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Student constructs, alternative pedagogies and assessment dilemmas

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Abstract: This paper reports on students responses to assessment work associated with an alternative curriculum and pedagogical approach within a compulsory unit of a second-degree teacher education program. The unit had an enrolment of approximately 800 students and allowed students to explore their conceptual basis of curriculum and assessment and the relationship between each. For the main assessment within the unit students were given choice not only of content focus within the broad area of curriculum and/or assessment, but were also allowed choice regarding the mode of expression used for the presentation of this assignment. The assessment product was to be presented as a potential professional portfolio artifact. The choice of learning representation/ assessment product was not restricted to text-based presentations but also symbolic, artistic, performance, multi media or any other mode that individual students felt best enabled them to best present their ideas. The approach greatly motivated students and they produced a wide variety of product for assessment. However, this variety led to assessment dilemmas for staff involved. This paper will track student responses to the notion of learning identity and choice and detail the resultant assessment dilemmas.

Keywords: Assessment; teacher education; pedagogy

Introduction and background

Over the last decade in educational research and practice several initially discrete trends have intersected to result in manifestations of strategy, policy and practice. One such intersection is between authentic or performance teaching, learning and assessment models and more predetermined outcomes-based education frameworks. Such outcomes-based approaches are built upon the premise that significant learning outcomes and priorities are predetermined and therefore foreseeable before any learning or assessment has taken place. Authentic learning models presume that each individual student will make their own construction of understandings resulting in more personal, unique and less predictable learning outcomes. Various alternative approaches to curriculum and assessment have been suggested and trialed with a common focus of allowing the curriculum to be more based on students “actively constructing mental models” (MacLellan, 2004, 311). Although this research and trialing has been undertaken within school contexts in the main, rather than higher education ones, they do propose some pedagogical and assessment questions that those operating within higher education, especially teacher education, cannot ignore. A review of pedagogical and contemporary assessment principles and recommendations arising from school education or higher education reflect very similar themes and assertions (University of Melbourne, 2002; Department of Education and Training Victoria, 2006). Some resolution of these issues is particularly important within teacher education given that recommendations from various reviews, including a parliamentary one in Victoria (Victorian Parliament, 2005) criticize teacher education practices as being ‘out of touch’ with 21st century current educational developments. The implications are not just of concern to the domain of teacher education however, there are questions and consequences arising from these challenges that impact on pedagogy and assessment decisions within any context.

Alternative assessment methods such as “performance assessment, authentic assessment, direct assessment, constructive assessment and embedded assessment” have been developed to support student construct models of learning (MacLellan, 2004, 312). One such assessment tool arising from these approaches is the student portfolio as a representation of student learning (Hay and Moss, 2005). A portfolio framework was chosen for the student work developed within the study described in this paper partially because it is the one currently employed across Australia to evaluate teachers for registration purposes (Victorian Institute of Teachers, 2006). Although the students were not asked to produce a completed portfolio, they were asked to assume the work they produced might well become part of a developing professional portfolio, that is, an item or artefact within it. The students had in an earlier semester completed some work including an elaboration of their developing professional selves by comparing personal learning experiences against accepted learning theories. The portfolio entries assessed within this unit were to be an extension of this earlier work moving from a learning theory focus into the domains of curriculum and assessment.

In the earlier pedagogy unit students had considered the notion of learner identity and diversity within conceptual frameworks such as Gardners’ multiple intelligences (1983; 1993) and had explored implications for pedagogical practices and decisions. Within the curriculum and assessment unit they were invited to consider this diversity of learning and understanding theories in conjunction with curriculum constructions and assessment practices.

If we assume such diversity of learning has any basis, regardless of how such intelligences or preferences are classified, one clear implication is that not only do we not all approach and express things in the same way but we do not even conceptualise things in the same way. Conceptualisation itself becomes a uniquely individual process. Gardner (1983; 1993) termed these differing intelligences ‘frames of mind’. If we all operate with different ‘frames of mind’, no matter how they are classified, then what is happening when an artefact (or an event, or some form of personal representation of self or ideas) is developed and used for assessment purposes? Does the ‘frame of mind’ of the producer match that of the assessor. If such profiles truly are individual it clearly will not in total. Multiple translations therefore could well be occurring (and necessary) throughout the assessment process. The work is conceptualised, expressed (in whatever form) and then received and re-conceptualised by the assessor. From this second construction of meaning the assessor makes judgment about the relevance and quality of the work. This of course all occurs after a reverse translation from assessor (or perhaps a third person) to the assessed, of the criteria the work is trying to address and any feedback given. If this interactive complexity is overlaid with the contextual issues within authentic assessments, i.e. that the composer of criteria, the assessed person and the assessor all may function within very different contexts, the complexity of potential multiple meaning making becomes acute. When referring to meaning making in regard to text-based material Doeke & Gill (2000; 2001) state “ as every English literacy teacher knows, meaning does not reside ‘within texts, but is constructed in the process of responding to them, when readers read and then talk with others about their meaning” (p9). This is not true just of written texts but any mode of expression of ideas and within a negotiated process such as presented to students within this unit, meaning construction is going to be complex and multiple, not singular. When an assessment is inviting expression of individual conceptualization, as the portfolio item clearly did, many potential difficulties for assessment arise. If assessment is to be ‘domain aware’ (that is contextualized within learning domains), and ‘intelligence-fair’ (Gardner, 1993) what does that mean for the overall pedagogy and assessment process?

The approach to assessment within this study

The assessment process within this study moved significantly in a direction that invited students to represent themselves as individuals throughout the assessment process and try and portray their personal meaning construction. They chose not only tasks and content focus but the very modes of expression used to communicate these understandings. For many of the students the accepted form of tertiary assignments had been text-based (most commonly some form of essay/paper). For this assessment they were given permission to move outside of this framework, partially or totally. Students were not told that they had to be creative, unique, innovative in their product construction, but were certainly invited to be so and a majority responded.

The students within this study were pre-service teacher education students, already with a first degree representing all disciplines. Possibly more than any other profession teaching crosses into every domain and every intelligence – or at least it should. All students were enrolled as a second degree program and therefore all had demonstrated academic credentials previously in a wide range of domains. Many discipline (or domain) backgrounds were evident in the cohort representing most undergraduate offerings available. The common ground was that all were interested in studying education, most to become teachers. They were invited to represent all, or selected elements from their individual backgrounds in order to represent their current thinking and evolving professional selves.

A review of literature into the nature of professional identity would suggest that any construct that separates teacher as professional and teacher as person may be problematic, if not completely invalid (Sachs, 2001, 2003; Armour & Fernandez-Balboa, 2001; Cochran-Smith, 2001; Gee, 2000, 2001; Wenger, 1998). For this reason students were asked to explore and represent their professional selves and conceptual understandings through a series of personal portfolio items that reflected who they were both as a developing teacher and as an individual and collaborative learner. To this end five items were asked for, one of which was to represent collaborative work involving themselves and at least one other person. Also, at least one item had to be presented in a form not normally associated with their existing discipline background.

To provide some coherent structure to what was to be a range of tasks determined through student negotiation, a professional portfolio framework was used. The term portfolio has a range of interpretations, but most reflect some version of ‘a depository of artefacts’ (Wolf, 1991). One clear issue emerging from the whole portfolio agenda is that there does not exist a clear definition of what a portfolio is nor what assessment procedures for portfolios should be (Benoit & Yang, 1995). The whole issue becomes even less clear as the whole dimension of professionalism and what it is to be a professional enters considerations. Classical definitions of professionalism acknowledge professional knowledge and skill, but also a degree of professional autonomy and altruism, often not evident within competency-based frameworks (or rigid outcomes or standards based ones) being used for teacher assessments. (Locke, 2000; 2001).

A key strength of portfolios as a tool for student, undergraduate and teacher assessments is perceived to be their relative authenticity (Brady, 2000; Payne, 2003; Xu, 2004) although some commentators believe some current teacher assessment frameworks are merely a parody of genuine authenticity (Scriven, 1996). The term authenticity itself is somewhat problematic in terms of definition. Portfolios, it is claimed, can be seen as “performance-based, authentic assessments because they involve collecting information from real-life situations” (Bergen,

1993). Such assertions assume some things about the nature of the ‘artefacts’ that portfolios may contain, but there is no doubt that strategic selection could reflect the situation and constructs of a particular learner, at least in broad terms. However, as the nature, purpose and assessment of the portfolio moves closer to true authenticity and away from a mere checklist of competencies particular assessment dilemmas arise. Attempts to allow greater flexibility in response to standards assessment in the USA have been criticised as ‘too soft; and ‘not sufficiently rigorous’ (Petrosky & Delandshere, 2000; 2001)

As previously mentioned, to develop portfolio items within the context of this unit students were to complete five inter-related tasks. When framing the portfolio process, and to allow maximum flexibility, assessment criteria were divergent and invited a high degree of negotiation, for example the portfolio was described as;

...comprising five separate pieces of work to illustrate the level of their work and thinking on curriculum and assessment throughout the semester. The portfolio will ‘house’ a variety of assessments selected to provide insight into the diversity and quality of each individual students work.

However, the folio was not just an open free-for-all, certain requirements did have to be addressed although students had choice over the contribution each section would make towards their overall grade. They also had choice over how these sections were presented in the final portfolio, some choosing a co-constructed format (that is attempting to address more than one aspect within the single extended entry), others addressing items discreetly. The framework provided for the portfolio item development included such things as:

an entry that weaves curriculum, assessment and teachers’ work into a coherent whole and reflects the interdependent nature of the three,

an entry where the student has thought about curriculum and/or assessment outside of their usual frame, or that is standard/usual for your particular discipline area.

The reason for the second entry listed above was to allow students the experience of producing work in an unaccustomed mode, something they will undoubtedly be requesting of at least some of their students regularly. In developing each of these entries, along with the others required, students were told that three processes were critical, these being, i) collection, ii) selection and, iii) reflection.

Three of the five required items were to be nominated by the student for grading purposes, the remaining two remained “hurdle” requirements.

Many students collapsed the five items into composite items addressing two, three four or even five of the criteria through the one integrated item.

This framework was provided along with assessment criteria that were also selected to allow for maximum students choice regarding not just what they focused upon, but also how they presented their work.

When these criteria were drafted a ‘reflection’ component was to be included and it was assumed that this would probably result in some written annotation on other materials, although this was not specified. What happened in reality was that many students embedded this reflection into the items themselves or negotiated to present it in a non text (for example they utilized sound, visual or multimedia representations) or at least non conventional text way.

Student anxieties, responses and outcomes

As the unit unfolded students went through a period of high anxiety caused by the open nature of the assessment criteria, many made statements such as, “I am not used to this, please just tell me what you want and I will produce it!” (student comment). In response they were told what was wanted was for them to choose how they wished to express their ideas and, if they were uncomfortable with a high degree of risk-taking they could present work in the way they felt comfortable, no matter how conventional. The only caveat on this was that they had to develop at least one item that moved them outside of their usual frame, or what was standard/usual for their familiar discipline area. However even here they did not have to be radical, merely move outside of the usual conventions within their discipline.

During periods of high anxiety, a high degree of trust between staff and students was essential. This was reported by all staff involved in the unit during the early negotiation phase in particular. Staff (Senior and Sanjakdar, 2005) saw elements of Masons (2002) cyclical process of development manifest as students worked their way through the unit and entered unfamiliar territory. Mason describes a cycle of “grumbling, griping, groping, grasping, gripping and grappling” as students come to terms with new and unfamiliar challenges (p.9). There was certainly an anxiety hump evident that almost all experienced and some never resolved. For most however, this anxiety ‘hump’ began to diminish about one third of the way into the unit and had virtually disappeared by the two thirds point. The students who did not resolve it remained within the expected modes of their respective discipline to represent their ideas. This group was a small minority (less than ten percent) of the student cohort. Some who followed this ‘low-risk’ path commented later, after seeing what others had produced, that they wished they had taken the opportunity to be more adventurous. A very small percentage (only one or two) retained the view to the end of the process that it had no educational purpose or validity and that the staff were merely a “radical bunch who had lost touch with the real world” (student communication). As the majority moved through the high anxiety phase they became totally enthusiastic about what they were producing putting in far more hours than the unit demanded. This produced workload issues for them but they insisted that motivation allowed them to find the time. At the conclusion students were asked to publicly share what they had produced but again this was purely voluntary. Almost all chose to share some or all of what they had produced through display or performance and expressed great ownership over what they had produced.

When the final products were presented for assessment a great majority of students did take an approach that was innovative for them, although some deemed those sections of their portfolio to be the ones contributing to the ‘non-graded’ component. The diversity of work was vast, and the quality of thinking exhibited was very high-order. Portfolio items included every conceivable composite of performance (dance, music and drama), visual art, technology, multimedia and text-based form. Even the text material ranged from poetry and creative writing to more traditionally academic genres such as formal essay. Many students described the whole process as the most challenging and enlightening they had experienced as students, at any level.

The diversity of product produced assessment issues for the staff. Not only did the issue arise that in one student class work that was entirely performance or visual in nature was been assessed alongside work that was text-based, both formal and informal in nature. This added a new dimension to criteria interpretation and equity. The students were communicating or expressing their ideas in ways that they felt best suited them, unfortunately this did not always coincide with the communication strengths of the marker. The result was that the

marking had to be done in teams with a cross section of input into the final awarded result. Even so assessors had great difficulty accessing the students' conceptual constructions unless the work was accompanied by some form of explanation, verbal or written. This is consistent with assessment dilemmas described by Cowdrey and de Graff (2005) in trying access high-level creativity through student product. The product itself is not creativity, nor is it a concept, it is a representation that an assessor can only judge by inference any more "valid" judgment requires some form of articulation by the creator.

Another outcome that was not anticipated was the extreme identification many students exhibited to their work. Their work was a representation of them and they expressed this clearly. Some who presented non-text based artefacts were asked if they could provide written support for the work they presented to aid the assessor. Their response was, "This is how we conceive of and feel about this issue and this is how we choose to express it. We will stand or fall on judgment of it as it is". This particular group who had chosen to work through the entire process together all also chose to have it marked as a collective portfolio and would accept the same result as each other. Some of the items presented were so personal and powerful that issues of confidentiality even came to the fore.

Implications arising from the study

Two clear implications one for pedagogy and one for assessment arose from this study. Unfortunately they were somewhat at odds with each other. Firstly, as a pedagogical approach, it was very successful. Students were motivated and produced thinking of a very high order. All staff and a vast majority of the students reported an engagement with the work, on a conceptual level, greater than would have arisen within a more traditional frame. If engagement with concepts, personal concept construction, revision and refinement are accepted as characteristics of effective pedagogy then this was effective. Students suggested that the freedom and support to explore beyond traditional "safe" modes was largely the reason for this high level of engagement. It did cause anxiety for students but for most this was ultimately resolved.

Secondly, when given the opportunity to express themselves and their conceptual constructs in non-traditional ways students will produce a huge diversity of work representing a wide range of styles and conceptual and schematic underpinnings. However for assessors unfamiliar with these domains (and perhaps even if they are) to access these concepts and underpinnings they can only do so if there is an accompanying articulation by the creator. We have to return to some form of uniform, translated format. It appears an unresolved dilemma exists if we are to match our current pedagogical beliefs with assessment practices. No matter how carefully we consider the product the ultimate assessment is still largely determined by a student's ability to translate and articulate it into a form the assessor can access. Is every assessment judgment not only measuring the strengths and limitations of the assessed, but also, in a much less explicit way, the assessor? This paper has explored one attempt at resolving this without restricting pedagogical and assessment options but a definitive solution does not yet present itself.

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