

FOREWORD: ASSESSMENT LITERACY

Consensus is rare in education. People disagree about what students should learn, how they should be taught, how we should find out what students know, and even about the ways that we can find answers to these questions. Indeed, it may not be an overstatement to say that there is not a single fact in education that would be agreed as true by everyone. Of course, some accounts, views, or claims are more coherent than others, or accord better with empirical observations. However, in general there is an acceptance that in education, opinions, beliefs, and values matter.

This is why assessment is such a challenging field for most people, because, in some aspects of assessment at least, there is a great deal of science underlying the claims that we make about what students know. In assessment, it is possible to say things that are not just unpopular, or lack widespread support, but that are flat-out wrong.

And this is why the idea of assessment literacy is so important. People who use assessments need to understand what the results of assessments *mean*, and also, what assessments *do* to those involved in the assessment process. In other words, assessment literacy has both *evidential* and *consequential* aspects (Messick, 1989). These two aspects were incorporated by Richard Stiggins (1991) into his two key questions of assessment literacy:

What does this assessment tell students about the achievement outcomes we value?

What is likely to be the effect of this assessment on students?

(Stiggins, 1991: 535)

Such a definition, while useful, tells only part of the story, because the results of assessments are used to make a range of decisions, from what kinds of activities would be most beneficial for learners to undertake next, through to whether a particular individual should be allowed to fly a commercial airliner or practise as a surgeon.

This is recognized in a more comprehensive definition of assessment literacy, proposed by Norman Webb (2002), which has three main elements:

the knowledge of means for assessing what students know and can do, how to interpret the results from these assessments, and how to apply these results to improve student learning and program effectiveness.

(Webb, 2002: 1)

More recently, others have proposed a range of definitions of assessment literacy. In particular, some have argued that learners also need to be assessment literate, but this raises significant problems of its own. If we have a single definition of assessment literacy, then we make unreasonable demands on learners because they would need a level of technical skill that is normally expected only of assessment specialists. In my view, the only sensible response, therefore is to accept that assessment literacy has to be a multifaceted, multilayered concept – we need different definitions of assessment literacy for different people, depending on their role.

We are currently a long way from understanding what this might mean in practice, but the papers in this special issue make valuable contributions to a much-needed debate about what assessment literacy might mean in practice, and how we might assess it. Three of the papers are focused on higher education, and in particular highlight the challenges that higher education

institutions have faced as they have explored ways in which assessment might support learning, as well as measuring its extent.

The paper by Lees and Anderson highlights how the way that teachers in higher education understand assessment constrains the way they make sense of new assessment policies and practices. The paper by Forsyth *et al.* describes the introduction of new assessment procedures on an institution-wide basis and in particular highlights a tension intrinsic to higher education, which is the desire to allow assessors to make complex, nuanced judgements about students' work while at the same time providing students with clear assessment frameworks.

The paper by Medland brings to the fore the difficulty of assessing assessment literacy, not least because of its contested nature. External examiners routinely draw attention to certain feature of the programmes they are examining, and fail to mention others, but what we are entitled to conclude from this is far from clear. Did they fail to mention certain aspects of the programme because of a narrow view of assessment literacy, or because they thought it was outside their remit as an external examiner?

The other two papers in this special issue focus on younger students, where, in most countries, the assessment of student achievement is undertaken by an external agency, rather than the teacher. This has advantages, in that the teacher has a much 'purer' role – supporting the student in doing as well as possible on the external assessment – but also presents significant challenges. Both the paper by Dann and the paper by Nadeem illustrate the crucial point demonstrated by Kluger and DeNisi (1996) but so often ignored by researchers: the only thing that really matters with feedback is what the learner does with it. The paper by Dann focuses on how students understand the 'gap' between where they are in their learning, and the expectations of their teacher about where they need to be, while the paper by Nadeem explores how students make sense of oral and written feedback. Both illustrate how challenging it is for teachers to help students understand where they are in their learning, and what they need to do to move on.

The papers presented in this special issue are more a source of questions than of answers, but by continuing a debate about what assessment literacy could, and should, mean, it is likely that we will be able to deepen our understanding of the power of assessment to improve, and not just measure, learning.

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References

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