficulties, for example when doing a tricky French translation.
- Cognitive resourcesfulness - meta learning and speaking in the language of learning to learn.
- Self management and reflectiveness.
- Sociability.
- Collaboration - the use of group work to systematically develop group working skills rather than just delivering on the curriculum.

Embedding learning to learn

- It was felt that reducing L2L as part of the core curriculum would be pointless. Instead it is necessary for a change of attitude that will affect all aspects of the educational domain.
- Learning hooks were seen as helping to establish a pattern of life-long learning based on the idea that all that is needed is a single hook to catch the interest of the child, and this can lead to a passion for life. The current assessment system limits the number of 'hooks' that are available to students.
- Again, the idea of an e portfolio or an increase in project work was seen as a great way of creating these random hooks and allowing students to pursue these interests.

Learning to learn and assessment

This section specifically focusing on the model shown on the following website:

www.buildinglearningpower.co.uk.

- The program helps children and teachers to explore changes in their belief system about learning and helps them to challenge assumptions that they might have built up, for example, "It is good to concentrate in class", and conversely, "Asking questions makes you look stupid".
- Student can access feedback that is directly focused at them. It continues with the gym analogy, telling them which muscles they use and which ones they need to build up.
- Giving immediate focused feedback empowers the learner and also asks whether the student agrees with the comments.
- The program also gives homogenised feedback to the teacher, providing an overall picture of what is going on in their classes. The teacher can also input judgements about the children and then compare them to the shifts in the child's self report.

4. Joined up learning

QCA feels that there is a will to 'join up learning', but the key question is how will it be taken forward?

- Shifting the focus in classes to joined up learning will be easier in primary school as the structure of the school day will allow more opportunity to embed skills in content.
- However, it was felt that it will be harder post KS3; there is an important set of conversations to be had about the way subject domains could be joined up. As yet there is no coherent model.
- Post-16 is a different story again; there are ways of uniting projects that are being used, and curricula deliberately draws across a number of disciplines so perhaps this work could be used as a model.
- The development of central records of achievement will help to fuse disciplines together and discourage the teaching of straightforward academic subjects.
- It was also felt that if the focus upon project work was increased then assessment would increasingly take place across subject boundaries; ie work would be assessed by a panel/group of relevant experts from different subjects. The idea of the assessment group also containing people from a non-educational background (for example those who work in museums or research institutes) was also raised. This would also tie in with more 'extended learning' exposing learners to the notion of life long learning.

Reciprocal transfer and lifelong learning

- Transferring what students do outside the classroom into an assessment context and capturing the value of other activities and extra curricular community based programmes was a recurring theme. For example encouraging students to think about the skills and attitudes that they use in football, such as determination and focus, and applying them to a difficult maths problem, hopefully resulting in a recognised or not comparable sense of satisfaction.

Accountability

- The assessment and accountability systems are currently aligned; one fear that was raised was how can ipsitive assessment be used as part of the accountability system?
- There is also a question around how you incentive schools to develop these capacities in young people. One suggestion was the undertaking of some solid research detailing 50-100 action-based projects that point to improvements in attainment and behaviour, which could be used to incentivise schools and enable them to see the advantages of helping their students to expand their minds in a number of different ways.

5. Possible futures for assessment

- One idea for a future learning system was the introduction of 'dynamic assessments': an individual could be made to sit down and solve a lateral problem, which they would have no previous experience of. However, it was acknowledged this might be construed as setting up pupils to fail.
- An alternative that was discussed was the adoption of a 'driving-test' style of assessment, whereby an individual is only entered for an assessment when they are deemed ready. However, the problem with this model, is that it does not address whether the 'driving-test' itself is the best form of assessment. It may actually be the case that a portfolio of work or website may be more appropriate.
- A more radical view was also espoused. Rather than have assessments at the point of exit we could adopt assessments to allow people to be admitted to the next stage of development. For example, progressing from A-Levels to university could incorporate a test to judge whether the individual was ready for entry.
- Assessment for the future is a profoundly important role for the QCA - the reforms of the White Paper are very much a modernising as well as a reforming agenda. The end game for assessment is about teaching and learning. There is a growing interest at the QCA in assessment as a catalyst for change.

Mentoring

- The role of mentoring was mentioned as playing a part in an effective assessment system. One way to progress the agenda might be to assign summary points in the learning process, which a pupil is allowed to participate in if they are perceived to have reached a certain level of attainment.

6. How to get there

Role of the Government

- One problem that was raised was that the current system does not acknowledge the fact that most learning in life is done outside of school. Moreover, there is an artificial separation of school from society, which results in restrictions being placed upon the uptake of technology by schools.

Cultural shift

It was recognised by all groups that assessment should be more about individual worth than accountability. In order for this to permeate at a system level there needs to be a serious

culture shift at many points.

Initial teacher training and CPD

- Teaching teachers how to learn is essential and would result in shifting the collective mind set and enable them to become conscious learners in their own right.
- Teachers need to have a broad set of skills encompassing teaching, mentoring and coaching.
- Co-production of work and assessment and ongoing teacher CPD could play a key role.
- ICT is a powerful mechanism as illustrated by TES Online staffroom and NCSL hotseats.
- However, it was felt that the government would have to be up front about the risk of changing the system, specifically the personal risk involved for teachers in a negotiated assessment environment and learning contracts.

School structure

- Schools are not necessarily looking at the best types of learning, they could learn from looking at other sectors such as community organisations, libraries and museums.
- To be valued a changed system must have the buy in of parents. The point was made that programmes that encourage parents to learn how to learn etc are great, but only if they can be rolled out system-wide.

The BBC Digital Curriculum facilitates a direct dialogue with learners, parents and community. This is an enormous shift with a move away from siloed subject based understanding. The programme is to help everybody to learn themselves in a variety of environments.

In the wider community

The first point that needs to be made is that there were many definitions of 'a community'. It was felt that geographical communities are still key, but have been joined by communities of interest facilitated by on line networks.

- There is a question around how to raise the consciousness of population at large about learning and spread the realisation that learning is far beyond the school.

Learndirect courses have helped to raise general awareness of LLL. Schools are a catalyst in this process. As extended schools, they are increasingly shaping up as community learning centres. There is potential for this to extend to building proper relationships with museums and libraries, acting as a catalyst for bringing other types of learners. Other points that were raised are as follows:

- There is a need to be able to access people in the community as there is a massive richness of people but a need to match and broker marriages between learners and other people within it.
- An e-portfolio would offer a wonderful life record for the individual and their family. It was pointed out that it would be great if something of value was being produced for the community which would give some sense of permanency and ownership, and possibly create powerful cross-cutting networks within the community.
- There is also the issue of the distribution of learning around the community - the perception of schools and learning needs to be addressed. Schools are increasingly recognising this and creating rooms that do not look like classrooms.

7. Overall seminar feedback

Participants felt very strongly that the messages from the seminars need to be captured and used to move the debate forward. People were very keen to know, "Where next?"

It was felt that producing provocation papers and feedback generated a more interesting debate and gave participants more ownership over the final report.

An ideal outcome would push some of the national barriers.

It was also felt that some more research needs to be undertaken to support the messages.

Finally, it was felt that if more learners had been able to contribute then the discussion would have been more valuable.