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The Spirit of Assessment: The Contribution of Assessment to Spiritual Development

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Background

What is the contribution of assessment to spiritual development, in schools and universities? Assessment is often portrayed as impersonal or, if personal, rather negative or even aggressive. 'Feedback' is often rated low by university students (e.g. in the National Student Survey), even when they have good relationships with their tutors and an otherwise good experience at university. And in schools, much assessment 'tend[s] to lower the self-esteem of pupils' (ARG 1999). What makes the situation even more puzzling is that the assessment of pupil/student work is generally the most intensively individual regular teacher-pupil or tutor-student communication.

The work presented here is based on an international project, based on research with 144 pupils and staff in 13 primary and secondary schools in the UK and Hong Kong, that generated a modelling of spirituality in schools (Stern 2009). That describes being more 'spirited' in terms of dialogue, community and learning. The model is also being tested in universities. A more 'spirited' learning community is 'an inclusive community with magnanimous leadership that enables friendship through dialogue in order to create and evaluate valuable or beautiful meanings, valuable or beautiful things, and good people' (Stern 2009, p 161).

Assessment is about judgements of value, which are themselves central to spirituality, and in the assessment of pupil/student work there are, typically, judgements made about the pupil/student (either compared to other pupils/students - i.e. forms of normative assessment - or compared to how the student has been in the past - i.e. ipsative assessment - or might be in the future - i.e. formative assessment), and judgements made about the work itself (either compared to other pieces of work - again, normative assessment - or compared to criteria - i.e. criterion-referenced assessment). The judgements made are both personal (and professionalism in schools and universities would suggest that there must be room for personal, professional, judgements in any assessment system), and communal (reflecting the values of the institution and the sector).

Research Questions

This paper focuses on feedback alone, recognising its crucial role in the wider context of assessment (Hattie 2003). By analysing teacher/tutor comments on pupil/student work (the marginal marks and any summative comments), the paper will attempt to reconstruct the implied meaning of the teacher/tutor contribution to learning, community, and dialogue. The aim will be to build on good practice in dialogic, communal, learning-oriented, and therefore spirited, assessment.

Based on spirit of the school research (Stern 2009), six linked questions can be asked of any aspect of a school or other learning community, to see how 'spirited' it is. In assessing pupil/student work, who do you bring in, how do you treat people as ends in themselves, in what ways are you magnanimous, how do you enable friendship to thrive, are you in dialogue, and how do you take part in creating meanings, things, and people?

Methods

Following the approach of the ARG, the research analyses the actual assessment processes - 'inside the black box' - rather than looking at the processes leading up to or the outcomes of assessment. In both school and university contexts, the ARG research has led to policy changes focusing more on assessment for learning (Weeden et al 2002, Weston Manor Group 2008). Research has ranged from the policy-oriented (Stobart and Gipps 1997) and practical (Clarke 2001) to the psychological

(Murphy 1999), and includes work on equity issues (Gipps and Murphy 1994), yet research has been remarkably scarce on spirituality and assessment. This project analyses assessment feedback in primary schools (for pupils aged 9 to 11) and universities. By analysing feedback in 'workshop' activities, teachers and tutors give their own views on the meaning and significance of examples of feedback, and on how assessment feedback could and should be more 'spirited'.

Frame

The tradition of spirituality used is of dialogic, relational and 'worldly' spirituality, as described by Wong, who promotes 'a more mundane form of transcendence' from our 'ordinary experience', exemplified by 'an everyday conversation that opens up a space of intersubjectivity' (Wong in Ota and Chater 2007, p 74). Spirited assessment would therefore be ordinary as well as extraordinary, and would avoid the relationships described by Rowland, in which 'the teacher should force compliance upon the student, whose response should be one of servility and conformity to expectations' (Rowland 2006, p 20).

Research findings

Initial findings, according to the six questions outline above, involve discussion of how 'spirited' assessment feedback is, how teachers/tutors believe it could be made more spirited, and what the implications are for assessment and broader teaching and learning strategies in schools and universities - such as feedback priorities, how to be 'friendly' in hierarchical relationships, and how to maintain 'surprise'.

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