

Editorial

Assessment of change in education

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Assessment is back. There is undoubtedly a transnational preoccupation with the national performance of education systems, performance-based pedagogies, and the assessment of student learning. The shift from educational inputs to learning outputs, from classroom processes to student achievements, and from teacher actions to learner outcomes are common in both first world and developing country contexts. Such shifts are often justified on economic grounds (greater efficiency in the use of resources), sometimes on political grounds (greater accountability in terms of governmental resources), and occasionally on educational grounds (greater attention to learners and learning). These shifts are marked differently in the education policies of various countries, and its most prominent expression in South Africa is in the form of what has come to be called *outcomes-based education*.

It is within this context that the research and concept articles in this Special Issue on Assessment should be understood and engaged. The contributors cover an impressive range of topics and contexts related to assessment theory and practice: quality assurance, validity, curriculum reform, multilingual classrooms, vocabulary assessment, assessment in higher education, assessment in classrooms, outcomes based assessment, and learning management systems.

It is within this context that the reader should reflect upon the contributions within this special issue on assessment. The authors provide a wide spectrum of issues ranging from quality assurance at national level (Potgieter) to detailed alternative perspectives on validity (Killen). On classroom level assessment practices, there are articles by Vandeyar and Killen, and Davis and Reed looking at curriculum reform changing assessment practices and assessing multimodal texts in multilingual classrooms, respectively. Cooper and van Dyk (on vocabulary assessment) and Mothata, van Niekerk and Mays (quality assurance strategies) focus on assessment in higher education level whilst Kouwenhoven, Howie and Plomp apply a needs assessment for identifying competencies for higher education in Mozambique. Shalem adds to the edumetric theory of accountability, whilst Combrinck provides readers with a comparative perspective of OBE. Finally, van Dyk gives a technological flavour to assessment by focusing on assessment through learning management systems. All of these contributions are summarised in the following paragraphs.

Killen's theoretical exposition of validity as assessment principle in *Validity in outcomes-based assessment* offers new insights on current outcomes-based assessment practices. Validity as a principle has grown in stature and importance with the emergence of classical test theory defined by Lord and Novick in the late Sixties. His interpretation of validity is vested in the association between the meaning of the concept and the information a test should provide regarding some underlying construct. This association should demystify the degree to which certain inferences could be drawn from test results or test scores. Killen's argument that assessment tasks can never be valid or invalid, but that validation should rather be sought in the assessment-based inferences we should be able to draw from performance, brings novelty to a classical concept often used and abused in our assessment practices.

[Un]Reliable assessment by Granville, Janks, Makoe, Reed, Stein and Van Zyl questions the consistency of the marking of post-graduate students' research reports. They analysed the categories and criteria applied by three different markers and came to the conclusion that although shared categories were observable, 'consistency' within and across universities is still very difficult to achieve. They developed a set of banded criteria to address the problem of [un]reliability and established weightings for the different categories of assessment. They came to the conclusion that notwithstanding all our attempts to standardise our marking through the use of sophisticated statistical techniques, multiple marking and the averaging of the marks across markers seems to remain the fairest ways of dealing with differences across markers.

In *Do we have a theory of change?* Yael Shalem adds value to our generally poor edumetric theory, especially when trying to link action to purpose within assessment strategies applied at schools and institutions. It contributes to a better understanding of accountability – often seen as an important premise for the validation of our performance-based educational practices. The article is a valuable addition to a wide range of change metaphors flooding the education scenario at present, especially when one has to assess educator accountability against and in terms of well-defined parameters of competence and performance-based education and training.

In *An international comparative perspective on outcomes-based assessment*, Combrinck qualitatively assessed the realities and problems related to outcomes-based assessment from an international perspective by interviewing a sample of officials in Australia, New Zealand and America. The article provides insight into a simple strategy that could be followed by comparing the opinions of interviewees with the theoretical assumptions underpinning outcomes-based assessment (OBA) in general in terms of seven major categories listed by the author. Most of Combrinck's findings are not new to OBA. What the article does do is to successfully integrate various variables into a practical model and to highlight the implications of the different variables for sound assessment practice. It also identifies interesting research foci and critical fundamental issues to be dealt with when assessing human performance.

The article on *Vocabulary assessment* by Cooper and Van Dyk, draws attention to the fact that a basic and sound academic vocabulary is required by first-year students to meet the demands of academic discourse at institutions of higher learning. The research focuses on the importance of 'vocabulary size' as variable influencing student performance in courses and modules at the end of the semester or year. The researchers applied simple yet effective techniques to compare students' performance at university with their vocabulary test scores and language proficiency levels. In the second comparative study a standardised instrument was used to measure the language proficiency as well as the vocabulary proficiency of first-year students. A relatively high correlation was found between academic performance and 'vocabulary size'. The outcomes of the investigation call for a review of the classical question whether language competence should be regarded as prescriptive for significant academic performance at institutions of higher learning.

Bearing in mind that learner assessment remains one of the most critical and crucial quality assurance mechanisms at programme level, Mothata, Van Niekerk and Mays illustrate the application of such strategy as applied to a National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE) offered by the University of South Africa. The article *Learner Assessment in practice* exposes a number of interesting and important learner assessment strategies and assesses the strategies against classical assessment principles. Applying the classical outcomes-based assessment requirements to a distance education teacher education programme, the authors illustrate to good effect how the NPDE programme meets the requirements set by such criteria. The case study is a valuable addition to this Special Edition as it models future learning assessment strategies as applied to the final evaluation of an educator development programme.

In the article *Assessing multimodal texts in multilingual classrooms*, Davis and Reed attempted to answer a number of questions related to the development of criteria that could scaffold multimodal tasks and the establishment of levels of 'excellence in execution'. They also search for answers to questions linked to the association between the 'accuracy of learners' assessment' and the language of instruction encountered at institutions of learning. The authors provide feedback to a variety of evidence-gathering strategies (tasks) applied by 40 Grade 11 learners as their response to the reading of a given novel, and provide feedback on the efficiency of film storyboards, written notes, oral presentations and two- or three-dimensional visual tasks. The outcomes of the investigation support our understanding of the impact of visual presentations as a response to a task as this 'helped learners to change the way they thought' about a novel. The article succeeds in providing a firm empirical account on the efficiency of multimodal tasks to enhance quality of learning as well as the assessment of learners with diverse needs and competences in multilingual classrooms.

The article by Vandeyar and Killen, *Has curriculum reform in South Africa really changed assessment practices?* exposes a classical problem educators have to face when responding to the demands of change or a new set of rules in any education system. They support their arguments from evidence drawn from a number of case studies based on assessment practices applied by Grade Four educators on a small sample of schools in the greater Pretoria area. The authors highlight the traditional divorce between instruction and learning and explain what impact this practice has had on teaching in general. They speculate that those educators who have always applied principles of high quality assessment prior to the introduction of OBE in South Africa, would be in better command of outcomes-based assessment (OBA) than those educators who have neglected the basic principles of assessment in general. A crucial point made is that the application and implementation of new policy and practices (as is the case with OBA) have to be preceded by a deeper understanding of the underpinning rationale and premises justifying action and practice.

Very little empirical research on the nature of educator competences and the achievement of such competences by education students has been conducted in Southern Africa. The article *The role of needs assessments in developing competence-based education in Mozambican higher education* – by Kouwenhoven, Howie and Plomp – is an attempt to close this gap and to contribute to our knowledge and understanding of needs assessment as a curriculum activity. It also highlights the nature of the competences required by graduates and educators working in the fields of Science and Mathematics education. The case study reflects a number of important observations, namely that subject knowledge (substance and syntax) remains a core competence to be in command of whereas competences and skills related to Information and Computer Technology were not that highly rated by the respondents who participated in the investigation. A careful reading of the article will reveal an interesting paradox often encountered in curriculum development, namely that the variables highlighted by a needs analysis often fall short in identifying and emphasising major trends and requirements in the teaching of a specific subject. This applied specifically to Information and Computer Technology with the results that we often have to rely on specialist input when designing learning programmes and curricula for the future.

Emphasising the importance of a Learning Management System (LMS) as a means to more effective teaching and learning in an e-learning environment, Van Dyk illustrates in the article – *Assessment through Learning Management Systems* – the utilisation of WebCT assessment tools and shares the successes and frustrations of the system. The article reflects on both literature findings related to the application of WebCT as well as on action research experiences sprouting from programmes utilising WebCT at institutional level. Attention is focused on initial poor command and understanding of WebCT as assessment tool as well as the application

of its functions during assessment and evaluation. The findings of Van Dyk support the classical notion that the use of ICT during teaching and learning is not necessarily hampered by restricted and limiting technological skills. The problem is much deeper and the solution should be sought in a sound educational understanding of the assessment processes and ability to link a technology and its applications to the learning outcomes associated with performance.

Potgieter provides a well-argued theoretical discussion on the misunderstandings and misconceptions regarding 'learnerships' in general and the importance of this practice to the training of educators at higher education institutions in South Africa. His differentiation between learnerships and traditional apprenticeships are informative, as well as his attempts to justify the practice as mode of delivery. Potgieter identifies six principles as conditions for the implementation of learnerships in South Africa. These principles have to be interpreted in conjunction with the main objectives driving the National Skills Strategy and be assessed against the national targets set by the National Skills Development Strategy. The article *Phantom ship or ferryboat? Understanding the mystery of learnerships and assessing the realities* once again reiterates the shortage of English and mathematics educators and suggests what role learnerships could play in alleviating this problem. His suggestion that learnerships should coincide with and run alongside the traditional and conventional workplace-based or school-based teacher education programmes is a logical challenge to by institutions of higher learning.