Institute of Educational Assessors

Is every student in my school learning? If so, to what extent? How would I know? Obviously a senior secondary certificate needs to have assessment. Assessment took on far greater importance as a consequence of the SACE review if you can remember all the way back to 2004, so ten years ago. Who would have thought we’d come so far so quickly? However, one recommendation from that review was not taken up at the time, and that was to establish within South Australia an Institute of Educational Assessors, which would promote the importance of assessment and would support teachers to develop their capacities as educational assessors. We’re now ready for the Institute of Educational Assessors. It is here to meet a need that everybody knows exists.

There is really a new era of assessment. It was centralised; it’s now very much more sitting within a school and teachers as a result have much greater autonomy, but with that improved autonomy comes much greater responsibility and accountability. And so what we’ve also seen happen over the period of time too is that we’ve moved from summative assessment right through to the debate about formative assessment. So assessment now is much, much more complex than it used to be. In addition to that, you get thrown in validity, reliability of assessment, and then you find that the debate is around fairness of assessment, around feasibility of assessment, around authenticity of assessment, and around making assessment informative.

We’ve now got to embrace new approaches to assessment and new understandings of assessment. One of the things I am very attracted to is the notion of assessment as learning, and I think that’s a very powerful way to think about assessment. If we think about assessment activities as opportunities to learn, and to build students capacity for learning and for judgement about their own learning, then we’ll make some real progress.

How do you get everybody on the same page? In my experience is within the schools they move at different paces, different subject areas are sometimes of natural reasons more inclined to be on the front of what’s happening in assessment and others don’t. Some automatically do formative assessment, some don’t. It’s interesting for the school, it’s how do you bring everybody on one page and I think this is the kind of fascination for assessment is how do we bring people more on this same page? We’re in this new era of assessment and that’s what’s fascinating with what’s happening in South Australia. It impacts on the schools, the teachers, and also upon the students.

Then in 2012, you might remember there was the first year evaluation of the SACE. Most teachers and leaders who responded said we’ve made really good progress, but we need to improve that far more quickly. We need more support in understanding and applying standards-based assessment. We want more support in designing effective assessment tasks. I wrote this in my evaluation: In actually supporting students to complete satisfactorily those apparently well-designed tasks, and using information gathered from assessment to inform teaching and learning. We want more support in monitoring progress at individual, class, year level and school level. We want to know why, when, how to intervene when there is a problem. We actually want to know also that there is a problem. And in being able to evaluate the effectiveness of the practices, of strategies, of programs, of teaching and of schools.

In Australia we see curriculum and assessment as two inseparable, complementary parts to the learning enterprise. This is not the case in other countries. We expect our teachers to know about both curriculum and assessment. In Australia we use a curriculum-based approach rather than an aptitude-based approach for selecting students for entry into tertiary education. That is we teach and learn through subjects, and achievement in subjects counts, and the assessments that teachers design and deliver and report matter. Our third feature is that we’ve now come through the Australian Curriculum and through the SACE to a standards-based assessment system where the quality of student achievement is described as through a set of standards and there is a line of sight from learning outcomes, the construct of interest, the content selection and assessment. In Australia, teachers play a pivotal role more than in many other countries in teaching, learning and assessment. It’s a big ask actually.

It’s in fact our professional responsibility as teachers to nurture young people, nurture our students. And in fact, the key thing about nurturing those students and their learning is in fact assessment. Assessment has to feature in that nurturing process. In addition to that, I also have a very strong view about students in as much as I believe that students have a right to the feedback, and they have a right to have information back to them to let them know how their learning is going.

Then we’ve got to make sure that we communicate to students very clearly. There’s a language around assessment, there’s that professional language that is the language that we share as teachers as professionals. We need to include students in that conversation and make sure they understand the language of assessment. We need to provide them with informative feedback about what they know and what they can do and how we make judgements about what they’ve done. They need to be engaged in reading our feedback, getting information from that feedback and being able to act upon that feedback.

To improve student learning outcomes by providing educators with exemplary learning opportunities to develop their expertise in educational assessment is the vision of the Institute of Educational Assessors.

This vision statement really is making two related claims. Firstly, that the realisation of this goal – to maximise student learning – can be advanced by teachers developing a deep understanding of the relationships between learning and assessment. Secondly, that if we improve teacher expertise in educational assessment, we will improve student learning.

Teacher expertise is the single most important in-school factor influencing student achievement. We know this through the OECD, through AITSL, Hattie and Yates and others. Hargraves and Fulham agree that teacher expertise really matters when they say, and I quote, “never before have teachers, teaching and the future of teaching had such elevated importance.”

There is a widespread agreement now that of all the factors inside the school that affect children’s’ learning and achievement, the most important is the teacher. Not standards, resources or even school leadership, but the quality of the teacher. Teachers really matter.

If we think about assessment tasks as opportunities to learn and opportunities to demonstrate learning, then we’ll see assessment in a new way.

We’ve moved from, “Oh my goodness, what am I going to teach today?” as you rush down the corridor, through to, “What are the students learning? Why am I doing this?” and we’ve now moved even further in that, not only in what are the students learning but to what standards are they learning?

The exciting and important thing here is that it all connects back up to the standards. What kind of evidence are the teachers collecting of their own practice. The institute will fulfil an important role here because it will give that extra ballast for developing that portfolio, for being able to understand the processes for that self-insight into what is happening.

Growing in assessment not only has a spin-off for your students, not only does it give your students a better learning opportunity, but there’s a bit in it for you too, because you can then record those kind of learnings that you’re doing against those of professional standards for teachers.Essentially there are two strands. The first of those is a course for individual teachers, which is the certified educational assessor. This is the one that is the truest to the original intention of the Institute of Assessors and the SACE review in 2004, and in that was a hope, a vision to say, “is there a person or people in my school that I want to be able to have that expertise that I think could support the rest of the teachers in my school to continue to develop?” the other side of it is a more recent creation, and that is those principals and school leaders say, “I don’t want just one or two people in the school to do this, I want the whole school to do it.” We’re making important decisions about kids’ learning at every stage and we’re basing those decisions on assessment. It’s what is it that you’re trying to achieve through your school and how might this support you and how might this be moulded to work with your school, your staff, your context, your students, the particular learning goals that you have.