

Vive la différence

IT'S VITAL THAT WE REMEMBER THAT ASSESSMENT OF 'SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE' IS THE MEANS TO AN END, AND THAT END IS STUDENTS WHO LEARN, SAYS DAVID LOADER.

If we are to respect the individual, and nurture creative and complex communities, which is how democracies grow and thrive, we need to value diversity and non-conformity as much as we value discipline and order in our schools. Doing this is a matter of balance, but we seem to have lost this balance in our current pursuit of examination-based outcomes.

Look at our schooling philosophy, and we've put the cart before the horse. Instead of considering the bigger picture – the kind of individuals and community that we are seeking to create – we are focusing instead on the detail, the means not the ends. The result? We concentrate on 'stuff to be learned' – and if we do that at the expense of a concentration on each individual learner, we do so at our peril. Education is not a short-term objective; students' experiences of school colour their outlook and form their values for the rest of their lives. Societies are built or held back by the schooling offered to their young people.

Yes, it's true that some teachers and schools haven't sufficiently valued the basics of literacy and numeracy, and literacy and numeracy are surely important, but it doesn't follow that a maximum score in those basics is critical to the nurturing of resilient individuals or even to achievement in a competitive society. By all means, we should celebrate with those students who achieve maximum scores in the basics, but let's also celebrate with those students who achieve functional competency in the basics and also excel in other areas such as art, music, history and sport. Given that we are growing both people and communities, let's particularly value and celebrate with those students who demonstrate care for others,

who show respect and offer support to their peers.

It's hard to argue against standards and benchmarks. If we buy a car, say, we demand a basic standard in terms of its reliability, performance, seating capacity, fuel efficiency, safety and so on. We would be horrified, however, if we were only offered one model of car that met one standard. We want choice because our needs and aspirations are different. We value variety and set as our goal the maintenance of society's plurality and the world's biodiversity.

When it comes to schooling, though, it seems we're happy to reduce all our various needs and aspirations to one model that meets one standard. Just when we seem to be breaking away from our inherited industrial model of schooling by attempting to focus on individuals and not classes, by placing the emphasis on the student and not the curriculum content, along comes this externally imposed emphasis on assessment. Yes, we can say that externally imposed assessment has formative or diagnostic usefulness, but it also runs the risk of turning attention from learning to performance, from the learner to 'skills and knowledge,' as narrowly defined in a curriculum.

Current external assessment is useful in that it can provide a snapshot of a student's performance at a particular time. It's not particularly helpful, however, when it's used to compare one individual student or school against another, which often hides more than it shows.

If our goal is to help each student to improve, then the most useful data is provided by comparing an individual students' achievements not against other students but against themselves at an earlier time.

Starting point assessments of those students is needed before one can assess progress. In good teaching, there's no separation of the teaching and learning process, and assessment. Think about the way teaching, learning and assessment go together in the real world or in the virtual world of computer games, where continuous assessment enables the learner to understand mistakes and move forward. Assessment is critical if we're to progress in our learning.

To help all students improve their learning outcomes necessitates looking beyond aggregated school data that compares one school against another. Real improvement in student learning can only be identified by considering each student individually, and identifying that student's results, measured over time rather than against those of other students. These results taken together give a picture of a school's success as a teaching and learning institution.

Much current school assessment is based on the assumption that there's one type of student, or – worse – one set of knowledge and skills for one type of student, that is to be 'built.' The reality is that we're dealing with an ecology, not a factory, and the end result we should be pursuing from the teaching and learning experience in schools is diversity not conformity. Any useful measurement has to accommodate multiple outcomes, value diversity in students and accept non-conformity as a positive virtue. **T**

David Loader is an education consultant and Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne. His latest book is Jousting for the New Generation, published by ACER Press. Email davidloader@bigpond.com