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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 accountability 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.

Introduction

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 (Black et al., 2003). 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 is in flux. Shepard (2000) argues that 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 (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007), 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 (for example, head teachers, Ofsted, external examiners) 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. The accountability purpose of assessment has grown in recent years and the QAA Code of Practice (2006c) sets some fairly demanding requirements on institutions regarding assessment practices. This purpose is also concerned with assessment of learning.

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. Darling-Hammond and Snyder (2000), for example, discuss the growing use of diverse and 'authentic' assessment in teacher education designed to improve students' professional learning and their ability to take account of the context for pupil 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 (2000), 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 judgements, to be able to use criteria, to be aware of one's own prejudices and biases in making judgements, 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

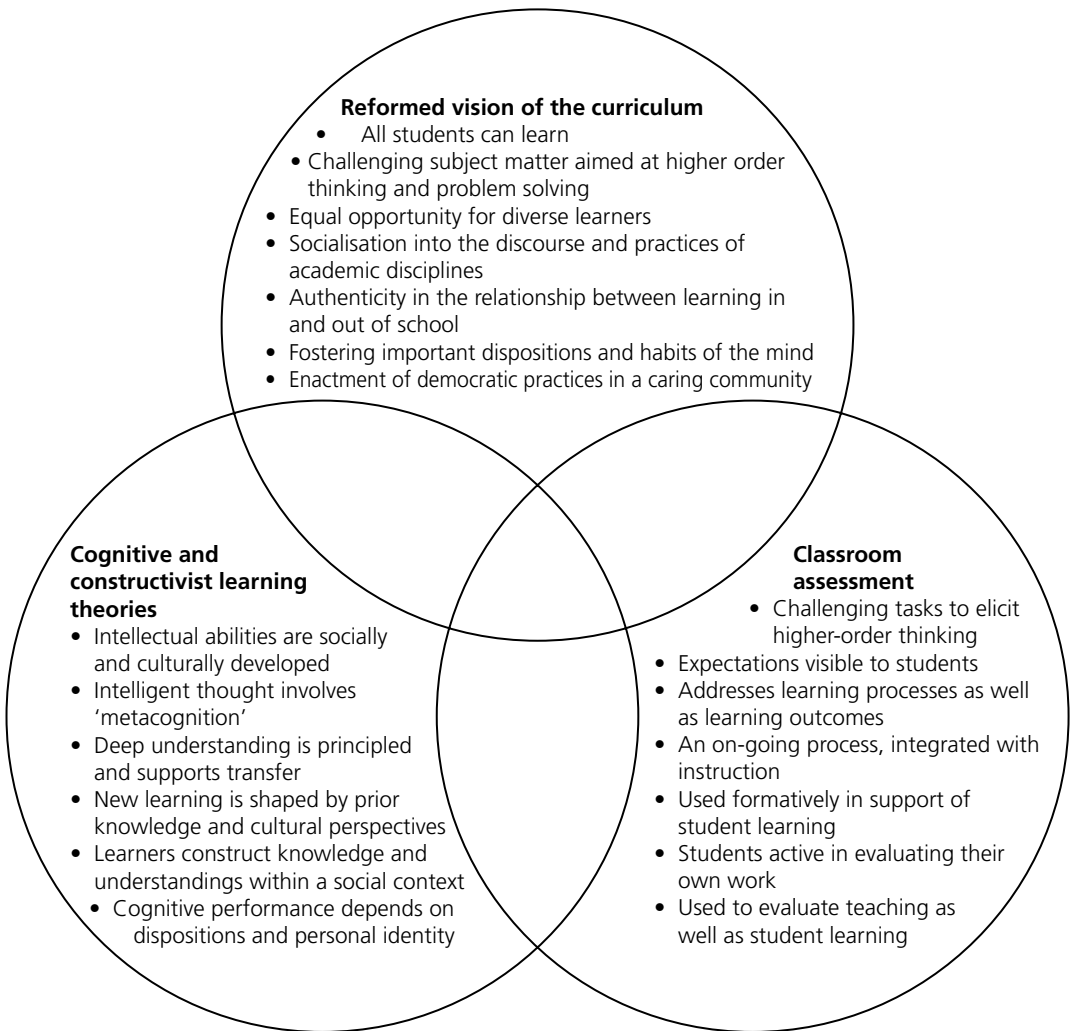
These four different purposes help us think about the 'point' of assessment in teacher education. They enable us to analyse what the different component parts of our assessment strategies might involve and what they are aiming to do. In addition, the different purposes reflect our changing views of assessment, 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 (see Bloxham and Boyd, 2007 for a summary of the research)

- 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.

Figure 1 Conflict between the different purposes of assessment



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 (Biggs, 2002).

Quality assurance in relation to assessment feedback may also direct tutors efforts, in the wrong direction. Research shows that useful feedback to students comes at the draft stage, isn't graded, is forward-looking and focuses on skills rather than content (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004–5; Brown and Glover, 2006; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Hounsell, 2007). However, second markers and external examiners look at final assignments and they often expect to see comments justifying the mark against learning outcomes. This approach tends necessarily to be backward looking and content-focused (Brown and Glover, 2006). With external examiners and second markers, metaphorically sitting on a marker's shoulder, who are tutors likely to be thinking about when writing feedback?

So how can we take a positive approach to dealing with the potential conflict that arises between the different purposes of assessment? This paper suggests two ways forward:

- a programme approach to assessment design
- making greater use of assessment methods that combine assessment of learning with assessment for and as learning.

Programme approach

Recent research has shown that the overall programme assessment environment can have a major impact on a range of factors in student learning (Gibbs and Dunbar-Goddet, 2007), including how much effort students put in, how much of the curriculum they cover, whether they take a deep approach to learning and how well they feel they understand assessment expectations. Therefore, regardless of issues to do with assessment purposes, programme assessment strategies need devising with care. However, for the purposes of the argument put forward in this paper, programme assessment strategies must also be designed so that the different purposes are balanced across a student's programme.

In many English-speaking higher education systems, assessment opportunities are tied to individual units of study or 'modules'. The size of such modules means that they cannot be expected to embrace all of the different purposes of assessment. However, there is a danger with a modular structure, particularly in primary teacher education where many subjects are involved, that a fragmented assessment strategy emerges. Tutors focus on the assessment of each module, thus struggling to meet the different purposes of assessment.

Collaborative planning needs to focus on making sure that assessment **across the programme** balances the different purposes. Some modules can use methods that are less favourable to 'certification' and 'QA' in the knowledge that there is sufficient summative assessment of achievement across the whole programme to assure standards. It is important to remember that students face a minimum of 40 summative assessments during most undergraduate programmes and therefore there is plenty of opportunity to share out the different purposes, if it is planned with that balance in mind.

A programme-focused approach to assessment planning and course design can consider how the whole learning process helps students meet the overall programme learning outcomes in order to create a coherent experience. It can reduce the risk of bunching of assessment submission dates, duplication in the assessment of various outcomes, over-reliance on one or two assessment methods (for example, essays) and overloading students with several major projects at the same time.

Developing assessment methods that effectively combine the different purposes

Traditionally, the social meaning of assessment has been heavily associated with certification, the measurement of learning (Shepard, 2000). If our intention is to move towards more learning-oriented assessment (Carless et al., 2006) while retaining an emphasis on 'certification' and 'QA', then we need to identify the key

characteristics of that type of assessment and choose methods that include those characteristics while also fulfilling the purposes of 'certification' and 'QA'.

A synthesis of research on assessment for learning and assessment of learning suggest ten qualities characteristic of learning-oriented assessment:

- 1 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
- 2 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
- 3 learning and assessment should be integrated with tasks combining learning and assessment
- 4 students should be involved in self-assessment and reflection on their learning, including the judging of performance
- 5 assessment should encourage metacognition, promoting thinking about the learning process, not just the learning outcomes
- 6 assessment expectations should be made visible to students as far as possible
- 7 tasks should involve the active engagement of students developing the capacity to find things out for themselves and learn independently
- 8 tasks should be authentic, worthwhile, relevant and offer students some level of control over their work.
- 9 tasks should be fit for purpose and align with important learning outcomes
- 10 assessment should be used to evaluate teaching as well as student learning.

(These characteristics have been assembled from the following, Shepard, 2000; Black et al., 2003; Knight and Yorke, 2003; Falchikov, 2005; Carless, Joughin and Mok, 2006; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Bloxham and Boyd, 2007; Hounsell, 2007; Havnes, 2008.)

Attention to these characteristics may also play an important part in ensuring that our assessment for certification is improved – that we are measuring the right things. As Havnes (2008) suggests, there is often a gap between the learning tasks that universities require students to do as part of their programmes and the demands of the work situation that students are training for. Effective professional learning is contextualised practice. It isn't just knowing about something; it is knowing about it and being able to use that knowledge across different contexts, for example, the different schools and classrooms students encounter. Assessment has to involve students in developing and negotiating their knowledge and skills in those different contexts.

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

Carless et al. (2006) report the use of field-based enquiry in groups of three. Students select a topic for inquiry relevant to the module. They create a plan for their inquiry which they send to their tutor with a literature review. The tutor provides ongoing feedback to the students in the form of email, chat room, or face-to-face meetings. When complete, students present their projects to each other through oral presentations and they receive feedback and suggestions for improvement from their tutor and peers. This feedback is given in relation to the assessment criteria and students can use it to revise a final written group report with self-reflection, which is submitted for summative assessment.

Looking at the characteristics of learning-oriented assessment described above, we can see that this type of assessment encompasses many of them. It:

- 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.

This analysis supports the view that small-scale classroom research and other enquiry projects have great value because they require students to develop, apply and critique knowledge in context (Kirkwood, 2007). Readers may consider that such a method is suitable for final year or PGCE students, but it is the contention of this article that such investigations can be used at all levels, if framed appropriately. The challenge is to help students select a topic relevant to the module and programme outcomes. It can be amended to require a different output, for example an exhibition, a poster, a newsletter for parents, a radio programme or a webpage. These different media provide the benefits of motivating students (somehow creating a radio programme was always very appealing to my students), but also allowing them to practise skills in communicating in different media.

Interactive examination

A second example comes from Malmo University in Sweden and involves an 'interactive examination' (Jonsson and Baartman, 2006) in teacher education. Using a computer, students view three short films showing different classroom contexts. They can also access background information and transcripts of the dialogue. They are allowed one hour per film clip. They are asked to describe and analyse the situations and recommend how the teachers should act.

Once the students have submitted this first stage, they are presented with 'expert' solutions. They then have a week to compare their own responses against the 'expert' approach, comment on the differences and use that to identify any future learning needs that have emerged from the exercise. The students are provided with the marking scheme well ahead of the exam. This assessment was done with 150 students and using three different cases improves the reliability of the assessment.

You can see how this assessment can lend itself to 'certification' – it is possible to check that it is the students' own work and the task can be very clearly linked to teaching standards and the application of theoretical knowledge relevant to teacher education.

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.

One could see how this might be adapted for use in the UK using clips from Teachers TV, which can be freely used for teaching and learning. The Swedish team had nine clips from which the students selected three.

Patchwork test assessment

The final example is that of a 'patchwork text' assessment used at Nottingham Trent University (Ovens, 2003). 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, jotter

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 (eg how can I convey the uncertainty of science knowledge in the way I talk with young children about their science?)

(Ovens 2003:547)

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.

(Ovens 2003:547)

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 (a key honours level outcome):

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.

(Ovens 2003:547)

It is possible to see that the final summative assessment could fulfil the purposes of 'certification' and 'quality assurance', but also, the process of this assessment method is strongly learning oriented. It:

- integrates professional and subject learning
- focuses on learning process as well as learning outcomes
- integrates assessment with learning
- integrates formative and summative assessment, encouraging students to participate in the formative elements because they feed into their summative work
- involves students in assessment
- requires requiring higher order and critical thinking for complex tasks
- encourages independent, autonomous learning
- encourages reflection.

Ovens makes the point that:

there might be difficulties in extending PT (patchwork text) assessment to modules ... which are more crucial to an OfSTED inspection, where there are many, tightly defined competencies to be 'ticked off'.

(Ovens 2003:562)

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.

So let's interrogate our summative assessment regimes to see if they are in fact fit for purpose in terms of both their alignment to important learning outcomes and in their capacity to promote student learning. How much of our assessment is traditional essays, because this is the accepted method of communication and development of ideas in academia? If our courses are centrally designed to prepare students for teaching, not for academia, we need to have assessment which is fit for that purpose.

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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