

Making assessment authentic: Questions and challenges for middle years research and practice.

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This paper considers the ways in which authenticity is constructed in materials written for teachers about authentic assessment in the middle

competitiveness is the height of technological arrogance... [I]t is important that we submit generalized negative claims about public schools and accompanying proposals to reform them—such as alternative assessments—to relentless, thorough examination. We need to treat critic's fixed beliefs and unexamined ideological response to reform as hypotheses to be tested. Until then, our schools will continue to be the object of facile cures and fiddling reformism. (Madaus, Raczek & Clarke 1997, p.22)

We began the research process by critically reading the literature to consider how authentic assessment was being described, what claims were being made for it, and what guidance was provided for teachers and schools. We raised questions of social justice and questions related to how authentic assessment might help students and schools respond to contemporary social challenges facing young people. Our questions included:

¥ how does authentic assessment promote achievement by traditionally disadvantaged students?

¥ what does authentic assessment construct as valued learning or 'success' and how does that relate to student's lives now and in the future?

This last question reveals our understanding of assessment, not as a neutral tool, but as a social and cultural construct. In our view, assessment does not 'measure' learning (a view that sees learning as an unproblematic, natural or given process), rather it constitutes

part of the project was that academics and teachers would be working together, in schools, to consider how authentic assessment worked in practice and, particularly, how it impacted on disadvantaged students. In our view, reforms that make a difference for these students must involve teachers in examining and reimagining their pedagogy. As Connell (1994) points out, teachers have been excluded from policy debate around school reform, yet what teachers do in their classrooms is crucial to making a difference.

We may not wish to blame teachers, but we also cannot ignore them. Education as a cultural enterprise is constituted in and through their

is student's ability to apply knowledge to solve real problems (Simon 1986).

A defining marker of authentic assessment is that the link between the curriculum and assessment is explicit so that the process tests what is taught and leads back to better informed teaching and learning.

Instruction and assessment are intimately connected; students are expected to produce and demonstrate integrated forms of knowledge and competence; assessment criteria are clear and known in advance by students and staff; and the products of the student's intellectual efforts have value beyond the purpose of assessment (Archbald 1991).

The literature that uses the term 'authentic assessment' (as opposed to specific issues such as portfolios) does not provide a large number of explicit examples of how it works in schools there tends to be a focus on issues of principle and broad procedure rather than illustrations of actual practice. Importantly for our project, there were very few examples provided from Australian contexts with most examples provided from the USA. Much of the authentic assessment literature coming from this context seemed to be written in response to a debate and a concern about the impact of large-scale standardised assessment systems on schooling ! in other words authentic assessment

Our reading of the literature and our subsequent research and analysis with the teacher researchers involved in the project, led us to identify six key aspects of authentic assessment. That is, the term 'authentic' was seen to imply assessment that:

- 1 connects assessment to the curriculum
- 2 engages students, teachers and others in assessing performance
- 3 looks beyond the school for models and sites of action
- 4 promotes complex thinking and problem solving
- 5 encourages student 'performance' of their learning
- 6 engages with issues of equity

Full discussion of each of these aspects of authentic assessment is to be found in [Cormack, 1997 #47]. For the purposes of this paper these characteristics will be discussed briefly, before a fuller discussion of the way in which authentic assessment does, or does not address issues of equity.

Connects assessment to the curriculum

It has been taken for granted that valid student assessment should be connected to the curriculum that students experience. However, in the face of growing trends to 'standardise' at least some forms of student assessment across schools and systems, there has been a move to re-articulate the rationale for curriculum-connected assessment. As the traditional subject divisions are seen to be broken down in middle school curriculum, assessment tasks need to reflect the cross-disciplinary nature of learning ! 'the problems of the modern

world do not fall neatly into the divisions of the traditional discipline's (Lowe 1995, p.28). Stefonek (1991, p.1) characterises these new forms of curriculum as sites in which there is 'disciplined enquiry that integrates and produces knowledge, rather than reproduces fragments of information others have discovered.' Authentic assessment is seen to provide ways for the assessment of knowledge and skills developed in such cross-disciplinary curricula.

There are, however, a number of issues that are rarely raised in the literature but deserve closer consideration. It is apparent that some of the literature on authentic assessment fails to recognise the complexity and contested nature of 'the curriculum'. It largely assumes that the 'reform's to the curriculum embodied in general policy statements are transparently 'good' and 'needed' if schools are to prepare children to face a range of largely unknown challenges in the

next century. Missing from the literature are fundamental questions about whose conceptions of the future dominate 'the curriculum', who has a legitimate stake in 'the curriculum', and what groups stand to gain and which may lose through the reform process.

Engages students, teachers and others in assessing performance
The adoption of learner centred pedagogies, the promotion of collaborative ways of working and learning, and a broader acceptance of collective decision making in schools have enabled some teachers to

involve students, peers, parents, and other members of the community in assessing student performance. Authentic assessment tasks involve students in sharing their learning with a wider audience than the teacher. For instance, students may present key aspects of their learning from a particular project at a 'Roundtable' made up of the presenters and peers, parents or family members, teachers and invited guests who may include college professors, union representatives, superintendents, teachers from other schools or recent graduates from the particular school. (Allison, [1995]) Presenting their learning to a wider audience than the teacher enables students to receive feedback and help from a wide range of sources, some of whom may be able to offer advice that is more relevant, or has more meaning to the student, than that which is given by the teacher (Burke 1996). A related development has been greater explicitness in assessment criteria. The move to involve others in assessment has required teachers to 'publish' their assessment criteria and to negotiate them with other stakeholders.

Looks beyond the school for models and sites of action

settings, and which require analysis, integration of knowledge, invention, highly developed written and oral expression (Darling-Hammond et al. 1995) and opportunities to use problem solving, decision making skills, learning strategies and creative thinking (Kushman n.d.). Tasks described in the literature as more representative of expectations beyond the school include 'roundtable' presentations to an audience made up of school and non school representatives (Allison 1995), student portfolios of work samples (McMillan 1997) and performances, exhibitions, projects, learning logs,

plan and evaluate learning experiences.

Encourages student 'performance' of their learning

McMillan (1997, p.199) emphasises that the defining characteristic of authentic assessment is to be found in the nature of the performance task, focussing on, a student's ability to use knowledge to perform a task that is like what is encountered in real life or in the real world. Similarly, Torrance (1995, p.1) notes that the basic implication is that performance-based assessment tasks should be more practical and realistic than traditional assessment devices. Puckett and Black (1994, p.22) include in their list of essential characteristics of authentic assessment that it be performance-based and related to real-life events. Worthen (1993, p.445) adds that authentic assessment devices, refer to direct examination of student performance on significant tasks that are relevant to life outside of the school. This dual focus of performance and relevance to real-life situations beyond the school dominates the literature.

Engages with issues of equity

Literature that focuses on authentic assessment only occasionally takes on equity as a major issue ! Although the issue is often mentioned tangentially. The most common way of addressing the issue of equity is to describe traditional approaches to assessment and to point out the ways that they discriminate against students of difference (so-called 'standardised' testing and tests of basic skills are particularly described in this regard). Issues such as the atomisation of the

curriculum caused by the identification of discrete skills in multiple choice/machine scored tests; their tendency to narrow the curriculum as teachers teach to the test; and the distance of test content from desirable classroom curriculum are seen to particularly discriminate against disadvantaged students.

One claim is that, to promote equity, teachers must ensure that the explicit and formally valued curriculum is accessible to all students in ways that enhance their opportunities for success. A key way of attempting this is by developing curricular experiences and assessment

Several authentic assessment practices incorporate flexibility which make it possible for teachers and students to negotiate aspects of learning and assessment such as the scheduling, development and completion of assessment tasks to take into account social, domestic and cultural demands.

Forster and Masters (1996, p.6) note that authentic assessment involves performances, processes and 'doing' activities which necessitate observation of the students in action. There is a heavy reliance on anecdotal and interpretive recording. They acknowledge that inter-marker reliability is crucial yet problematic. They also note that informal observation

emotional states and refer to family conflicts. These records are used in 'case consultation's between teachers and social workers... Given the existing surveillance of poor families by the state, and attempts

A review of what the schools were able to do reveals the difficulties

forms of testing. One example of this is reported by McInerney et al (1997) where McInerney began work on student debates by asking students to complete a questionnaire on their previous experience and perceived strengths in the proposed topics. This is an example of a form of prospective assessment, where knowledge and skills revealed in the assessment lead into school work, rather than the usual process of assessment concluding work a

recognise non-traditional skills and knowledge in a way that teachers may not.

Allowing for flexibility

The work of many of the schools confirmed that the authentic assessment practices trialled allowed for greater flexibility than traditional approaches. This aspect appears to be a key element of processes that may ensure greater success for disadvantaged students. One example from Seaton illustrates how flexibility may work for students. Sommer reports that:

there is an element of unpredictability in authentic learning. The learning situation is often complex and messy. Students bring different

(the time factor allows for flexibility) which provides for multiple opportunities for students to succeed. The Seaton case study goes on to expand on the ways that students were provided with multiple

Prospect where the teachers extended the concept of group responsibility by consciously focussing on issues of group collaboration and teamwork as the teachers attempted to make explicit for students what collaborative groupwork involved. Such work seems to provide a practical illustration of the ways that assessment can recognise that no student's performance in any area is truly a reflection of individual work or ability, but involves interaction with others and that assessments can account for this fact. This is an issue that also arose in relation to the focus on oral communication at St Paul's and Henry Kendall. Activities such as an oral presentation to the class, for example, or completing a group task, can only be successful if the listeners collaborate and respond in the way the

question proved to be a powerful catalyst at the second conference in Adelaide for the teachers to reexamine their assessment practices to consider how they might be contributing to placing particular groups of students as less successful than their peers. We saw that this process of setting up some students for failure may be accomplished through the criteria for success that are established, the practical application of the assessment process, or even through the assumptions that teachers make about the resources students have to bring to bear on a task.

The two projects that focussed on verbal communication provided some immediate issues for discussion related to this issue. At both St Paul's and at Henry Kendall, it became obvious that the criteria for assessing students listening or attending skills, that were established in collaboration with the students, reflected the cultural practices of only some Australian students. For example, the criterion that effective listening or attending involves 'eye contact' will clearly lead to students who come from cultural groups where eye contact is not appropriate in many social situations, being labelled as poor performers. Our discussions of the issue revealed that it was probably not possible to establish a set of criteria for listening or attending that was universally applicable to all students and all situations. One teacher, Karen Skelly of St Pauls, had the opportunity after the conference to pick up on this issue. She reported rethinking the criteria she had established by thinking about a range of different situations in which students must listen as a basis for renegotiating the criteria with the students to make them more situation dependent.

Skelly's work is an illustration of the power of the research process to support teachers to reconfigure their classrooms to work better for students who struggle according to mainstream assessment processes. In this case the reconfiguration involved developing different, and more inclusive of the student's experience, criteria for success in communication. Such a process could be extended beyond thinking about different social situations in the school to consider the ways of interacting evident in other settings involving a variety of participants. Certainly this example brought home to the researchers the ways that social issues could be considered in assessment practices

in ways that make them more authentically account for the increasingly diverse communities with which schools work.

New lessons about equity

In addition to the directions suggested by the literature, analysis of the work of the teachers revealed some other approaches as having potential to address issues of equity. These can be summarised as:

- ¥ using assessment processes to make the criteria for success more explicit to students

- ¥ designing assessment processes that provide built-in support for student success

- ¥ focussing on student involvement, activity and engagement as a basis

The teachers made criteria for success explicit by defining, negotiating and documenting assessment criteria so that students would understand what was required for success. A number of factors seemed to drive this concern for explicitness. The complexity and long-term nature of many of the tasks seemed to require greater explicitness in order that students could understand what they had to produce as outcomes. It was also clear that the teachers, in deciding to work on non-traditional curriculum areas such as oral communication, unusual projects such as designing an entranceway or organising excursions, needed to explain to the students what some of these new skills actually involved. For example, the Holy Eucharist teachers negotiated in great detail what an informative poster on a planet might contain and the kinds of headings that could be used. Perhaps, most importantly from an equity perspective, this meant that students had explained to them in some detail, school requirements that at other times might remain quite inexplicit. Thus, just on the issue of 'affective' aspects of students' performance in the classroom, the teachers produced three checklists which detailed what 'attending', 'contributing' and 'acceptance of other's meant. Students rarely have access to such information ! we assume they know what 'pay attention' means, for example. Such explicitness seems to have the potential to overcome some of the misunderstandings that may lead to trouble in classrooms for students who don't have 'inside knowledge' on what teacher-speak actually requires of them.

An unanticipated feature of many of the assessment processes developed by the schools was the way that they not only involved judgement about

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