

SOUND BUT FEASIBLE?

revisiting authentic assessment

The multifaceted debate around educational standards and assessment has taken a notable turn. In recent decades, there is a renewed interest in assessment instruments known as 'authentic assessment', comprising elements markedly similar to outcomes-based assessment. *Ke Yu and George Frempong* take a critical look at the advantages and disadvantages inherent in this form of assessment.

Teachers have always used classroom tests and quizzes to check the progress of learners. When the stakes are higher, for example when a learner's fitness for graduation must be determined, an external test is usually administered.

External and highly standardised tests are often considered to be more efficient and cost-effective. Among the criticisms of this form of traditional assessment, the chief argument questions its validity in that it may not truly reflect learner competence. There are also doubts whether these tests, particularly when they involve mainly multiple-choice questions, could adequately assess higher-order thinking rather than merely rote learning and fact recall. These tests also often come at a high price, such as exacerbating exam anxiety and promoting the teach-to-test syndrome.

Birth of the 'authentic' assessment

These concerns have led to the search for an alternative form of assessment and the birth of the 'authentic assessment' movement. Authentic assessment is a collective term referring mainly to diversification of assessment tools (tests, observations, portfolios, performance, projects, self-assessments, peer assessments and others). Although the concept itself is under constant redefinition, it is generally agreed that it presents assessment tasks in



Do classroom tests adequately assess higher-order thinking rather than merely rote learning and fact recall?

real-world problem contexts; the assessment is continuously re-distributing the high stakes involved in single assessments, and emphasises using the assessment to promote and facilitate learning instead of using it mainly for evaluation and monitoring purposes.

Authentic assessment involves promoting and facilitating learning instead of using it mainly for evaluation and monitoring purposes.

Grant Wiggins, an internationally recognised expert who has been working in assessment reform for more than 25 years, stresses the importance of recognising that competency is context-bound. To assume that all learners everywhere have the same 'knowledge' is to short-circuit a vital educational dialogue in a pluralistic and diverse society.

Authentic assessment not widely implemented

However, despite the apparent logic underpinning this new form of assessment, despite various degrees of policy alignment in this regard, school leaving certificates in most countries still rely largely on traditional single, external and large-scale assessments. Some countries have also experienced a notable counter movement that promotes more centrally controlled, larger national assessments.

Classroom practices, according to many scholars, have also mainly manifested rigid application of certain practices, like compiling portfolios or using open-ended questions to replace multiple-choice ones, failing to reflect the true essence of the new assessment that aims at facilitating learning. The question is, why?

Issues of reliability, accountability and cost-effectiveness

We argue that despite the obvious advantages of authentic assessment, it has not sufficiently addressed the reasons why traditional assessment has been widely used in the first place, namely, the concern over accountability, reliability, cost-effectiveness and competition.

Accountability, inevitably due to increasing pressure to demonstrate tax revenue, calls for benchmarks and common platforms where the functioning of schools, districts and provinces within the system can be monitored and their accountability demonstrated.

Reliability manifests in two ways. The first relates to teachers' objectivity, judgement error and bias that could have been exacerbated by the external accountability pressure. The second is a wide-spread observation that although teachers know the learners better and are therefore logically in a better position to provide accurate assessments, many are inadequately trained or ill-prepared for designing, conducting and recording assessments, particularly authentic assessments.

The increasing mobility of the world population is accompanied by pressures to standardise educational and qualification systems, including assessment systems, to facilitate education credit transfer, as well as to demonstrate the quality and competitiveness of a system to potentially attract pupils.

Individualisation vs. competition

The prominence given to individualisation under authentic assessment implies that the more comparison and competition is removed from assessment opportunities, the more the focus could shift to progress rather than achievement or failure alone. However, competition is often believed to bring out the best in pupils. The removal of comparison and competition does not prepare learners for a society in which comparison and competition are the norm.

A deliberate avoidance of comparison could also provide weaker learners with excuses not to catch up, turning a social into an educational disadvantage, with the vicious circle of low expectation and low achievement. Meanwhile, the key danger in the area of competition, which is not competition itself, but rather lack of provision of support to the less competitive, is often not adequately examined, not only diverting the quest to facilitate healthy competition but also running the risk of missing the target completely.

Individualised assessment also means more work for the teachers. The perceived extra work and time required for the authentic assessment are regularly cited as the most important reason for its failure to be implemented in the classrooms. To expect a teacher to prepare individually-tailored assessments and to use that information to inform instruction is to expect individual tutoring.

This is in direct contradiction to the important aim of education in the current age: namely education for all, targeting the inclusion of the largest number of learners so no-one is left behind. In addition, complexity – developing routine and habit – has been continuously identified as an important feature of classroom teaching. This again is at odds with the individualised element implied by authentic assessment.

Inherent limitations in authentic assessment

Because of these reasons, we caution authentic assessment advocates to recognise the limitations of such a movement, and to address the important practical issues before advocating this form of assessment. Some of the practical matters we outlined include further exploration of the optimal balance between applied and abstract knowledge; the possibility of developing better authenticity in standardised tests, for example multiple choice questions that require high order thinking; engage in discussions on how to judge the quality of various authentic assessment activities; the quality of the teaching force, particularly in terms of their assessment skills; and the time teachers needed to implement authentic assessment.

There should also be greater clarity and explicit guidelines on the following questions:

- Should a teacher use the same or different assessment tools to collect various outputs?
- Should teachers vary the ways they record and report assessment information for each student?
- How long should assessment records be kept?

In summary, although authentic assessment sounds appealing, many theoretical and practical factors as outlined could hinder its wider application in education systems as well as in classroom practices. Because of this, we argue that some of these concerns should be addressed first for authentic assessment to acquire greater legitimacy and realising its potential.

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