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Guest Editorial Fit for Purpose: Lessons in Assessment and Learning

Ann Harris

Are all thy conquests, glories, spoils,
Shrunk to this little measure?

Julius Caesar Act III, scene i

What is assessment and how can we, as educators, ensure assessment of learning, and perhaps more particularly assessment for learning? Throughout the twentieth century, debates raged around the place of assessment in education and its relationship with learning. Forty years ago, Rowntree suggested that assessment occurs:

Whenever one person, in some kind of interaction, direct or indirect, with another, is conscious of obtaining and interpreting information about the knowledge and understanding, or abilities and attitudes of that other person. To some extent it is an attempt to *know* that person.

(Rowntree, 1977, p4)

His definition, which was of its time, emphasised how assessment might be seen as holistic, and conceptually drew upon its etymology from the Latin verb 'assidere' meaning to sit beside. However, all too often in the years since then, assessment has been seen as synonymous with examination from the Latin verb 'examinare': to weigh or to ponder. The former infers dialogue and interaction; the latter testing and judgment. All learners, whether they be infants learning to read and write, or post-sixteen and higher education students desperate to achieve their requisite grades, experience both these definitions of assessment.

Yet what learning is being evaluated? Is the assessment fit for purpose? Is it fair and/or authentic? Might it be a means to meritocracy and social justice, or simply a

ticket of leave for the tutored and well-resourced middle classes? To what extent is assessment aligned with the curriculum, or do we teach to the test? However it is defined, whatever the rhetoric and clichés around assessment, its effect on learning and its validity and reliability preoccupy educators at every level. This assessment agenda, both in the UK and overseas, is often driven by government policy, and designed to show that initiative has made a difference, or that learning has improved. Some of the changes in assessment and public examining practice are documented by Bethan Marshall in her article on *the Politics of English Testing*. This special edition addresses some of the above questions but it also raises others, such as how creative can we be in assessment? And what occurs during the external examining process?

English is a core curriculum subject in anglophone countries. Competence in English is often a requirement for higher education and for a range of employment. As the language of school in the UK and elsewhere, English underpins learning across the curriculum and much assessment. Success in other subjects can even to some extent be affected by literacy performance since one needs, for example, to be able to read and adequately understand a mathematical problem before even attempting its calculation. Yet, historically, what comprises English has been disputed, educationally and politically, in a debate which indicates the contention, ideologically and philosophically, underlying the English subjects of both language and literature. Under discussion have been issues of public confidence, political priorities, economic demands, employability, life skills, technical accuracy, communicative competence and individual needs. Criticism of standards is well documented through the decades. Mais reported on literacy in the UK in 1914:

A boy leaves school at the age of eighteen or nineteen, having had some 1000 or 2000 pounds spent on his education, able hardly to write a coherent sentence, with no knowledge of punctuation, no vocabulary, no power of expression, having read practically nothing, and consequently possessed of few qualities.

(Mais 1914, p118)

While at that time only privileged children would have had the opportunity to continue schooling until eighteen or nineteen, successive generations have also felt compelled to criticise the literacy performance of young people and, as a result, to apportion blame and/or implement change. During the last thirty years in England and Wales, such change has been endemic in the teaching and assessment of English: through baseline assessment and synthetic phonics; through the National Curriculum, literacy strategies and key stage testing; through coursework and differentiation; through communication key skills; through curriculum 2000 and 2015 A-level reform; and, indeed, through all the various incarnations of new assessment and syllabus regimes, and revised examination procedures. This is a trend which is also evidenced in other English speaking countries, whether it relates to accommodating societal and economic needs, or to addressing social or ethnic deprivation and racial discrimination. Some educational developments or social initiatives have historically been based on research pertaining to what were perceived as key issues such as Bernstein's restricted and elaborate codes (1971) or the Kingman Report (1988) or the Rose Review (2006). Others, for example the recent curtailment (in the UK and elsewhere) of coursework, seem motivated more by political partisanship, or the exigencies of circumstances such as technological development.

Even once learning and assessment have taken place, how work is marked and graded remains an issue. Is it outcomes-based or criteria-referenced, or is it norm-referenced ostensibly to ensure systematic and consistent performance across different tests and times? In English, the debate around assessment has been particularly keen. Opportunities to measure performance in the subject have been affected by discourse around the nature of assessment and what it measures as well as debates around validity and reliability, and around 'subjective' or impression marking and notions of a more 'objective' professional judgment. Accountability has also been prominent, especially for stakeholders, since public examining, particularly in the later stages of schooling, represents 'high stakes' assessment. Yet where does that leave learning? How can we best judge whether learning has taken place and if credit is due? Do we need base-line assessment to determine whether learning has occurred or value has been added? How is familiarity with testing regimes likely to affect the way in which we teach and what learners learn? This

special edition takes on some of these debates and examines them in a contemporary context.

Teachers have always regularly assessed students to evaluate and support learning, but the use of public examinations to determine league tables and to regulate the achievement not just of the pupil or student but also of the teacher and the school, college or university has impacted on the process. The special edition confronts these issues also, but it cannot cover all potential issues within the field of assessment and learning. It would be a lengthy tome if it were to do so. At the beginning of this editorial, I highlighted the signification of prepositions: assessment *of* learning and assessment *for* learning. We also have assessment as learning, and these nuanced phrases demonstrate how learning and assessment can be bound together in different ways. The distinction between assessment *of* learning (summative) and assessment *for* learning (formative) has been well rehearsed, but the more recent assessment as learning focuses where we might locate more recent, twentieth-first century development. Harry Torrance explains this:

In a very real sense we have moved from 'assessment of learning' through 'assessment for learning' to 'assessment as learning', for both learners and tutors alike, with assessment procedures and process completely dominating the teaching and learning experience.

(Torrance, 2007, p291)

This introduces a notion of strategic assessment whereby assessment is designed with learning in mind, and learning is designed with assessment in mind. Ruth Dann (2014) suggests, however, that this concept of assessment as learning also offers an opportunity for engagement, providing:

A complex interplay of assessment, teaching, and learning which holds at its core the notion that pupils must understand their own learning progress and goals through a range of processes which are in themselves cognitive events. Implicit is the need for pupils to be active in both learning and assessment.

(Dann, 2014, p150-151)

Some of these ideas will not be new to English teachers, for whom the pragmatics of a creative and critical classroom have often demanded the interplay of assessment and learning and the involvement of the student in the process of pedagogy. Each of the articles in this special edition challenges ideas of assessment and learning, presenting alternative perspectives on how one might accommodate both in different sectors from primary school through to post-sixteen.

Nerida Spina's article, *Governing by numbers*, offers a detailed analysis of the impact of the Australian national testing programme, NAPLAN, undertaken at grades 3, 5, 7 and 9, which comprises literacy assessment in spelling, grammar, punctuation, reading and writing. Spina's institutional ethnographic study indicates how testing, ostensibly introduced to raise standards, can be used for funding and accountability purposes, and she suggests that this emphasis on examining with its concomitant pressure on schools has undermined both the curriculum and opportunities for classroom creativity. Spina also makes the point that the notion of an education system designed to be increasingly quantifiable is a global phenomenon, the implications of which are evident elsewhere including in the United Kingdom.

Bethan Marshall's account of *The Politics of Testing* picks up this argument, initially by looking back fondly to a time in the UK when teachers and educators could comment on the examining system 'and the exam boards listened'. Her article then goes on to address in turn the phonics screening test, key stage 2 literacy and GCSE English, and the effect of 'politics, even party politics' on assessment processes. In doing so, it offers a revealing analysis of how assessment of learning has been used, at various times, to gain political advantage and/or to criticise teachers and categorise schools, all in the name of improving standards. As a key curricular subject, English, Marshall suggests, has generated more than its fair share of attention and intervention, including arguments over word classes and what constitutes English literature. She leaves us, however, in little doubt that testing, not just in the UK, is 'bound up with politics'.

Tony Hall and Eilis Flanagan's article on *Digital Ensemble* presents an innovative approach to English assessment through the integration of drama pedagogy and

mobile computing with senior students in Eire. The fact that this assessment of English through collaborative ensemble, through digital literacy and multimodal texts took place outside the UK is perhaps not surprising since there are limited opportunities for such initiative here. Hall and Flanagan offer through their design-based research some insights pertaining to the process and implementation but also seek to evaluate whether novel and technologically-enhanced assessment can support criticality, and expressive and affective learning. The rest of us are left to speculate, given its value and significance, what scope, if any, there might be for us to do something equally creative in assessment and learning.

Jonathan Glazzard gives us an account of synthetic phonics and the impact of the phonics screening test in relation to models and theories of reading development in UK primary schools. He extends the argument made by Bethan Marshall about the politics of assessment by focusing on the primary school and touches upon issues emergent from the current UK parliamentary primary assessment inquiry on the effect of assessment on primary teaching and learning and the training necessary to design and implement effective assessment. Glazzard's account questions the compartmentalisation of reading skills, and he argues for a developmental framework which recognises the phases and stages in sequential reading skills development.

Velda Elliott's paper *What does a good one look like?* takes us behind closed doors to observe two examiner training meetings. Very little research has, it appears, been undertaken into public examining and standardisation, and Elliott draws on work from subjects other than English to emphasise the intricacies and complexities, and to analyse and interrogate the processes. The training deemed to take place through these meetings is evaluated through the interaction and notions of compliance with the mark scheme, standardisation, representativeness, and cognition. The idea of a mental framework into which examiners and assessors might fit work is scrutinised alongside the implications of such construct-referenced assessment. Examining, the paper reveals, is a process fraught with challenges and contradictions as well as with significance.

John Hodgson's paper with Bill Greenwell: *The work of the course: validity and reliability in assessing English* offers us a nostalgic view of learning and assessment as practised within an 'alternative' A level English literature syllabus in the last two decades of the twentieth century. An informed personal and authentic response to literature was encouraged, and students genuinely did their coursework throughout the course. Furthermore, teachers, who knew their students and were familiar with students' work, were trusted to assess achievement and standards, while being cradled within the developmental context of a consensual and supportive moderation process. Hodgson's account harks back to halcyon days before the world wide web ensnared the principle of coursework and before league tables ostensibly compromised notions of teacher integrity. It does, however, remind us of how checks and balances were ensured, staff development and professional discourse generated, and how learning was foregrounded rather than being driven by assessment. In discussing the merits of the extended essay, it also identifies how students, even without Google, were able to engage in independent research and autonomous learning as part of the advanced level assessment process.

The book reviews in this special edition are not focussed so much on assessment as on learning yet in doing so they offer thoughtful comments on where we place value and significance. Marcello Giovanelli discusses *The Discourse of Reading Groups: Integrating Cognitive and Sociocultural Perspectives* (2016) by David Peplow, Joan Swann, Paola Trimarco and Sara Whiteley. Reviewing the book, he highlights how theory might be illuminating for classroom practice, and the value of group work in the context of the 'negotiated nature of classroom literacy'. Andrew Burn looks at James Gee's *Literacy and Education* (2015), a book by an author familiar to the field and one which provides lively examples as well as revisiting his 'Big D' notion of discourses. However, while commenting on its usefulness as an accessible introduction, Burn also points out the inevitable limitations of a relatively short publication on a complex topic.

This special edition challenges us all as English teachers and academics to re-evaluate aspects of assessment and learning, especially since the English curriculum in the UK, as in some other countries, faces change at every level. Unfairness and anomalies still exist. Jo Carrington's poems remind us of the

implications and the responsibility that comes with teaching and learning within a curriculum that at times might appear neither to permit flexibility in its assessment nor fully to acknowledge individual needs. Hopefully, however, the articles in this special edition also remind us that knowledge and understanding of process and of practice as well as creativity and professionalism are fundamental to ensuring that our pupils and students, whoever they are, are given a fair chance to succeed through the learning and assessment they experience.

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