

ASSESSMENT AND ADULT LITERACY

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In my experience, the enthusiastic teacher does not want to test. He is anxious to teach and to encourage his students to use their learning. He does not want to waste time on arid testing which will merely tell him what he knows already, which may discourage the less successful students and which will not provide a useful challenge to the more successful.

I do not know about your countries but in mine, students in adult literacy programmes need no artificial encouragements in the form of test scores, no artificial threats in the form of arbitrary examinations. Why then should we bother with testing? Is it not just an impediment to our work?

But is testing just an impediment to learning? If so why is it so wide-spread? Let me give you an example.

This little test (SCRE 1976) was first published by my Council over 40 years ago. It has been revised and re-normed many times since but it remains essentially the same test that we published in 1938. (Vernon 1938). It is still used in a third of all English primary schools and fifteen per cent of secondary schools (and incidentally, one of its competitors is used in the others). It is widely used in other English speaking countries. We received a request this year for it to be revised again for continued use in New Zealand. That followed a recent revision of the test for use in Canada. Why do teachers of reading find it useful to use such tests?

One reason is that a test provides a target, sets a standard. You may know that golf originated in Scotland and that in golf one has a "handicap", a statement which represents one current level of skill in the game. Golf players play against their "handicap". That is they are constantly trying to improve their performance. There is a known criterion, a known standard which tells them whether or not they are improving. These are not school children, they are adults, voluntarily taking part in an activity they enjoy. What applies in golf applies in the academic field. A standard provides a target.

I was talking recently to a young idealistic teacher who had been abroad teaching English as a foreign language. He had not believed in tests or examinations. He

merely wanted his students to learn because it was important to them. He tried to make their lessons as exciting and stimulating as he could but, since they were all adults and had all chosen to come to the course, he relied on their intrinsic motivation.

It is part of that system to enter students in an examination which is set from London. He played down the importance of this examination. He told his students that the examination did not matter. What did matter was whether they would be able to read the business letters that they would receive in English or carry on a social conversation. The students nodded their heads in agreement. They carried out the tasks he assigned and did the necessary preparation, but, as the time of the examination approached, the students became more interested. They were more conscientious in their attendance at class. They were more assiduous in completing their exercises. They worked harder and, like athletes, trained for the great occasion when they could demonstrate their prowess.

That situation is not very different from our own in Adult Literacy Programmes. We too are dealing with adults, adults who have a motivation which arises from their own circumstances and not one that is imposed on them arbitrarily. Yet the examination served as a target and a stimulus. Is the same true of our students? Would a test be a stimulus for them too?

This seems to me the least important of the reasons for giving a test. There are other, and in my opinion, more important reasons for assessment. One is to indicate to the students their level of competence so that they know whether they are in a position to proceed or whether they need further work at their current level.

You may well say that for most students in an Adult Literacy Programme that this does not apply. Why should they want to know their level of competence? Surely they know that they can read those things they wish to read, whether it is the instructions on a bag of fertiliser or a newspaper or a book. That of course is the real test. Have we succeeded in teaching students to

read those things that they want to read? If not, we have failed.

In one sense then no formal test is necessary. All that our students need to do, is to try out their newly acquired skills in a practical situation. But how do they know whether they are reading correctly the material that is before them? When my children were small we lived in Canada. I do not know what the situation is in your country but there, children's toys arrived in a kit form. I used to spend Christmas Eve assembling tricycles or dolls houses ready to put at the foot of their beds. The instructions for these toys came in the form of plans and diagrams which I read very poorly. It always seemed to me clear what I should be doing but as I went through the task of assembling their toys not only did I lose a great deal of skin from my knuckles and a small amount of blood but I learned that I had misread the blue prints that were before me. I knew I was wrong only because the toy would not go together or when it was assembled would not work in the way that it should.

Few of our students in Adult Literacy Programmes have this kind of direct test of their reading skill. How do they know whether their reading is accurate or not? How do they know whether they are applying the right fertiliser in the right way? How do they know whether they have understood the newspaper correctly?

It seems to me that it is a responsibility of the teacher to help his students to know what their actual level of achievement is. Whether they are likely to misunderstand and so poison their crops rather than feed them. Our students are for the most part enthusiastic and ambitious. Perhaps over-enthusiastic, perhaps over-ambitious, so that they try to go beyond the limit of their actual skills. This of course is to be praised but not encouraged because of the consequences that may follow.

If there are so many teachers and so few students that it is possible to work individually and systematically with each one through every learning task that they encounter until we are absolutely certain of their competence then of course there is no need for a test. Personally, I have never encountered a situation like that. I have always found that there is need for the teacher to go beyond his own inaccurate impressions to a formal assessment procedure which provides a check for his professional judgement. I have great faith in my family doctor. However, I expect him to use the appropriate tests. At its simplest level I expect him to judge my temperature if I am ill, not by looking at me or placing his hand on my forehead but by using a thermometer. It seems to me that the teacher in a literacy programme has the same responsibility to his students. He should not be content with an impression but should use the most accurate and refined tools which are available to him and like any good professional he should be contributing to the development of those tools.

It is for diagnostic purposes that tests devised for specific objectives are important. I do not speak Portuguese or Spanish so I cannot select examples from your languages, but in English and in French we find that students' errors are not random, once they are beyond the initial stages of learning. We find that there are consis-

tent errors. These are based on misunderstandings, that is students consistently misread some combinations of letters and therefore misunderstand what they are reading, or they are based on ignorance, that is there are certain principles which the students have not yet learned. As I said I must give you examples in English. For example, the letter E after the letter C turns it from a 'k' sound to an 's' sound. Students who do not know this misread words. Others have difficulty with combinations of letters particularly combinations of vowels, ae, ie, and so on. Others have simply not learned to recognise particular letters or confuse similar letters for instance, a 'b' and a 'd' or an 'r' and an 's'. For this diagnostic purpose we need tests which are designed to provide information both to students and teachers on the specific skills which pupils still need to develop.

Equally important to my mind is testing to indicate to the teacher how successful he has been and conversely what his failures have been. It is easy for us to be impressed by the apparent success of pupils or depressed by their apparent failure, but our impressions are not enough. We need to follow a systematic process of obtaining sound information as the basis for future actions.

It is common in the philosophy of science to distinguish between knowledge which is based upon impression and knowledge which is based upon systematic investigation. If we are to be fair to our students we must ensure that the techniques we employ, the materials that we use, are subject to evaluation which is rigorous and systematic and not based on mere impression.

You are no doubt aware of the procedure that is used in the preparation of tests for this purpose. First there is the definition of aims which are general, then the specification of objectives which are precise and particular, and finally the assessment. We find that this procedure is like the syllogism in logic. It is a good post hoc test but not a good guide to thinking.

We have found in our studies that a good teacher knows in an informal way what he wishes to achieve and indeed how he is to achieve it. He only knows this though after some experience with the course that he is teaching. Aims and objectives which are laid down in advance often prove to be unattainable in practice. It is only after we have had some considerable experience that we are in a position to know what aims are reasonable and what objectives are practicable.

Our approach in recent years has been to launch into a programme in a more pragmatic way. We know in a general way what it is we wish to achieve. We choose the materials and methods that we are going to use. However, when the field is a new one we anticipate that we will have to make many adaptations. We find for example that in practice there is frequently a conflict between our general aims and our specific objectives.

When I was involved some years ago in a programme teaching reading to illiterate and educationally deprived adults, the students were taught to decipher letters and words but we were not concerned with the extent to which they had understood the meaning of the text. Certainly the students were delighted that they could translate the hitherto meaningless ciphers into

sounds but no thought had been given to the extent to which they could read the material that they would encounter in the course of their daily lives. The objective was clear. It was to be able to decipher our difficult English words but we had lost sight of the major aim which was to have a useful skill.

These students could "read" English without understanding it in the way that I learned to "read" Latin as a small boy so that I could serve Mass.

By contrast I visited a group where the teacher was delighted when one of her students saw the word "Lux" and read it as "soap". The point was that this student had understood what reading was about and knew what the word meant in a practical context even if it was technically misread. The second kind of reading was not in accord with the specific objectives of the course but certainly it was in accord with the general aims.

We find incidentally that this kind of conflict is not restricted to the basic skills but extends throughout the curriculum of the secondary school. We were investigating recently the teaching of Home Economics to older students in our secondary schools. The aims were appropriate, for example, an understanding of the importance of a balanced diet. The objective in practice was the ability to write down the vitamin content and the calorific value of certain common foods even though the students did not know which vitamins or in what quantity they were essential for a satisfactory diet. Thus the objective might be achieved but the aim would not.

The preparation of satisfactory tests them must follow and not precede the teaching in any programme, particularly in a basic literacy programme. What we need to do is devise tests which reflect our general aims whatever they may be. When I was teaching in an Adult Literacy Programme some years ago I used as a basis for my tests, materials taken from the popular press as well as selections from the technical manuals which these men were required to read. My aims were two-fold, technical and cultural, and I wanted assessment procedures which would let me know how successful I was being in achieving both of these aims.

We need to know as teachers also the effectiveness of specific methods and materials. Now it may be that materials are for the most part prescribed and we have very little choice, but in many circumstances we have a choice of additional materials which we may choose to use; books, newspapers, magazines. We can form impressions of the success of our materials from the reactions of our students. The problem with this kind of unsystematic assessment is that we are often misled by a conspicuous reaction. One or two students may be very enthusiastic about a particular set of materials and that may blind us to the fact that a larger group are not interested or perhaps are even confused by these particular materials. Unless we devise a test we will not be sure either of the response of the students or of the extent to which they have accurately interpreted the particular material that was used. Without a structured test of comprehension we are likely to base our decisions on inaccurate impressions. Only systematic assessment will tell us whether any particular set of materials is a satisfactory vehicle for teaching a particular group of students.

Let me give you an example from outside the field of reading. In a country where the level of education in the countryside had in the past been low, particularly the education of girls, a reformed curriculum which included Physics was presenting considerable difficulty. The girls seemed to have some problem in understanding basic laws of mechanics. In a male-dominated society this was attributed to an innate sex difference. However, the test scores were analysed and it was found that it was only when the teaching was oriented to male experiences and to an urban environment that the girls did poorly. When the teaching materials were re-written to draw examples from the girls own experience, for instance, drawing water from wells, the principles were more easily acquired and could be applied to a wide range of circumstances all of which previously appeared to be beyond their abilities. General impressions were misleading. Carefully devised tests provided crucial information about teaching materials.

The same is true of reading material. Materials which contain words, phrases or concepts which are familiar to one group but unfamiliar to another will put additional difficulties in the way of some readers. I am not saying that reading for farmers should be restricted to material about the countryside. Rather I am saying that unfamiliar words and phrases will present unnecessary additional difficulties especially in the initial stages. I understand for example, that the Eskimo of Northern Canada do not have a word for snow. They have sixteen words, each of which refers to different kinds or conditions of snow. You may know that there is no French word for sport. The French have words for different sporting activities, but "sport" is an Anglo-Saxon concept. My point is simply that those of us from outside do not know the limitations or indeed the richnesses of other people's worlds. We cannot assume that materials or techniques devised for one group will be effective with another. We must evaluate all our materials and procedures systematically for the particular group we are working with.

If testing is used in the ways I have described it is not a weapon, it is a tool, a means of providing necessary information and support, a way of giving help both to students and to teachers.

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