Assessment standards, 'intentional alignment', and dialogic inquiry

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Abstract

Internationally, the policy move towards standards-aligned instruction is gaining momentum. In Australia, standards have assumed unprecedented prominence in education policy relating both to classroom practice and to teacher preparation and career progression. The move is also evident in the United States, where the lure of standards to inform improvement is clear: significant investment has been committed to longitudinal research to examine at state and district levels the desirable conditions for implementing standards, their impact on developing college- and career-ready teachers, and in turn, the impact on teacher instruction and student outcomes.

Moves such as this are occurring in the absence of a general theoretical position that connects assessment and standards to meaning making. This paper argues for the pedagogical utility of standards understood as enabling critical inquiry into teaching and learning. The notion of 'intentional alignment' of standards, curriculum and assessment is explored through two key questions: What do teachers bring to assessment? And: What is involved in a dialogic approach to assessment standards which values learners' perspectives and their agency in improvement?

The call for assessment innovation and system reform has international reach (OECD, 2013). It is arguably more pressing today than in earlier periods for a range of reasons. Societal change, concerning levels of youth unemployment, and radical changes in workplaces are unmistakable, as is the increasing rapidity of change associated with new technologies. The calls in many countries for a flexible workforce are loud, with clear evidence that as technologies make an impact on the nature of work, they also make an impact on the capabilities, attributes and dispositions valued in workers. The continued rollout of new technologies and convergence possibilities mean that human communication is undergoing unprecedented change. What type of education is needed in these times, and in turn, what approaches to educational assessment are needed? Given that there is no prospect of futureproofing, as may have been an aspiration in former eras, and that the link between education and employment is now not as strong as it was in the 20th century for many, questions abound about the kinds of assessment that will benefit young people in preparing them for their futures.

Along with such changes are some troubling signs of youth disengagement from schooling, and the impacts on learning, wellbeing and longer-term employability that this can bring. This presentation seeks to take account of these developments. It presents the case for the role of assessment in learning to be understood as shared enterprise, with the learner and 'quality' at the centre. What becomes shared — modelled by the teacher and 'tried on' and developed over time by learners — is *an assessment mindset.*

The presentation starts with two questions that circle validity and that call for new thinking about and practices for assessment. More than two decades ago, Rowntree (1977) posed the question, *How shall we know them?* The emphasis in this era was on the teachers (as we) knowing students (as them). I want to start with the proposition that Rowntree's question can be rephrased, as: *How can students make themselves known?* Accompanying this is a proposed move away from student voice to student agency in assessment, with a direct focus on broadening the students' experience of assessment. Related to this, but often overlooked, is the need for students to learn how to recognise, critique and generate 'good work', developing and applying concepts of quality. Essentially, what is needed for this to occur is for the pedagogical utility of standards, together with judgment and quality, to come to centre stage. There needs to be a focus on the value of teachers' and students' engagement in dialogic inquiry into how learning occurs in classrooms (Nuttall, 2004).

The second question involves the notion of what is meant by 'expectation' as represented in standards, and further, how expectation is used to engage students in improvement efforts. Alignment of curriculum and assessment and clarity of expectations are identified as foundational in much assessment literature. However, the pedagogical use of standards connected to curriculum, teaching and learning has not been validated internationally by empirical research. While Assessment for Learning — with its core principles of student agency in their learning against clarity of expectations and appropriate feedback — has been taken up widely at national and regional levels in several countries including Australia, we have as yet relatively little evidence of the success of these policies (Baird, Hopfenbeck, Newton, Stobart, & Steen-Utheim, 2014; Black, 2015; Wyatt-Smith & Klenowski, 2014). Indeed, the notion of what is meant by 'expectation' as represented in standards lacks good empirical support. This paper calls for large-scale research to be undertaken and will introduce a study to this end.

Through the entry point of these questions, the presentation seeks to take discussion back to assessment foundations, and in particular, validity, and then to the present possibilities for action, for new thinking and professional practice in assessment. It gives an opportunity to connect assessment to large open questions about:

1. teacher assessment identity and the potential benefit of moving beyond the notion of assessment literacy

2. the role of teachers as assessment designers with a designer's eye on and skill in developing students' capabilities in goal-setting, their criterial knowledge[1] and evaluative experience

3. the contribution of dialogic inquiry in the classroom as a means to support students' meta-cognitive development including the *assessment mindset* discussed above

4. a move towards developing *digital learning histories* to build a richer picture of learning progression.

These four thematic lines lead to the ultimate question of why validity matters more than ever. A related intention is to reposition dialogue about 'good teachers' and 'good teaching' with implications for what it means to be 'a good student'.

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[1] 'Criterial knowledge' refers to student knowledge of 'criteria relevant to a fine performance on the task at hand' and how to deploy this knowledge to inform on-task improvement strategies and self-monitoring (Wyatt-Smith, 2001, p. 118).

Assessment as professional capability

Assessment is now recognised as a key professional capability for teachers. Developing teachers' assessment capability is recognised as a national priority for many countries including Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Ireland, Scotland and Japan. The Australian review of teacher education (TEMAG, 2015) recognises the need to lift teacher capability in assessment, in using standards and in using data, to improve student performance. Standard 5 of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers addresses the collection, interpretation and use of assessment data to improve teaching practice (AITSL, 2014), including the provision of appropriate feedback to students. Section 4.2 of the Irish Professional Code of Conduct for Teachers focuses on the need for teachers to 'maintain high standards of practice in relation to pupil/student learning, planning, monitoring, assessing, reporting and providing feedback' (Teaching Council, 2012, p. 7).

Such emphases have been incorporated into education policy. The current Australian Curriculum was designed to meet the promise of the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 5) linking schooling, equity and excellence with curriculum and expectations of 'common high standards of achievement', encouraging the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority to work with state and territory systems to investigate ways to strengthen national consistency in application of standards (ACARA, 2012).

For illustrative purposes, and to broaden the focus beyond Australia, I draw on another national experience of curriculum and assessment reform in Ireland. The new Junior Cycle (NCCA, 2011) has been accompanied by a contentious shift in assessment policy whereby teachers assess and judge student work against stated features of quality (standards) for certification, to enable more comprehensive learning outcomes and curriculum expectations for students. This important change attempts to relocate assessment from examination contexts to the classroom. Driving this move are the dual aims to provide opportunities for teachers to use evidence of student outcomes to improve their own teaching and thereby inform learning, and to broaden the opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning and thereby develop a sense of 'good work'.

Against this backdrop of changing curriculum and assessment contexts in Australia and elsewhere, the discussion commences with the issue of students' intellectual engagement. This is taken as foundational in the new professional knowledge that locates assessment at the heart of pedagogy.

Connecting assessment, engagement and school-community partnerships

Dunleavy and Milton (2009) discussed the requirements for intellectual engagement. They identified the difficulties of isolating particular classroom practices that would be most effective in supporting it. While recognising these challenges, they proposed a set of common instructional 'designs for learning that begin with the goal of intellectual engagement' (p.13) that arguably have relevance to assessment that aims to trigger and sustain student engagement in learning. According to these writers, the designs:

- require high levels of **student participation** and provide time for in-depth work

- incorporate **authentic assessment** as a strategy that helps students set goals and assess their own learning

- use work that is **relevant, interesting, and connects with students' aspirations**; is rigorous and allows students to think as 'professionals' and create professional-quality outcomes; is challenging and allows students to experience a sense of deep **intellectual and emotional investment** in learning; is built from diverse and improvable ideas; and is informed by the current state and growing knowledge bases of different subject disciplines

- promote students' **sense of ownership** and responsibility for their own learning

- invite students to be **co-designers of their learning** in classrooms; support student voice and autonomy

- provide a **high level of social support** for learning and encourage students to take risks, ask questions, and make mistakes.

- foster **collaboration** and **community building**

- engage students in becoming **literate with technologies** as social networking-knowledge building tools

- connect students with opportunities to **develop abilities in critical thinking**, intellectual curiosity, reasoning, analysing, problem-solving and communicating

- bridge students' experience of **learning in and outside of school** by exposing them to digital technologies in knowledge building environments (2009, pp. 13–14, emphasis added).

The above shows a general recognition that context matters, with support for authentic assessment and the role of students in setting goals and setting their own learning. They also highlight the relationship between school and community, and by extension, the world of work and community engagement. At the core of this relationship lies the traditional and powerful link between

assessment, on the one hand, and on the other, the control of curriculum; what students learn, and the tasks students are required to undertake both for learning and for assessment and grading. Bound up here are matters of teacher and school authority, and the potential for interdisciplinary individual or small-group student-initiated and led projects. From this perspective, human resources that include teachers, community members and industry could play a strengthened role in ensuring connections of in-school and outside-school learning and assessment, and in turn, post-school pathways.

It is useful here to distinguish between system and site validity (Freebody & Wyatt-Smith, 2004). Validity is taken to refer to what is assessed and how well this corresponds with the behaviour or construct that it is intended to assess (Harlen, 2004). In the case of 'site validity' it involves assessments that intend to assess the range of skills and knowledges that have been made available to learners in the classroom context or other sites. High 'system validity' involves assessments that intend to assess an often narrower range of skills and knowledges, regarded as essential by a government body or system.

Barriers to moving towards the strengthened focus on site validity come from current accountability requirements that rely heavily on large-scale standardised tests and thus work against the design-led assessment and instruction.

Australian research reports that teachers can experience the dual approach of assessment for learning purposes, and the prioritising of testing and test preparation, including for the National Assessment Program — Literacy and Numeracy, as presenting competing assessment demands. On the one hand, as McClay (2002) highlighted, there is increasing downward pressure to rehearse standardised testing conditions, to make students 'test-savvy', and to thereby demonstrate a type of quality assurance of learning and teaching. On the other hand, there are the imperatives to develop and implement assessments that have high 'site validity'. Characteristic of such assessments, as noted elsewhere, are teachers' efforts in connecting in-school and out-of-school knowledges. The aim routinely is for school activities to have touch points with contexts outside schooling (Cumming & Wyatt-Smith, 2001). The relationship between system validity and site validity has changed with the move in this country and others towards considerable investment in testing. As testing moves online, this relationship is likely to be impacted further.

Recent research (Cumming, Wyatt-Smith & Colbert, forthcoming; Ng, Wyatt-Smith & Bartlett, forthcoming) suggests that the potential benefits of standardised tests for improving learning are not being realised in classroom practice. It appears that this will continue to be the case until the links between testing and improvement efforts at system and school levels are more clearly articulated and better understood by teachers, students, parents and the wider community.

Related lines of inquiry

The connection between teachers' assessment knowledge, curriculum standards, and teaching and learning is taken as being at the foundation of much work on assessment to improve learning but has not been validated in empirical practice. Further, a core tenet of assessment research on descriptive standards in standards-referenced systems is that the descriptions are guides as to what is required in students' work to achieve a standard, and how it will be assessed. An additional tenet, which underpins much current writing, is that clarity of these assessment expectations is important for student learning, through goal setting and through feedback to students about the quality of the learning they have demonstrated and the gap that they may need to close to achieve a better learning outcome (ARG, 2002; Sadler, 1989). While such 'assessment for learning' has gained a hold in assessment policy worldwide (see, for example, MCEETYA, 2008), and is being widely implemented in different forms internationally, there is scant large-scale empirical evidence on how teachers and students work with stated assessment expectations and are able to use these to guide and improve both student learning and teaching practices (Black, 2015; Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2014; Torrance, 2012; Wyatt-Smith, Klenowski, & Colbert, 2014), and further, how they build a shared assessment mindset.

The four thematic lines outlined earlier (identity, task design and standards, dialogic inquiry, and digital learning histories) are addressed in the presentation using data from a range of studies for illustrative purposes. While it is possible to treat each one separately, innovation lies in seeing them as a suite of connection points that inform teachers' and students' decisions about assessing what matters. At issue are both intellectual and relational synergies in developing the assessment culture of the classroom and the school more generally. They complement an approach to learning-centered task design and dialogic inquiry not only into what is learned, but also the cognitive and meta-cognitive processes underlying learning and performance.

The potential of rethinking assessment in these ways lies in reconsidering how a hallmark of 'a good teacher' could extend well beyond being recognised for the good grades that students achieve. Instead, the measure could be the success of teachers, leaders and school systems in developing students' abilities to use existing knowledge, to generate new knowledge, and to think and deploy meta-cognitive knowledge. This is taken to include students' insights into themselves as learners and how they learn, and moreover, how to apply knowledge and skills, and how to transfer and adapt them to be effective in new contexts, facing new problems and working in new collaborating teams. Students' ability to meta-cognitively assess and adapt will promote their opportunities to contribute, to lead, and innovate in societies of the future.

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