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Article information:
To cite this document:
David Giles Kerry Earl, (2014),“Being “in” assessment: the ontological layer(ing) of assessment practice”,
Permanent link to this document:
http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JARHE-01-2012-0001

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Being “in” assessment: the ontological layer(ing) of assessment practice

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Abstract

Purpose – Current discourses on educational assessment focus on the priority of learning. While this intent is invariably played out in classroom practice, a consideration of the ontological nature of assessment practice opens understandings which show the experiential nature of “being in assessment”. The purpose of this paper is to discuss these issues.

Design/methodology/approach – Using interpretive and hermeneutic analyses within a phenomenological inquiry, experiential accounts of the nature of assessment are worked for their emergent and ontological themes.

Findings – These stories show the ontological nature of assessment as a matter of being in assessment in an embodied and holistic way.

Originality/value – Importantly, the nature of a teacher’s way-of-being matters to assessment practices. Implications exist for teacher educators and teacher education programmes in relation to the priority of experiential stories for understanding assessment practice, the need for re-balancing a concern for professional knowledge and practice with a students’ way of being in assessment, and the pedagogical implications of evoking sensitivities in assessment.

Keywords Teacher education, Assessment, Ontology

Paper type Conceptual paper

Current discourses on educational assessment focus on the priority of learning. While this intent is invariably played out in classroom practice, a consideration of the ontological nature of assessment practice opens understandings which show the experiential nature of being “in” assessment. These stories show the ontological nature of assessment as a matter of being “in” assessment in an embodied and holistic way. Importantly, the nature of a teacher’s way-of-being matters to assessment practices. Implications exist for teacher educators and teacher education programmes in relation to the priority of experiential stories for understanding assessment practice, the need for re-balancing a concern for professional knowledge and practice with a students’ way of being “in” assessment, and the pedagogical implications of evoking sensitivities in assessment.

Some understandings around assessment in initial teacher education

Developing pre-service student teacher’s understanding and pedagogical practice in assessment is a central concern for teacher education programmes. In so doing, teacher education programmes variously prioritise different forms of assessment. The skills and understandings surrounding summative assessment (assessment of learning), and the strategies for ensuring validity and reliability in the measurement of student’s achievement, appear to be the dominant discourse (Hill, 2000; Stoll et al., 2003). Such a discourse objectifies the teacher, the learner and the learning process to a causal
and quantifiable interaction which names and measures post-teaching assessment constructs. All too often, summative assessment practices reduce essential learning to measurable aspects of an educational experience without due attention to the interactive process of learning and the recognition of individual student’s engagement in their own learning.

A particular challenge to this discourse, and the focus of assessment and evaluation courses in initial teacher education, comes from critical and humanistic concerns for assessment practices to capture the growth in children’s learning and their holistic formation as a person (Crooks, 2002; Freire, 2003; Shapiro, 2005). This shift in thinking gives greater attention and priority to the learning process alongside former concerns for the product (outcome) of learning (Absolum, 2007; Black and Wiliam, 1998; Clarke et al., 2001; Harlen, 2007). As a consequence of this changing discourse, and in accord with social constructivist underpinnings, initial teacher education programmes are reshaping assessment courses towards a greater concern for “assessment for learning” alongside “assessment of learning” (Chappius and Chappius, 2007; Davies and Hill, 2009). A renewed interest in sustaining a central focus on the learner and noticing their learning, and the associated and critical role for teachers, shifts the discourse on assessment practice to include formative aspects of assessment (Bell and Cowie, 2001; Clarke et al., 2001; Hattie and Timperley, 2007).

More recent developments in educational assessment have moved the discourse towards a more integrated view of assessment such that “assessment of learning” and “assessment for learning” are positioned alongside “assessment as learning” (Earl, 2003). This latter expression moves the discourse on the purpose of assessment to the notion that assessment should always relate to learning. The focus on students’ learning is found in official documentation as a priority for assessment. The Ministry of Education (2007) in New Zealand links assessment and learning in their national curriculum stating that “Assessment for the purposes of improving student learning is best understood as an ongoing process that arises out of the interaction between teaching and learning” (p. 39).

Assessment practices within pre-service teacher education invariably focuses on what student teachers should “know” and “do”. Indeed, teacher registration bodies describe this as professional knowledge and professional practice that ought to be acquired from a teacher education programme. The content for such courses includes principles of assessment, the benefits and limitations of particular assessments procedures and the processes of reporting students’ learning to various stakeholders. This paper argues that the current focus on assessment is limited and privileges rational and pragmatic knowing.

Locating ourselves
As teacher educators, we affirm recent shifts in pre-service teacher education programmes towards more of a critical and humanistic priority. While attention is given to the development of professional knowledge and professional practice in relation to assessment, we have found ourselves wondering whether we are taking for granted some essential understandings of the assessment experience. Our wonderings are a consequence of our own experiences as students, teachers and teacher educators. Kerry brings to our wonderings her primary teaching experiences and her interests in assessment and e-education. David brings to our wonderings his primary/secondary teaching experiences and his interests in educational leadership and phenomenology. An ongoing dialogue has emerged between us as to the nature of assessment practice. While sharing a similar approach to teaching that seeks to provoke students’
What have we taken for granted in our assessment practices?
The question we have been wondering about is; what have we taken for granted about the content and priorities in assessment with initial teacher education courses? What have we been privileging? And, does it matter?

Observations across various teacher education programmes within New Zealand would suggest that pre-service teacher education programmes emphasise the professional knowledge and practice of assessment. We wonder whether teacher education programmes have taken for granted the experiential and ontological nature of assessment, that is, students’ and teachers’ experiences of being “in” assessment. In this way, assessment might be understood as a lived experience; students and teachers “in” assessment (Giles and K. Earl, 2010). Thought of in this way, assessment is not a thing or an event, but rather a continuous relational encounter that draws upon teachers’ and students’ sensibilities in terms of their noticing and valuing.

We contrast our thinking of an ontological layering of assessment with attempts to objectify assessment practices by stressing reliability and validity. Perhaps teachers are always “in” the experience of ontologically noticing and attuning their beings towards students and the nature of their activities and understandings. We wonder then, when is a teacher not assessing? This is not to suggest that all teachers are deeply attuned to student’s assessment at every moment but rather to signal the notion that assessment relates to a quality of knowing, doing and being “in” assessment with others.

Our experiences as teachers and students suggest that assessment is an experience of being in assessment. Being in assessment involves teachers noticing students and how they are “in” their learning, and acting on what they are noticing (Bell and Cowie, 2001). Focusing on students’ learning, teachers can be found seeing and reading children, while students can feel that they have been seen. Van Manen (2002) suggests that “being seen is more than being acknowledged. For a child it means experiencing being seen by the teacher” (van Manen, 2002, p. 31). In a similar way, being in assessment has a characteristic of teachers being attuned to students, their relationships, their learning and their assessment (Hawk et al., 2002). Being attuned to students relates to the way teachers have an embodied sense about the experience they find themselves in (Dreyfus, 1991; Giles, 2008; Heidegger, 2001). Sometimes the experience of being “in” assessment involves being surprised; moments when what we notice or experience is completely unexpected (Bell and Cowie, 2001; Giles, 2008).

In this way, assessment practices are an embodied experience of ontologically attuning to others. Such experiences are immersion-like and, in particular, relational.

What do stories show us about assessment?
A particular influence on our thinking as teacher educators came from stories that appeared to show teachers and students “in” assessment. The following story is about a teacher who senses that something is not right with a particular child:

One day, I was watching one particular boy and I quietly pulled him outside. I said, can you give me a hand to pull this desk out? When we were outside I said to him, hey is the work too hard for you? And he just sort of looked at me with his big eyes. That’s alright boy, you can tell me, is the work too hard for you? And he just stood there and shook his head. And I said, you just go and sit down again, I’ll change it for you. So that’s why – it’s too hard for him!
The eyes give it away – they do. You can see it in kids. It's amazing actually how much the eyes actually tell you.

In this story a teacher “notices” that something is not right. The particular influences were not immediately obvious but the experience provoked a wondering; what is happening for this child? In a busy classroom, a teacher is found “in” an experience with a child that calls for a response. The situation has the teacher wondering about the child and how they are. Acting, not from a script but rather a hunch, the teacher tactfully withdraws the child to a more private place under the guise of moving a desk. In a private and respectful moment, the child experiences being seen by the teacher (Hawk et al., 2002; van Manen, 2002). The teacher checks their observations, reaching for understanding; “Is the work too hard for you”? The moment is held open with the student’s apparent lack of response. Sustaining the care for this child, the teacher inquires further. The student does not offer any spoken words but allows a message to be heard through the nod of their head.

Being in assessment for this teacher relates to unspoken messages from a student. Carefully and respectfully relating with a student (Hawk et al., 2002), this teacher was being in assessment by seeking particular understandings about a child that were not formerly known. The teacher’s way of interacting and the words spoken were not scripted but arrived “in” the experience of being with the child (Dunne, 1997; Gadamer, 1994; Giles, 2008). Had this teacher not been watching, this student might have experienced learning difficulties for a longer period of time.

Teachers cannot be expected to “see” and “notice” every child consistently. Rather, as teachers notice particular students and attune to their learning experiences, some form of intervention is required on the part of the teacher. The student in the story above had not been noticed until this point. The learning tasks were too difficult; the teacher had got it wrong. Being in the context of assessment leaves the possibility of this teachers attuning to, and noticing how the learning tasks were being experienced.

In the following story a student teacher opens an embodied sense of being in assessment. She shares:

I find some classroom issues always leave a funny feeling in my tummy after it has occurred. There is a lot of self-reflection afterwards, did I do the right thing or could I have handled that differently?

For this student teacher, there are times in her professional practice when being in assessment involves sensing and reflecting upon experiences in hindsight. For some reason, some experiences have a lingering aspect that is felt and noticed (Gadamer, 1994; Rayle, 2006). Such experiences appear to question how we have been in a particular moment in terms of what we have seen and how something was handled. This experience has the student teacher dwelling in the experience to further understand. Rather than a rational deliberation, this student teacher initially feels something calling for her attention as “a funny feeling in my tummy”. The origin of wondering is within the student teacher’s being.

A final story shows a lecturer’s surprise when the unexpected occurs. Being surprised, the teacher is temporally thrown and comes to see the experience as reflecting on the student’s personal and professional growth. The lecturer writes:

When Peter started his course, he was asking for an extension every time there was an assignment due. And then this happened. He had a death in the family and the grandparents had to come from overseas to the funeral, but were too old to travel on their own. So Peter comes bounding into my office and says, there’s been this death. I am the only one in my
family that is not working so I have been elected to go over and fetch the grandparents and bring them back. I have to go on Friday. And I thought, here it comes. Now he’s going to ask for an extension because he had two assignments due. And he said, I’ve got both my assignments ready to hand in early and I want to know if I can do my presentation to you because I am not going to be in tomorrow to do it with the class.

The teacher in this story begins by assuming a familiar pattern is about to unfold. The familiarity is felt in how the student is and how their relating occurs. The teacher speaks her anticipation: “Now he’s going […], “and I thought […]” and “here it comes […].” Contrary to what the teacher expected, the student shows the teacher that they have their completed assignments and they are ready for handing in. The student is ready. What a surprise for the teacher! This is to be a very different experience. In this particular experience, the teacher made incorrect assumptions that were based on previous experiences. Expecting past patterns to continue, the teacher appeared to close down options of reading and noticing this student’s growth; the student’s change was to be seen.

Assessment experiences can show uncertainty at times (Bell and Cowie, 2001). Challenging our expectations, students can show insight and understanding that as teachers, we may not have previously seen (Dunne, 1997; Field and Latta, 2001). Such moments are a reminder that we need to notice, see, attune and focus on the “way” students are being and “how” they are relating to their learning experiences. Buber (2002) suggests that “for the genuine educator […] concern is always the person as a whole, both in the actuality in which he [sic] lives before you now and in his possibilities, what he can become” (p. 123).

What might these stories mean for how teachers and students are “in” assessment?

While particular assessment tasks are planned and implemented, as teachers, we are always “in” assessment. Our way of being as a teacher is continuously sensing and attuning to an ontological layer that is “in” the experiences teachers have with their students. As a consequence, how we are in assessment experiences matters as a teacher’s way-of-being influences the experience and outcomes of assessment. What is critical here is the small word “in”, that is, the way a teacher is “in” assessment influences what is experienced and how this is experienced.

We argue that the teacher-student relationship is integral to assessment practices (Bell and Cowie, 2001). As such, pre-service teacher education programmes need to balance concerns for “knowing” and “doing” with a concern for how teachers and students are being in assessment. A rebalancing of priority towards the relational nature of assessment experiences enables explorations of the value-laden ness of how we are “in” assessment. Similarly, critical and humanistic imperatives to critique dominant discourses in every area of education would be opened through investigations of the taken for granted and experiential nature of assessment (Freire, 2003; Popkewitz and Fendler, 1999; Shapiro, 2005; Shor, 1992). One particularly rich source of data for students to explore would be their own assessment experiences. Phenomenological reflective activities can provoke attunement towards the nature and essence of assessment experiences (Macintyre Latta, 2004).

Experiences show assessment as embodied and holistic that draws on the participants holistically. Being in assessment involves senses, intuitions, hunches and emotions alongside rational and cognitive deliberations. As such, teacher’s dispositions and sensitivities are critical to the practice of being in assessment. Indeed these
dispositions and sensitivities influence what we notice and attune to, and has significant consequences for others.

**What do we advocate?**

Through the experiences we have had with our students and our ongoing dialogue over the nature of assessment we advocate two particular outcomes. How might teacher education programmes revisit student’s experiences of assessment as this might attune them to subtleties within their own assessment practice? In so doing, students might attend to the holistic nature of these experiences and their way of being in the experience. We would argue that a rational discussion of assessment experiences primarily serves theoretical knowing and limits students deepening sensitivities to their own dispositions that might be accessed through a more reflective and contemplative approach to such stories.

In a similar way, we would ask whether an experiential concern for assessment practice might re-balance a privileging of conceptual understandings and pragmatic skill development. Our position is to ask the questions of ourselves and other teacher educators that we might critically consider the actual and intended outcomes of our teacher education programmes. What have we taken for granted about the content and priorities in assessment with initial teacher education courses? What have we been privileging? And, does it matter? Perhaps the questions need to lived out rather than be seen as a problem to be fixed along the way; that is, we need “to live and speak from within” the tension (Jardine, 1992, p. 126).

**Conclusion**

Improving students learning is an ongoing embodied process that arises out of relational interactions between teachers and learners. We argue that the sensitivities and dispositions of teachers and their practice are integral to “how” learning is “noticed”. Teachers “see” more than colour in a student’s eyes; they read students and this assists in shaping and redirecting a student’s learning.

Beginning teachers need to have a professional knowledge of assessment (knowing) and professional practices in assessment (doing). However, ontologically considerations of the experiential nature of assessment suggest that students should also be able to show a professional way of being in assessment. Becoming such a teacher is a journey of sensitising oneself to how we are “in” assessment practices. Such sensitivities are evoked through holistic considerations of assessment practice that question taken for granted assumptions and understandings. Accordingly, teacher education programmes need to assist and evoke pre-service student teachers towards a deeper appreciation and sensitivity to their way of being “in” assessment practices.

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