VET systems: role of assessment in supporting lifelong learning

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Introduction

The objective of this paper is to illustrate English obsession with formal assessment and how this leads to neglect of the role of assessment in encouraging further learning. As a contrast I will draw upon a range of European experience in order to put forward the design characteristics of an approach to the assessment of work-related learning that could best support commitments to life-long learning and active knowledge transformation.

The value of an assessment outcome can be judged in four ways:
- Does it give accesss to further education and training?
- Is it helpful in employment selection or promotion?
- Does it encourage further learning and skill development?
- Does it recognise achievement?

I will argue that in England neglect for consideration of the third function of assessment (encouraging further learning and skill development) has undermined achievements in other areas.

Point 1: English obsession with assessment

I could start with the inadequacies of assessment in NVQs and GNVQs - but those arguments have been well rehearsed. Instead I will start with a more personal illustration of the English obsession with assessment. My son, Jamie, is 18 and, today, he is taking an examination that is part of his sixth set of national examinations. This is the story of his cohort:

Born in 1984   perhaps this is appropriate given the resonances of George Orwell's novel about the influence of an over-mighty state in all aspects of people's lives

1991: aged 7   Key stage 1 national tests in English, maths and science
Statutory reports to parents on national levels of attainment of each child

1995: aged 11   Key stage 2 national tests in English, maths and science
Statutory reports again; advocates argue that assessments are not 'high stakes' for children but have become 'high stakes' for schools and teachers and anxiety is transmitted to pupils

1998: aged 14 Key stage 3 national tests in English, maths and science with teacher assessments in other subjects
Statutory reports again; advocates argue that assessments are not 'high stakes' for children but have become 'high stakes' for schools and teachers and anxiety is transmitted to pupils

2000: aged 16 GCSE national examinations in 10 or more subjects (can also take GNVQs): 'high stakes' exams for pupils - likely to determine post-16 pathways and influence likelihood of offers from universities

2001: aged 17 Introduction of new national modular examinations AS level - examinations in up to 5 subjects in January and June. Standards very demanding. High levels of failure, repeating modules and dropping subjects. Attempt to broaden curriculum a failure as most students revert to 'traditional' 3 A levels.

2002: aged 18 New national modular examinations A2 level A levels - examinations in 3 or 4 subjects in January and June. 'High stakes' exams for pupils - likely to determine post-18 pathways, including choice of university.

Plato is famously quoted as saying 'an unexamined life is not worth living', but I am sure he would not necessarily have agreed with the intentions of the designers of the National Curriculum to produce a 'life of examinations'! In at least one aspect of educational performance we are world leaders - our school students take more external tests than their peers in any other country. The problems with this approach are that it reinforces a 'surface' learning of facts and procedures that can be memorised for tests. It is antithetical to both 'deep' learning and a commitment to lifelong learning.

It is also worrying that some sixteen year-olds ceremonially burn their books after the GCSE examinations, as if giving form to the idea that they have now finished with examinations and have no more need of education (or at least knowledge as represented in books). This hardly seems to have laid a foundation for lifelong learning. The response of pupils to this burdensome assessment regime does not seem to have been given much thought in a structure that is concerned primarily with evaluating performance of schools and achieving government targets. There is no immediate prospect of 'escape' for students either, since the post-16 vocational route (GNVQ) and work-based qualifications (NVQs) are also typified by over-assessment.

Point 2 Encouraging work-related learning and assessment to facilitate life-long learning

Learning at work can be conceptualised as involving a number of tensions between:

- Implicit - explicit learning
- Applying learning to other contexts - own context
- Learning related to existing practice - changes in practice
- Individual - collective learning
- Closeness to work - distance from work.

Organised reflection upon managing tensions in learning associated with changes in practice at work and:

- leads to an increased willingness to engage in explicit forms of learning;
- makes outcomes of learning shareable;
- makes it possible to reflect upon implicit ways of learning.

The use of artefacts (photos; diaries; record sheets; drawings etc.) in discussions about work helps those learning while working:

- become more aware of how they learn at work;
- articulate their learning to others.

A **formative** assessment process, with a strong dialogical component, can provide a basis for life-long learning by stimulating learners to:

- talk knowledgeably about key aspects of practice
- engage a range of other people in talking about practice
- consider changes in practice in the workplace
- reflect upon how to transform aspects of existing practice?

A 'soft qualification' with authenticated examples of experience and achievement (in, for example, Managing change; Supporting the learning of others; Reviewing own learning and development; Talking about future developments; Talking about how knowledge, skills and experience could be applied in different contexts) can provide a spur to life-long learning because:

- it recognises the emotional component to learning
- it aligns with the idea of continuing personal development (as the examples can be updated)
- it acknowledges the inter-relatedness of changes in work practice and organisation, personal development, organisational performance and broader labour market requirements
- it could form the basis of a claim for credit against vocational or academic qualifications at a future date, while at the same time recognising that such linking to formal qualifications is often not wanted by individuals at a particular time and in a particular context.

Problems the above approach seeks to address:

Assessment of work-related learning tends to be driven by either or both the requirements of the educational system or of vocational qualifications system. The work of Bjørnåvold (2000) shows how the assessment of non-formal learning in most settings across Europe tends to be framed in such a way so that it can be fitted to the requirements of the formal education system. On the other hand, Grugulis (2001) shows how compiling evidence of achievements against detailed performance criteria for NVQs can be antithetical to learning and development.

Similarly, perceptions of assessment overload associated with formal education and training (and this applies as much to Modern Apprenticeships as to those following academic pathways) means that significant numbers of people are put off further learning because of painful memories of assessment (even if they were successful).

Problem 1: many work-related qualifications are assessment-driven and without a clear purpose in relation to individual learning and development.

Problem 2: assessment of non-formal learning is too strongly shaped by the requirements of the educational system.

Problem 3: insufficient attention is given to the identification of competences relevant to individual careers or improved performance in organisations and how these can be supported by programmes of learning and assessment that encourage individuals and organisations to continue learning.

Problem 4: work-related qualifications portray learning progression as an individual going through a single hierarchy of 'levels'. In practice, for an individual their learning requirements vary between domains and contexts and an 'expert' in one area may be a 'novice' in another, even if it is closely related. Also individuals have to learn to make judgements in different spheres (for example, academic; cognitive; managerial; inter-personal; experiential) and again an individual may be at very different 'levels' in the different spheres.

Do we have any evidence of how to devise pedagogically-driven assessment regimes that support employee development and improvements in organisational performance in ways that are meaningful to the learner and encourage further learning?

We do have relevant research evidence. The cornerstones of such an approach would acknowledge:

- Formative assessment may be more useful than summative assessment (James, 2000);

- Review operation of the French 'bilan de competence' - it is possible to devise an assessment system where the dominant focus is upon individual performance in the enterprise or wider labour market rather than seeking alignment with formal education and training programmes and qualifications (Bjørnåvold and Brown, 2002);

- Dutch experience: value of building a stronger dialogical element into assessment of work-related competences; also value of focus of work-related learning being upon the 'core problems' of practice (Onstenk and Brown, 2002);

- Danish experience: of the importance of 'soft qualifications' in strengthening individual commitments to undertake continuing vocational training (that is, opportunities for review and dialogue were more highly valued by most people than having access to 'hard (or formal) qualifications') (Oates et al, 2002);

- Experience of KLASS project (Brown et al, 2001): organised programmes of learning and development for organisational 'change agents' focused upon achieving demonstrable improvements in aspects of organisational and supply chain performance led to the achievement of significant learning outcomes for participants from a wide range of backgrounds. Achievements as 'change agents' could be recognised through either tailored NVQ units at levels 3 or 4 or in the form of 30 CATS points at undergraduate level 1, but only a very few participants were interested in either form of summative assessment. On the other hand, most of those involved in the programme found the formative assessment processes (reflections upon what they had learned and oral presentations of individual and organisational achievements and discussions of their future learning intentions) very valuable in bringing their learning together, achieving a sense of worthwhile 'closure' on their work-related improvement activities and in reflecting upon their future learning goals. It was striking that nearly all participants wanted to continue learning, but were not interested in summative assessment at that particular time.

Point 3: Designing work-related learning and assessment to facilitate life-long learning

From the above it is possible to construct an **outline of the type of assessment that could support the current work-related learning of a majority of learners and leave them with a positive attitude towards learning for the future**:

- The assessment will contain a strong dialogical component: allowing reflection upon achievements, why certain actions were taken, what difficulties were encountered, what has been learned, how to build upon that learning
- The assessment should be driven by the learning (not as so often the learning being driven by the assessment)
- hence the assessment should map directly onto those characteristics that the learning is seeking to promote. So, for example, for employees learning to be change agents in supply chains, the assessment review may use the following criteria:
  - can the learner talk knowledgeably about key aspects of practice?
  - can the learner effectively engage a range of other people in talking about practice (operators, team leaders, suppliers, customers etc. as appropriate)?
  - can the learner influence changes in practice in the workplace?
  - can the learner reflect upon how to transform aspects of existing practice?
- The assessment should be primarily formative, with the primary goal being encouraging learners to engage in further learning and skill development. Note here value of mediating artefacts (diaries; records; photographs etc.) in encouraging active reflection and review.
- The assessment process should add value to the learning process in recognising the achievements of the learner and the context in which the learning took place.
- The summative role of the assessment could be principally just an authentication of the role played by the learner and the significance of the learning. This authentication would for most learners be a worthwhile outcome in itself, and it would recognise that for most people most of the time they are not particularly interested in getting their work-related learning formally assessed. On the other hand, the authentication would also act as a **potential** component of a formal

qualification. If used as part of a portfolio, or with a complementary assignment, or as part of a more formal assessment of experiential learning, it could be used to help gain access to further education and training and/or formal qualifications. The outcomes could also be used to inform the construction of a CV or help in making a case for promotion or employment selection.

- Above all, learners would value the process and outcomes of assessment as supportive of their learning and further development.

Types of learning, compatible with life-long learning, that this approach to assessment could support:

- Managing change
- Coping with uncertainty
- Supporting learning of others
- Reviewing own learning and development
- Talking about future developments
- Thinking about how knowledge, skills and experience could be used in different contexts

Assessment outcomes:
Rather than giving the individual learner a formal qualification one outcome would be a map of options in relation to continuing learning for:

- Personal development
- Improving aspects of organisational performance
- Vocational qualifications (levels 2 to 4)
- Academic qualifications (CATS level 1 through to Practitioner Doctorate)

If the individual learner did want credit for their current learning, up to 30 level 1 CATS points could be made available through completion of assignments or a portfolio.

Assessment philosophy:
The value of an assessment outcome can be judged in four ways:
- Does it give accesss to further education and training?
- Is it helpful in employment selection or promotion?
- Does it encourage further learning and skill development?
- Does it recognise achievement?

Many formal qualifications are driven by the first two (and have an effect upon the external motivation to learn), whereas the approach outlined here focuses upon the latter two and the effect of these are far more likely to be felt upon intrinsic learner motivation, and as such provides a stronger platform for life-long learning.

This approach to learning is:

- Learner-centred
- Supports self-steered and collaborative learning

- Supports the knowledge development, application and transformation in a community of practice
- Highlights the value of adaptability and the transfer of learning between contexts
- Supports life-long learning through the application of a pedagogically-driven approach to assessment.

Assessment outcomes:
So far the emphasis has been upon the value of the assessment process. However, the research could also investigate the value of a 'soft qualification' that gives authenticated examples of experience and achievement in, for example:

- Managing change
- Supporting the learning of others
- Reviewing own learning and development
- Talking about future developments
- Talking about how knowledge, skills and experience could be applied in different contexts.

Qualifications can supply information on knowledge, skills, aptitude or potential. The above 'soft qualification' deliberately does not resolve the issue with what type of formal qualification this approach should interface, because that this left to be determined by the individual at some time in the future or not, as appropriate. The 'soft qualification', however, does promote a personal synthesis of knowledge, skills and experience from different contexts.

Work-related qualifications may be assigned a level within the national vocational qualifications framework, and individual qualifications may use particular descriptors, but for the community of assessment, and often for those using qualifications as part of a selection process, it is the **examples** that most clearly illustrate the 'level' of the work. So having a 'soft qualification' that authenticates examples of achievement and experience can still be of use even in employment selection decisions.

Learning outcomes:
Success in the approach outlined here is not measured by more people taking qualifications, but rather whether learners consider their learning worthwhile and whether the dialogical review process is viewed as useful in facilitating one or more of the outcomes mentioned above.

The approach to learning is grounded in seeking to make improvements in organisational (or occupational) practice. The learning will typically be based around mid-range improvement activities, such that the learning is neither too fragmented nor too large. This means that tangible outcomes can be realised within a time-frame of months, rather than days or years. The activities are chosen so as to have individual value to the learner and collective value to the team, organisation or occupation, as appropriate.

This approach to learning should have appeal to three groups with very different attitudes towards assessment when this learning takes place:

- Those solely interested in learning to effect changes in organisational (or occupational) practice
- Those interested in changes in practice, but who also welcome opportunities for 'soft assessment' consisting of review, reflection and dialogue
- Those interested in changes in practice, but who would welcome the opportunity to gain formal qualifications.

Ways forward: it may be useful to have in-depth discussion of the practice exemplars that highlight a series of tensions (or competing requirements) with the assessment of work-related learning:

- difficulty of work-related learning in work settings is likely to relate to complexity of occupational role; contexts and constraints upon learning; skills, competencies and support of others in the workplace, whereas if work-related learning is being assessed for academic purposes (credit) the markers are likely to be intellectual (or cognitive) difficulty and academic autonomy (is this your own work)

- how to balance immediate (demonstrable) learning achievements v. quality of reflection upon successes and failures in learning

- someone who puts all their efforts into improvements of current practice (e.g. focus on improvements in Quality, Cost, Delivery) v. someone with the vision to see scope for more fundamental changes (e.g. savings that would accrue from using different materials or processes) but without the responsibility or means of effecting the broader change in practice

- extent to which effecting change is central to v. additional to a work role (how to compare achievements of an operator, team leader or production manager given wide disparities in time and resources available to devote to planning, execution and evaluation of changes)

- learning about practice v. learning about learning

- how to compare very different types of outcome: effecting change through improved inter-personal communications (meetings with and securing commitment of suppliers) or through the provision of remote (or web-based) diagnostic support systems

- learning is generated through application of 'standardised provision' (adopting aspects of Japanese production or control techniques) v. learning generated through decentralised networks engaged in knowledge transformation

- knowledge remains with the individual v. knowledge is spread through wider communities of interaction

- improvements in 'management of change' v. improvements in 'management of learning'

- making judgements about immediate impact v. likelihood of being able to sustain continuing improvement

- comparing achievements when there are wide variations in company/senior management support

- making allowance for broader work context - there may be a host of reasons why it makes more strategic sense at a particular time not to follow through with changes (mergers, closures, crises etc.). On the other hand, lack of follow through in other circumstances may reflect a lack of commitment.

For all the above reasons it may be helpful not to make a premature rush to judgement, and to keep the assessment outcome in a form that does not decontextualise what has been achieved, but rather keeps it an exemplar format.

Work is still required upon detailed aspects of the assessment strategies and processes: for example, the forms of reflection, review, accreditation; role for portfolios, assignments, oral questioning, learner support; and the constitution of assessment panels. Any attempt to adopt this approach would also have to address the issue of scaleability of these ideas and explore whether it is possible to build a consensus over a strategic model for work-related learning, assessment and development in particular sectors.

In conclusion then, I believe it is possible to design processes of work-related learning and assessment to facilitate life-long learning. It does not even require the English to give up their obsession with assessment, rather they have to redirect their passion towards more formative assessment processes in the directions I have outlined.

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