

Editorial: Plotting new courses in assessment

DAVID WHITEHEAD
University of Waikato

YVONNE REED
University of the Witwatersrand

The articles in this issue foreground some of the tensions inherent in the use of “global” summative, norm-referenced measures of literacy on the one hand, and “local”, site and classroom specific literacy assessments on the other. At a theoretical level these tensions may seem without basis given that “global” and “local” assessments seem to serve different masters and achieve different purposes. However, in reality the wash-back effect of high stakes systemic assessment on classroom work is widely accepted. Furthermore, these tensions are palpable in countries in which the results from high-stakes, high status “global” assessments can lead to the closure of schools. Several of the articles in this issue describe how teachers in schools and universities are attempting to steer a course around and between the omnipresent impact of high stakes assessments and their influence on curricula.

The themes of tension, professionalism, innovation, dialogue, and a concern for the welfare of students and teachers underpin articles in this issue. Reflecting these themes, these articles demonstrate that the skilled use of “local”, ecologically valid assessments, portfolio assessments and self-assessments that work for students are a central concern of contributors. All the authors are based in countries with various forms of high-stakes assessment that by default have become de-facto curricula. The influence of these assessments is magnified when teachers teach to them, sometimes by using test items during lessons, and sometimes by using model answers or exemplars as a key component of their teaching.

In the background to these articles are the authors’ concerns around assessment protocols, linked as these are to national and institutional criteria. For example, behind Mbelani’s learner-centred approach to teaching and assessment is a concern to raise achievement among his students so that they meet national standards. Behind the King et al. use of portfolio assessment is a concern that their graduate students meet International Reading Association standards. Behind Whitehead’s description of how teachers use ecologically valid topic assessments are the case study participants’ concerns that these test items did not align with national examination items. Aharonian questions how communities of teacher-learners can be established in a high stakes assessment climate. Together, these and other contributors demonstrate their professionalism and innovation in plotting innovative courses.

From Michigan, King, Patterson and Stolle write of tension between “global” and “local” assessment protocols as they recount their experiences of “navigating the murky waters of assessment”. Their article explores tensions between the political demands of national accreditation standards and a faculty belief system when decisions are made to use more ecologically valid approaches to assessment. In practice, their use of portfolios opened rich dialogue between and among students and professors, accommodated diverse teaching and

assessment practices, modified course readings and the sequence of student experiences, while maintaining academic rigour. This article is as much about innovation as it is about navigation; about ways of manoeuvring within courses so that competing local and global belief systems are acknowledged. It is also about valuing assessment tools that Barton (1994) describes as socially embedded, “naturalistic” and “ecologically valid”.

Whitehead, from New Zealand, also describes the use of ecologically valid tests by secondary school teachers. In a series of vignettes he explores how teachers tested like they taught, and the professional and personal risks involved in modifying historic, summative topic tests. He demonstrates that dialogue between literacy facilitators and teachers, born out of a concern to raise literacy achievement levels, can have a significant impact on classroom assessment practices

Reed from South Africa describes her progress in designing innovative environments of learning that address the complex issues around constructing multimodal assignments and assessment designs responsive to teachers’ diverse classroom contexts. Reed’s main question is how to support teachers not only in the designing of multimodal responses to texts but also in the designing of more appropriate forms of assessment than the rubrics associated with South Africa’s outcomes-based curriculum.

Steinberg reflects on the “emotional labour” involved in assessment and the “emotional rules” that regulate teachers’ use of different forms of assessment. Using evidence from a number of studies, she argues that the negative emotions associated with standardised assessments limit teachers’ effectiveness. However, she also suggests that formative assessment is more emotionally demanding than summative and argues that if teachers are to take up the challenge of formative assessment, the fear of failure and mistakes will need to be replaced by enthusiasm for unexpected learning opportunities.

Writing out of the United States context, Friese, Alvermann, Parkes and Rezak share their research on selecting texts for English Language Arts classrooms and the impact of high-stakes testing as one variable influencing teachers’ selection practices. Their article identifies a number of factors at work in the way teachers approach the task of selecting texts for student use, including teacher knowledge, access to texts and institutional constraints.

Bethan Marshall’s article is an up-to-the-minute discussion of the factors that have led to the British Government’s (perhaps temporary) abandonment of standard assessment tests (Sats), or key stage tests and single-level tests for key stage three. She documents a range of reasons why English teachers in particular have opposed Sats. Drawing on research conducted by King’s College on portfolio assessment, she outlines an assessment regime that could potentially fill the gap left by the unpopular Sats – one that is based far more on the professional knowledge of the teacher.

From South Africa, Mbelani’s narrative tells of the challenges facing teachers in post-apartheid South Africa, who attempt to teach visual language and engage students in the design of visual language assessments. This is a palpably honest narrative that echoes the self-reflective stance evident in Reed’s own work.

Aharonian recounts and reflects on her experience of introducing teachers in Israel to writing as a means of reflecting on their professional learning and identity within a school framework. She highlights at an individual level tensions between the needs of a school and students, and the needs of teachers, a theme that echoes the tensions between ‘local’ and ‘global’ assessment protocols. Aharonian also emphasizes the importance of respecting the knowledge teachers bring with them and of acknowledging their desire to raise levels of student achievement. Aharonian argues that teachers’ knowledge about their students should be valued. Professionals don’t have to pull a carrot out of the ground to know whether it is growing!

Together these articles speak of a struggle between meeting the needs of students and the requirements of national assessment regimes, in using formative assessment in settings influenced by powerful summative assessment cultures – between pedagogy and assessment practices justified on the basis of historical precedent and those justified on the basis of socio-cultural explanations of learning.

The silences in this issue are palpable. First, as Steinberg notes, there is a need for further research around the emotional impact of assessment on teachers and students. Further, there are no contributors whose work involves national testing, although several were approached. Some potential contributors stated that the theme of the issue was “incompatible” with their position. There is an urgent need to engage those who work in high stakes systematic assessment in a dialogue around the effects of testing on a range of pedagogical matters. These dialogues need to include the effect of tests on how we teach, what students learn, what we value as knowledge, how we define knowledge, what effect “global” tests have on teachers’ and students’ view of learning, and what effect these tests have on teacher professionalism.

REFERENCES

- Barton, D. (1994). *Literacy: An introduction to the ecology of the written language*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.