

Assessment of key competences: Commission seminar in Brussels

In his opening remarks, Adam Pokorny, head of the unit in DG Education and Culture responsible for school education and Comenius, pointed to a revolution in European policy making. Previously, anything to do with education except the Comenius programme was taboo in the Commission.

The Education and Training 2010 work programme, agreed upon in Lisbon in 2000, led to a setting up of "peer learning clusters". Member states put forward representatives to work together on key themes. "An enormous richness is emerging from that work", Mr. Pokorny remarked. The clusters initiated "peer learning activities" in the areas of 1. Key competences; 2. Teachers and trainers; 3. Maths, science and technology; and 4. Learning outcomes. Since then, matters central to educational policy are increasingly discussed on a European level. Adam Pokorny: "This needs to be better known on a policy makers level". One of the important questions is how assessment is implemented. This can drive educational policy.

On October 15 2009, the European Commission invited key players to a joint seminar of all the clusters on the theme of the *Assessment of Key Competences*. Keynote speaker was Dylan Williams who, together with Paul Black, pioneered the concept of *assessment for learning*, also called *formative assessment* (they co-authored an article in 1998 and a book some years later with the title "Inside the Black Box" on the theme of improving assessment for learning in the classroom). This has had a significant impact on educational thinking in the Anglo-Saxon world, with "The 10 principles: Assessment for Learning" appearing, for example, on the website of the Qualification and Curriculum Development Agency in the U.K. One of the principles is that "assessment for learning should take account of the importance of learner motivation: Assessment that encourages learning fosters motivation by emphasising progress and achievement rather than failure. Comparison with others who have been more successful is unlikely to motivate learners." Mary Hoey from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education presented Scotland's *Curriculum for Excellence*, which has made *Assessment for Learning* one of its central pillars.

Dylan Williams noted in his keynote lecture that there is no such thing as a biased assessment: "a test tests what it tests". If there is a bias, it is in the interpretation of the result. A test may, for



*How is assessment implemented?
ECSWE is also working on this question.*

example, contain a variance irrelevant for what it is supposed to test, like testing how lucky a student is that a certain essay topic "fit" his or her preparation. Or a mathematics test may hide mathematical ability because the student stumbles over his reading ability. So the question is whether or not *what is meant to be assessed* is actually assessed in a valid way. But we must not only ask ourselves "whether the important things are measurable", but also "whether the measurable things are important"! Constructors of tests aim for a beautifully bell shaped curve of test results - but what do they actually end up measuring?

Assessment for learning focuses on the purpose of assessment, which is to *impact* teaching and learning. Do we look at what is deficient about a piece of work through a rear-view mirror, or are we looking forward through the windshield? This is a bit like the difference between a post-mortem and a medical, Professor Williams remarked. He then gave an example of a mathematics test. Instead of correcting and marking it, the teacher handed it back at the next lesson to groups of four students uncorrected. Each group was then asked not only to make corrections but also the best composite paper and then to share their results with the whole class.

Assessment for learning! What economy: The teacher incurs less work and the students learn

much more from the test. It's a pity I did not come across this method in all those years I taught mathematics at Steiner Waldorf schools. Dylan Williams: "Feed-back is not enough", we "need feed-forward into future learning".

Another problem relates to the all-too-great expertise of the teacher. If a teacher has been teaching for a while, it is estimated that he or she will have asked half a million questions in *one* particular way. Williams: "It is difficult to change the legacy of this incredible expertise!" It's a bit "like asking people to repair aircraft engines in flight: scary".

Prof. Williams went on to describe a way to strengthen *the learner's voice* as well as their engagement. This can also be found in his book "Mathematics Inside the Black Box", where he writes (p.21): "Self-assessment can also be used in 'real-time' rather than just at the end of a learning sequence. Some teachers have given each pupil three paper cups - one green, one yellow, one red. At the beginning of the lesson all students have the cups nested so that the green cup is showing. If pupils feel the teacher is going too fast, they can show the yellow cup, and if they want the teacher to stop, they show the red cup. Initially, pupils are often reluctant to show that they do not understand. However, if, when the teacher sees a red cup, he or she calls on a pupil showing green to give an explanation, pupils are suddenly more willing to show that they do not understand."

Assessment for learning: a concept which has yet to make significant inroads in the educational thinking of many countries. Germany, for example, has recently kept busy in most of its Länder by centralising the Abitur exams and compressing the already brim-full curriculum into a school time shortened by one year. The Abitur already defines a full prescriptive curriculum alone through the trickle-down effect on what needs to be prepared, ignoring the previously commissioned expertise on national "Bildungsstandards" to merely set *minimum* standards in order to allow for a diversity of learning outcomes.

In fact most educational systems have in the past tended to test learning *outputs* in a system defined through learning *inputs*. This is in contrast to defining a programme of learning through *learning outcomes*. Mike Coles from the English Qualification and Curriculum Development Agency presented a paper from the peer learning cluster on learning outcomes at the seminar, in which he wrote: "Increased use of learning outcomes for the curriculum, qualifications and frameworks is a clear policy intention. It appears that learning outcome

development is generally associated with the personalisation or individualisation of learning and assessment. It is thought that learning outcomes will enable curricula and assessment to be tailored to the learning needs of individuals and to take account of their prior learning. A key point for learners is that learning outcomes can open up the secret gardens of the curriculum and qualifications and allow them to become more active participants in organising their learning."

As ECSWE members are currently developing a "European Portfolio Certificate" based on individualised learning outcomes which can reflect the biography of the learner, I felt it apt to show a prototype of the EPC folder and the standards for portfolio certificates currently in development to some of the seminar participants and to leave some with cluster representatives in Brussels.

Currently, 31 of 32 European countries are on the way to developing national qualification frameworks. Almost all of them are writing them in terms of learning outcomes. This is closely linked to the coordination group of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). This process may not yet be very visible from within the countries themselves. Europe is indeed not on the road to harmonising national educational systems. There is, however, increasing convergence that not only respects national diversity but may also help increase diversity within nations by developing translation devices like the EQF that help educational qualifications to flow freely across borders without loss of validity - and without the straightjacket of standardisation.

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