Curriculum and Assessment

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Edited by David Scott

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Series Foreword

The purpose of the series *International Perspectives on Curriculum Studies* is to provide scholarly and authoritative debate about current curriculum issues. The series includes overviews of research in this area, examination of theoretical models and principles, discussion of the work of key curriculum theorists, and the reporting of new empirical research. Contributors to the various volumes in the series are not asked to provide definitive answers to questions that theorists and practitioners working in this field are asking. What they have been asked to do is to critically assess ways of thinking, influential models and current policy initiatives that relate to the curriculum.

The curriculum is defined in its widest sense, and it refers to programs of teaching and learning which take place in formal settings. Examples of formal settings are schools, colleges and universities. A curriculum may refer to a system, as in a national curriculum, an institution, as in the school curriculum, or even to an individual school, as in the school geography curriculum. The four dimensions of curriculum are: aims and objectives, content or subject matter, methods or procedures, and evaluation or assessment. The first refers to the reasons for including specific items in the curriculum and excluding others. The second refers to the knowledge, skills or dispositions which are implicit in the choice of items, and the way that they are arranged. Objectives may be understood as broad general justifications for including particular items and particular pedagogical processes in the curriculum; or as clearly defined and closely delineated outcomes or behaviors; or as a set of appropriate procedures or experiences. The third dimension is methods or procedures and this refers to pedagogy and is determined by choices made about the first two dimensions. The fourth dimension is assessment or evaluation and this refers to the means for

determining whether the curriculum has been successfully implemented. A range of issues have been surfaced and debated in relation to these four dimensions.

The series focuses on these issues and debates. The first volume examines the relationship between curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, and, as with subsequent volumes, adopts a cross-sector and comparative approach. This series is timely as administrators and policy-makers in different parts of the world have taken an increased interest in education, and as moves to centralize curriculum provision have gathered pace. This has in some cases driven a wedge between curriculum theory and curriculum practice, as policymakers have developed and implemented proposals without referring to academic debates about these issues. It therefore seems to be an important task to reassert the need to discuss and debate the curriculum in a critical manner before implementation occurs. This series will attempt this difficult, but much needed, task.

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Introduction

David Scott

This volume examines the relationship between curriculum and assessment, and adopts a comparative and cross-sector approach. Contributors present cases from England (e.g., Black, Elwood, Scott and Lunt, and Wiliam), Scotland (e.g., Harlen, and Simpson), France (e.g., Broadfoot et al.), Hong Kong (e.g., Klenowski), and the United States (e.g., Nitko). They also focus on primary (e.g., Harlen, Simpson, Broadfoot et al., and Black), secondary (e.g., Harlen, Elwood, Black, and Wiliam), post-compulsory (e.g., Harlen), and university (e.g., Scott and Lunt, and Klenowski) sectors of education systems. This is deliberate as the debates about assessment and curriculum rehearsed in this volume refer to education systems round the world and to their various parts.

Some of the debates referred to in this volume are:

- Summative versus formative assessment;
- Differentiation versus inclusion;
- Psychometric frameworks of assessment versus holistic frameworks;
- Decontextualized versus contextualized assessments;
- Symbol-processing approaches to learning versus situated cognitionist approaches to learning;
- Integrated versus connected assessments;
- High stakes assessment versus low stakes assessment.

The contributors come with a wide range of perspectives and from different backgrounds. The rationale for this volume is not to reach an agreement about

assessment and curriculum frameworks, but to air the various debates referred to above and develop new frameworks for understanding these important issues.

Paul Black in chapter two examines formative assessment and identifies the consequences of adopting such systems for the development of the curriculum. He uses a wide definition of curriculum, so that it embraces content, learning in schools, and other dimensions of the educational process. Reviewing four significant research projects, he concludes that effective learning includes enhanced feedback to students from their teachers, active involvement by those students in their learning, and adjustments by teachers as a response to formative feedback. He argues that these processes help poor attainers more than the rest and thus reduce the spread of attainment within the institution concerned.

He is pessimistic about the adoption by teachers in the United Kingdom of procedures that are genuinely formative, and suggests that this may be as a result of current models of pedagogy in use. He argues that: "a transmission model does not call for frequent interaction," and frequency of interaction is one marker of adopting formative assessment procedures. In relation to this, Black identifies three approaches to learning theory: the behaviorist, the constructivist, and the situated cognitionist, and discusses these in relation to his central theme. He identifies four examples of the contribution that formative assessment can make to learning: the capacity of the student to work strategically by clarifying aims and present understandings; the development of habits of productive engagement in dialogue; the promotion of task-related feedback; and the enhancement of the confidence of students to tackle tasks that are beyond their present capabilities. His argument is that the development of these capacities cannot take place in learning situations that ignore the contextualized nature of learning.

Mary Simpson in chapter three examines the issue of differentiation and how it relates to the curriculum in Scottish schools. She identifies two models of differentiation: the "measure and match" model and the "pick and mix" model. The first of these is understood as incorporating a number of principles: pupils have fixed general capacities; these general capacities can be measured; a match can be effectively made between pupils' performances and levels of difficulty of curricular material; and this process of matching can be further fine-tuned through summative assessment. On the other hand, the "pick and mix" model is understood as comprising the following principles: the competencies of pupils are influenced by a variety of alterable factors; levels of performance in the classroom will be influenced by these factors; therefore, the teacher is confronted with a range of different pupil needs; and as a result, differentiated materials and support needs to be provided to address these different needs.

In line with Black (see above), she suggests that most of the research conducted in this field would indicate that pupils understand that their achievements are not as good as they could be, and that what is needed is a flow of individually tailored assessment information that provides feedback on their performance. She also suggests that teachers in Scotland are attempting to operate

in this way, though there are formidable obstacles to the general application of the principles she advocates.

Patricia Broadfoot, Marilyn Osborn, Keith Sharpe, and Claire Planel in chapter four offer a comparative analysis of assessment practices in English and French primary schools. Their focus is the way that assessment impacts on the learning processes of students and they suggest that there has been a relative dearth of studies about this important aspect of learning. They also suggest that assessment is the most influential of the three message systems in the classroom, the other two being curriculum and pedagogy. Their central thesis is that in order to understand how particular assessment practices impact on learning, they must be studied in the context of the more general cultural setting in which the interaction between teacher and pupil takes place.

Such study, they argue, "must start from a recognition that any assessment act—formal or informal, covert or overt, formative or summative—is a process of interaction, a form of communication typically, but not always, between pupil and teacher, that is vulnerable to misinterpretation as any other type of social intercourse." In particular, they examine in this chapter the linguistic or communicative dimension of assessment, and conclude that assessment practices convey particular cultural messages, as exemplified in their two comparative case studies.

Portfolio assessment forms the major theme of Val Klenowski's chapter and she illustrates her argument with frequent references to its use across a number of countries, but in particular, to teacher training in Hong Kong. She argues that portfolio assessment has been developed and used for a number of different purposes: summative description, certification or selection, support for teaching and learning, appraisal or promotion, and professional development. Furthermore, portfolio assessment incorporates three important learning processes: self-evaluation, substantive conversation, and reflective practice. She therefore, as other authors in this volume have done, ties closely together assessment and learning; indeed, she understands the process of completing a portfolio as central to teaching and learning in a range of different contexts.

However, she identifies a tension between their use as instruments for enhancing learning and their use as summative documents for accountability purposes. In particular, she suggests that portfolio assessment may become detached from learning processes if it is used in contexts that are examination driven and highly regulated. As she argues in relation to the current situation in England with regards to teacher training, the use of portfolios may be counterproductive because systems that are even now being set in place are antithetical to the development of more generative and open methods of assessment that could underpin good teaching.

Jannette Elwood in chapter six analyzes issues of validity and how it effects pupils' performances in examinations. Her chapter in particular makes reference to two important debates. The first of these is the debate between those who favor psychometric and technical frameworks for understanding assessment processes

and those who wish to replace such frameworks, because they believe them to be inadequate to new tasks and new assessment arrangements, with more holistic and integrated approaches.

The second debate concerns the issue of contextualization in assessment. For Elwood, all assessments are located in specific and particular contexts; in other words, assessment practices are not and cannot be technical devices that are socially neutral, but are social techniques that have social consequences. In her chapter, she explores the implications of this in relation to three important assessment devices: coursework, differentiated levels of entry into the examination for students, and choice of items in examinations. She concludes that examinations are socially constructed, and that the choices made by examiners can impact negatively on specific sub-groups of examinees and hence place them at a disadvantage. Given the importance attached to examinations in modern societies, this has potentially disastrous consequences, since the point she is making is that it is not the learning experiences of children, which in this case contribute to their disadvantage in later life, but the assessment processes which they undergo.

David Scott and Ingrid Lunt in chapter seven examine the introduction of taught doctorates in the United Kingdom, conscious all the time that the United States and Australia have been at the forefront of this development for some time. Their chapter reprises a theme developed by Broadfoot et al. in this volume, which is that of the three message systems that structure educational activities and systems, assessment is the most influential and the most important. By adopting a framework of weak and strong framing and applying it to the academic/practitioner divide that they understand as the principle tension within taught doctorates, they show how curricula can only be understood by looking at the wider picture, and that power is ever present in assessment and learning settings.

Wynne Harlen in chapter eight describes and analyzes an educational system in its entirety and one that is undergoing substantial changes to the way it is organized. Her example is from Scotland, which has a different system from the other parts of the United Kingdom. She characterizes the system as: nonstatutory and implemented by consent; allowing for a lengthy change process where change is achieved, as far as possible, by consensus; able to cater for a full range of abilities and needs; outcome-based; broad, balanced, coherent, and progressive.

She argues that there is a strong interaction between curriculum and assessment; the main characteristics of the latter being: criterion-referenced; dependence on teacher assessment; comprehensiveness, in that all the intended learning outcomes are assessed; formative and summative with neither dominating the other; and target setted. She concludes by sounding a warning that an over-emphasis on external testing may hinder the development of proper learning, and thus she echoes two of the principal themes of this volume: the tension between external and internal accountability systems and the tension between assessments that are formative, integrated and productive of learning

and assessments that are summative, intended to raise standards, and have high stakes attached to them.

In chapter nine, Anthony Nitko takes a broader perspective on issues related to assessment and the curriculum. In particular, he suggests that assessment developers need to be aware of appropriate ways of identifying weaknesses to their assessment frameworks and as a result improving them. He presents a particular model for evaluating these frameworks, the Capacity Maturity Model, and in addition, provides a discussion of what quality assessment means. In it he focuses on the quality of interpretations made by assessors and how that assessment information is used. He further develops a generalizability theory to identify the impact of multiple sources of measurement error. The chapter concludes with a discussion of a developmental framework that examines problem-solving along a dimension of novice to expert.

The final chapter by Dylan Wiliam provides an overview of the relationship between assessment and the curriculum. In particular, Wiliam focuses on one of the tensions identified at the beginning of this introduction: between formative and summative forms of assessment. Referring to assessment systems at the national level, he identifies three possibilities: (1) teachers are not involved in summatively assessing their students; (2) teachers are not involved in formatively assessing their students; and (3) ways of ameliorating the tension between summative and formative functions of assessment are developed. Having rejected the first two of these as unacceptable, he proceeds to sketch out an argument in support of the third. Rejecting the idea that the formative/summative distinction applies to the assessment itself, he argues that it really only applies to the way the information that is collected is used. This allows him to develop his thesis that systems that are designed to be both formative and summative can be internally coherent. Though he accepts that the tension between the two will always be there, he suggests that it can be mitigated to some extent.

These then are short accounts of the contents of each chapter. They provide a flavor of the arguments and debates that are present in the field of curriculum and, in particular, in the field of assessment. What this volume has suggested, both in terms of the way it has been structured and in terms of its contents, is that assessment cannot be separated from teaching and learning, and is an implicit part of the curriculum. There has in recent times been a tendency to treat assessment as a decontextualized and technical issue. The intention of this volume is to show that this approach is misguided in two senses. The first is that choices made by assessors have pedagogic and curriculum consequences. The second is that frameworks for understanding assessment issues are themselves social artifacts and cannot provide neutral descriptions of the processes they refer to. The contributions in this volume are designed to broaden our understanding of these important issues.