

HARD MINDS AND SOFT HEARTS

The assessment of teaching practice

Judith Kennedy

We class schools into four grades: Leading School, first Rate School, Good School and School. Frankly, School is pretty bad". Decline & Fall, Evelyn Waugh 1940.

Introduction

Whilst the value both in assessment and professional development terms of formative approaches has been very elegantly and persuasively presented by others (Broadfield 1996), I shall in this article be arguing for a more rigorous approach to the summative aspects of the assessment of teaching practice in initial ELT teacher training. In reality, however, this does not mean that formative elements are not an essential part of the process. The tension between the two is, of course, an important problem in trying to develop reliable and valid means of assessing the practical teaching skills of trainees. As McIntyre & Hustler put it: "The evidence about the importance of deep-seated personal qualities for good teaching is persuasive, and so summative assessment of student teachers to determine their fitness to enter the profession should properly emphasise these qualities; but it may well be considered unrealistic to attach importance to such qualities in a profiling instrument intended for formative assessment" 1996:206. This distinction between processes and purposes in assessment is a basic and problematic one - for many teacher educators more imaginative and fair processes of trainee evaluation such as portfolios, teaching logs, reflective diaries are inextricably linked with formative evaluation but this need not necessarily be the case. I shall suggest that perhaps this over concern with process has encouraged us to neglect the very real need to address the summative aspects of trainee assessment - both the reasons for it and the ways in which we might more reliably carry out such assessments.

Arising from this, there are four questions to ask:-

1. Should we assess the practical skills or performance of trainees?

2. Why do we assess such performance?; and
3. What can we learn from other practice based professions?
4. How can we most effectively carry out such an assessment?

Arguments for summative performance assessments

With regard to the first question there are several possible responses. There are those, for example, who would claim that we should evaluate the practical competence of trainees because, as trainers, we are acting as the gatekeepers to the profession. We are providing a "licence to teach" - we are testifying to the competence to practise of the trainees. The purpose is external. As gatekeepers there are consequences to making bad decisions: accountability in the professions and appraisal of performance are developments that trainers need to take account of. Many professions are accountable for their practice such that they can be legally sued for poor performance and this is beginning to happen in education with students and school children starting to hold educators to account. There are others who would claim that we should because there is a need to professionalise teaching and part of becoming a profession is to set standards of quality and achievement in practice, which exclude some and admit others. Both of these reasons suggest that such an assessment will produce both successes and failures - those who have been judged as "fit for purpose" and those who have been deemed as "not yet" or "not quite" or whatever.

Objections to summative assessments

But equally some may raise a philosophical or ethical objection to such summative assessments. We may assess as part of educational development - assessment in this case seen as part of improving teacher education or of helping the individual evaluate their own progress and improve. Such assessment as part of continuous professional development will try to use procedures which have as their basic aim the development of the necessary skills and attributes of good teaching but such procedures are not primarily designed to be used as a gatekeeping mechanism.

A further objection that is sometimes raised is one of feasibility. Here the argument is that since we cannot easily conceptualise the qualities of a good teacher, or good and effective practice, then to think of assessing trainees in terms of a 'competency to teach'

is simplistic and not tenable. If we are claiming to be teacher educators then hopefully we have some concept of what skills, attitudes and knowledge bases we wish the trainees to acquire although how they are described and ordered in terms of priority may be debatable. Related to this, is the objection that we can't judge competency because we have not, as yet, developed a sufficiently reliable means of assessing such performance. Observing performance, of itself, interferes with the nature of what is observed. For an audience, performers may prepare differently, may respond differently, and nervousness and resentment may lead to an atypical performance.

Still others may claim that we can't judge competency summatively in any realistic sense because any performance is embedded in a particular context. So what we see one day in one context may not be predictive of the trainees' behaviour in another context. And moreover, the context may be a powerful determining factor in how the trainees perform. We accept, I think, that good teaching flourishes within a stimulating and supporting environment - hence the move to identify the features of 'effective' schools in which effective teaching will be encouraged. When that context is an overseas one the problem is even more complex. How can we assess the performance skills of a teacher when they are teaching in a context different from those which commonly inform teacher education theories in this country. As assessors what do we know about that context - how its values inform teaching practices and curriculum interpretation? The responsibility for understanding the ethos, motivations, norms is very great and do we even have the right to gatekeep in such a situation?

External pressures on assessors

Finally we could say that we should be more rigorous in our assessment of practice ; and that the capability is there but it just is not feasible because of market forces. Market forces can determine teacher supply. We may need all the fish in that pool - and particularly in developing countries where there is an acute shortage of good quality entrants to teaching, trainers are pressurised at both ends. They are pressurised to accept low quality entrants and equally pressurised to make sure they succeed. Such market forces may operate in another way on the providers of courses. There may be all kinds of hidden pressures on institutions not to be too exacting in the way they operate regarding both selection or assessment - and whereas paper and pen assessment is very

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open to external audit and control, it is much easier to avoid uncomfortable and difficult decisions about classroom performance and much harder for such decisions to be externally validated. When we are providing training courses in initial training for an overseas government, judging the teaching performance of a trainee as not of sufficient standard can lead to an overseas government crying "Why have you wasted 3 years only to tell us this student will never make a teacher".

I would suggest that the *shouldn't's*, *shoulds but can't's*, *can't's*, and the *it just isn't feasible's* are perhaps more dominant than the *shoulds* and *do's*. We need to carefully look at the unwillingness as I see it of those involved in teacher education to take on the role of effective gatekeepers. Whether it be a PGCE¹ course, or the various Certfla/Dtefla² courses - most students pass these courses - and certainly are rarely failed on the teaching practice component. This fact is often acknowledged in passing.

"However, since the vast majority of students pass the PGCE course the main role of the assessment system is to assist in their professional development as a teacher".

Barton & Elliott 1996:18

This could be justified if we were to argue that we have selected only capable and talented people who would inevitably become effective teachers. However, I don't seriously think that anyone could claim this. Whilst the recent moves to develop an accreditation scheme within the ELT are welcome, such a scheme counts for nothing if virtually anyone can enter and everyone succeeds. To say anyone can enter if, of course an exaggeration but my own personal research involved phoning seven establishments offering the CTEFLA and putting myself forward as a candidate who had no degree, no A level, no teaching experience, had worked in an office and now wanted to teach EFL. I was invited for interview and certainly not discouraged from applying and indeed was encouraged to participate in the week's taster course which would enable both parties to

¹ PGCE = Postgraduate Certificate in Education - a UK teaching certificate for graduates

² CTEFLA = Certificate in Teaching of English as a Foreign Language to Adults - a qualification accredited by the University of Cambridge

DTEFLA = Diploma in Teaching of English as a Foreign Language to Adults - a more advanced version than the Certificate above

assess more accurately suitability. A survey by C. Edwards (1997) of six CTEFLA centres showed that the interviews were indeed thorough. Nevertheless, of the twelve candidates interviewed all were offered a place and the CTEFLA has over a 90% pass rate. On the PGCE entry of course is graduate and competitive to a degree, but the failure rate on the teaching practice component is on average 0.5% and in some instances that is due not to an assessment of poor performance but to extraneous factors e.g illness etc. Some may claim that there is a very low failure rate on teaching practice because most people are filtered out before they get to that stage - but drop out rates for all teaching courses are in fact low (especially in comparison with other professional training courses). Ironically the highest drop out rate occurs once the trainee has been deemed "fit" to teach and actually enters the profession.

Why do we assess performance skills?

I would like now to address the second question I asked at the beginning - "Why do we assess the practical skills of trainees." As I have suggested, at present this is most likely to be for formative purposes. Teacher educators see a real educative purpose to assessing students in a wide variety of forms - it is part of the process of teacher development and in tandem with the move to defining the competencies required of practitioners (an art in itself) no bad thing.

Certainly most of the literature on assessment of teaching practice sees it as a formative process and the means of doing it have a formative aspect. This is partly due to the influence of INSET practice where the professional development of teachers as part of appraisal is dominant. But the summative aspects of assessment in initial teacher training need to be addressed for the reasons I gave initially - we are gatekeepers and we need to professionalise and maintain quality in teaching.

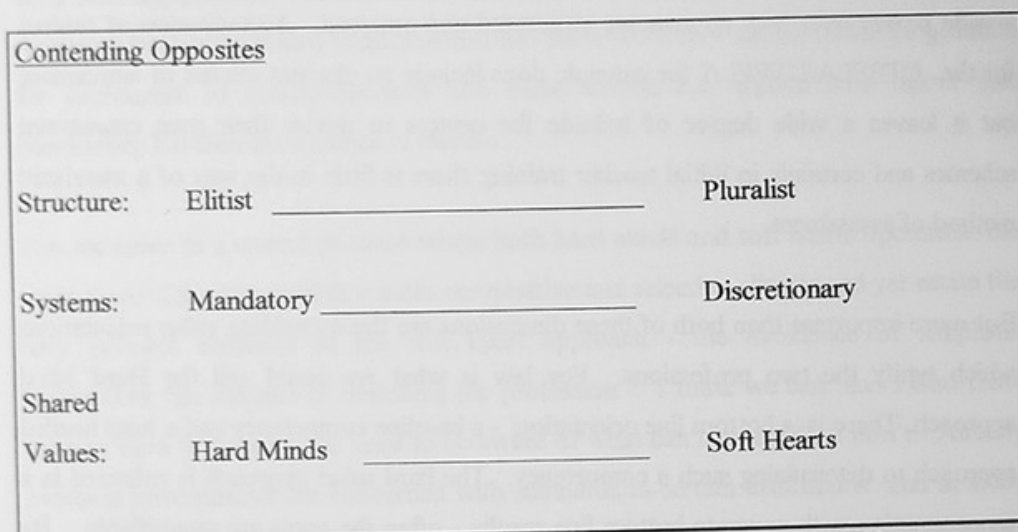
Learning from other practice based professions

As a profession, we may usefully learn from other practice based professions - do they experience the same difficulty in judging their trainees as competent? There are many professions whose practice is grounded in action and which have an element of performance assessment in them - for example, social workers, lawyers, the police. I will use as an example the British Legal Practice Course (LPC) as an example of a course which has introduced a large element of practical skills training into its

assessment process. The LPC, which is a postgraduate compulsory course for intending solicitors and barristers, is assessed on an approximately 60% substantive and 40% skills base. The skills based element is intended to reflect the kind of practitioner knowledge required of a solicitor and covers, for example, interviewing and advising, legal research, writing and drafting, negotiations and advocacy.

One way of representing the differences between the two professions in the way in which they approach the assessment of practical skills is to borrow some of the terms used by Pascale (1990) when describing different organisational structures.

Pascale suggests that organisations differ in terms of not only their structure, but also their systems of managements and their shared values. He represents these as shown in the diagram below (See Fig. I)



Adapted from Pascale 1990:53

Thus law and teaching could be said to differ along an elitist /pluralist dimension. Law tries hard to establish itself as an elitist profession. There is a unitary professional authority; training institutions are licensed; courses are approved by the one authority . It tends all along the line to set up barriers to entry - it is more or less a graduate profession with mandatory post graduate training and mandatory on-the -job training of two years. Moreover such on- the- job training is not open to all.

ELT by comparison could be seen as a more pluralist profession - there is an attempt to gatekeep but in a variety of ways so that to an outsider it could be a confusing situation of many different qualifications. There is a very wide degree of latitude as to who can enter; very wide disagreement as to the required body of subject knowledge and skills required. However courses are now accredited and there is a move to professionalise ELT in the UK - and of course in teaching generally the Teacher Training Agency (England and Wales) has taken on the role of a professional license body to some extent - although unlike law this is outside of the profession.

The two professions also differ along the mandatory /flexible dimension. That is to say courses such as the LPC have a structure and assessment which is mandated by an external authority - unlike many of the courses within the broad field of ELT or even within teaching which are more flexible and discretionary. That is, the institutions have a wide power over how courses are structured and assessed. Accreditation of centres for the CTEFLA/DTEFLA for example does include an element related to assessment but it leaves a wide degree of latitude for centres to devise their own assessment schemes and certainly in initial teacher training there is little in the way of a mandated method of assessment.

But more important than both of these dimensions are the overriding value orientations which typify the two professions. For law is what we could call the Hard Mind approach. There is a bottom line orientation - a baseline competency and a hard headed approach to determining such a competency. The hard mind approach is reflected in a preoccupation with concrete bottom line results - often the goals are quantifiable. By contrast, the teaching profession in its approach particularly to the assessment of teaching performance adopts what Pascale calls in management terms the Soft Heart approach. Soft hearted values permeate teaching - they refer to more intangible qualities and moral attributes which are essential in the relationships between teacher and taught especially where those being taught are children.

"Teaching is not just a technical business. It is a moral oneFirst, teachers are among the most important influences on the life and development of many young

children. They play a key role in creating the generations of the future.There is also a second sense in which teaching is deeply moral.. This has to do with the nature of teachers' decisions and judgements. As Schon (1987) puts it, professional action involves making discretionary judgements in situations of unavoidable uncertainty."

Fullan and Hargreaves, 1992 :28

Judgements tend more to the qualitative rather than the quantitative - little in the way of assessment of trainee teachers is focused on the pupils' learning or achievements or at least not in any systematic manner.

The attached example of an LPC assessment sheet for negotiation and interviewing seems, at first sight, rather similar to the checklist type sheet often used by supervisors on a teaching practice. However, in the manner of use there are crucial differences. Assessors have a clear idea what practitioners must NOT do - indeed these are grounds for assessment of non-competency and these criteria are applied with rigour and consistency but they are minimal in number.

Can we move to a central position where both hard minds and soft hearts operate at the same time? Can we establish a more competitive and selective climate and yet retain the very valuable elements of the soft heart approach - the avoidance of simplistic judgements, the dangers of deskilling the profession? I think we can and I also think we may have to because we need to be aware of what can happen if we don't. Already overseas governments are concerned with standards in certain institutions and in some cases are drawing up "hit lists" of British higher education establishments which should be avoided. We can be flexible about entrants to a profession, and in ELT this may be a good thing, but we must then have a very strict and hard headed approach as to who exits.

A judgmental approach to summative assessment

I would like now to turn to the final question as to how we develop a fair yet rigorous approach to summative assessments which also accommodate the virtues of formative assessments. One approach may be to adopt a judgmental model for assessing practitioner competency - such as that suggested by Eisner(1993)and adapted by Hager

and Butler (1996). A judgmental model suggests that decisions made about a candidate are based on evidence presented, rather as in a court of law. Quoting from Hager and Butler " *...a judgemental model of assessment allows for the calling of more evidence in a doubtful case, rather than relying on making inferences from a fixed and predetermined set of data. Another possibility is that assessment can become a dialogue between the person being assessed and the assessor, so that there is scope for the person being assessed to present their case*". 1996:374

At this point I will briefly mention some of these principles of this model and suggest how they might be applied when it comes to assessing teaching practice.

Principles of Judgmental Model

1. Assess process by which problems are solved as well as the solution.

We do not want to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Of course, we need to see what trainees actually do in a classroom - for example, if they are explaining some lexical item, what use is made of examples. In addition however we would look at how the teacher reached these decisions - by what process did the trainee choose the examples used? Thus the focus is not entirely on what goes on during the lesson but is also on what goes before and what comes after. One benefit of this is that the detrimental effects of observation are mitigated because the judgement is not entirely based on that performance at that time. We consider in other words teacher motives as well as actions.

2. Assess performance holistically and discretely.

We are aware of criterial competencies, however we describe them, but we are also evaluating lesson "images" - that is a holistic judgement of the event. By always looking FOR particular things (as perhaps listed in terms of certain specific competencies) we may end up by not looking AT. Many assessors will testify that although they know the trainee has done lots of things badly, in the end the lesson is a success. They feel it intuitively but cannot always specify exactly why. Both kinds of evidence are valuable.

3. Use a variety of assessment events.

Here any judgement is based not on just one lesson but on other teaching events (e.g. peer teaching) and indeed on the trainees' interpretations of such events - reflected perhaps in such items as teaching logs, portfolios, profiles etc. Durrant emphasises this "... competence cannot be assessed from performance alone. It is also located in the accounts used to explain, justify or evaluate classroom practice". 1992:

4. Use multiple sources of evidence.

The trainee, the mentor, the trainer, the pupils - all can be used as sources of evidence. The crucial point is that they do not make the final judgement - they do not act as decision makers as to a pass/fail. By using multiple sources of evidence we are moving towards a more reliable final judgement.

In summary, then, making decisions based on evidence of different kinds from a variety of sources underlies the approach of Eisner. But it still leaves open the question of who is to be the judge. In an ideal world, the judge should in my opinion be someone external to the institution. Only in that way could we be sure of impartial and unbiased judgement - but given the present impossibility of even finding external examiners merely to moderate this seems an unlikely scenario.

I would like to add one final word about the problem of identifying teacher competencies, because even the judgmental model incorporates some notion of recognising what minimal capacities are required of the novice teacher. There is no shortage of literature on teacher competencies but often these competencies as currently described whilst useful to curriculum developers, course planners, formative methods of assessment etc. can be problematic when it comes to making summative assessments for two main reasons:

- a. They are idealised. It is unrealistic (and indeed the move towards establishing teacher 'repertoires' recognises this) to expect new teachers to exhibit most of the

competencies as they are currently defined. For example, it is unrealistic to think that we can with any reliability assess the competency "demonstrates professional values" - although with profiles and portfolios we may be able to describe them. Moreover, many of these idealised competencies are ones that we would expect to develop over time with practice - they are competencies often embedded in sustained practice.

- b. There are too many of them to be used in any summative assessment system.

Mahoney and Harris talking about the design of a new profiling system at Goldsmiths College, London make this point *"We rejected a framework that would be confined to the PGCE year ... for the same reasons, the competence descriptors were not arranged in any temporal or hierarchical order, with some identified as priorities for the PGCE year and others for further professional developments. However the resulting length of the document and the lack of any indication of basic minimum requirements to achieve "a license to teach" presented us with a number of problems"*. Many students found it "daunting and off-putting" and despite reassurance clearly felt a pressure to achieve in one year a state of near perfection in relation to competence: *"I felt I could never possibly fulfil all those criteria in a year"*. Mahoney and Harris 1996:33. Finally the tutors did select the 20 statements which in view were the most important in determining whether a student should be awarded the PGCE. How they selected the 20 core statements, effectively the core criteria, is not made clear. But one alternative might be to reflect back on the approach used on the LPC course where rather than looking at the competencies that must be demonstrated we should look rather at what we would never countenance a newly qualified teacher doing. This usually produces a much shorter list!

In conclusion then, assessment of performance in the summative sense is a problematic issue raising justifiable concerns over distortion of the training process and oversimplistic judgements. We find it much easier to make judgements based on academic written texts than on practical performances but perhaps this could change if we moved to a more judgmental mode of assessment where many kinds of evidence are used. It is my contention that we certainly need to shoulder the responsibility for making hard decisions because if we don't, other external validating bodies will do it for

US.

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LEGAL PRACTICE COURSE

Instructions for Assessments

Group A

You will be assessed in business negotiation and conveyancing interviewing and the written skills of drafting and research.

Objective

The objective of these assessments is to demonstrate your competence in interviewing in a conveyancing context, negotiation in two business contexts, and in research and drafting.

ASSESSMENT

You will be assessed either as "competent or non-competent" in respect of each skill on the basis of your performance on these assignments. Make sure you are familiar with the assessment guidelines.

REMEDIAL Assessments

If you are referred in any assessment then there will be a further exercise for you to do. Only one referral in any one skill is permitted.

Exercise 2A

Your client, Antonios ("Tony") Saridaki, a qualified cost and management accountant, has been approached by recruitment consultants acting on behalf of Baalbek Holdings plc. who are considering offering him the post of finance director. This would constitute a major step up for your client, and after an interview with the chief executive he has agreed in principle to accept an offer of the job, subject to agreement of the detailed terms of the employment contract.

A copy of Baalbek's standard executive service contract has been sent to you and confirmed as acceptable by your employment department, subject to the agreement of a minimum term and the wording of the anti-competition covenant. On these points:

1. If Tony is to give up his current job, he wishes to get as much assurance of job security as possible at Baalbek. He would therefore like the contract to contain a fixed minimum term; this should be for as long as Baalbeck will give him, but for a least 18 months. the contract should not contain anything which would let the company dismiss him without paying substantial damages, to encourage them to keep him on.
2. If, however, Tony and Baalbeck were to part company within, say, two years, Tony things he should be bale to get a job with another company in the same business sector as Baalbeck, because of the expertise and knowledge he will have acquired at Baalbeck. He knows that the company will wish to impose an anti-competition covenant, and he wants this to have the least possible scope to prevent him from following such a course of action a the company can be induced to accept.

Attend a meting with Baalbeck's solicitor to agree a proposal, in line with your instructions, to achieve your client's objectives and protect his interests, for your principal to put to your client for his approval.

LPC Assessment Guidelines - Negotiation

Student's name and initials: Date:

Comments

A. Preparation

- 1. Identify clearly client's objectives and interests.
- 2. Analyse fully and accurately factual issues of case.
- 3. Analyse fully and accurately legal issues raised by facts of case.
- 4. Identify strengths and weaknesses of own case.
- 5. Identify strengths and weaknesses of other side's case.
- 6. Anticipate adequately other side's strategy.
- 7. Choose own strategy appropriately.
- 8. Prepare clear and concise written plan for negotiation, with method of recording outcome.

B. Conduct

- 9. Adopt appropriate tone and approach to opponent.
- 10. Pursue prepared strategy appropriately, with appropriate response to other side's anticipated case.
- 11. Present client's case effectively.
- 12. Respond appropriately to unanticipated actions of other side, and any other difficulties.
- 13. Achieve client's key objectives, so far as possible.
- 14. Protect client's interests.
- 15. Record outcome accurately.

C. Follow-up

- 16. Identify actions necessary to put into effect matters agreed on.
- 17. Identify timescale for action and parties responsible.

Contra-indicators of competence

- i. Significant failure to prepare adequately.
- ii. Failure to anticipate the obvious.
- iii. Inadequate knowledge of significant facts.
- iv. Inadequate knowledge of relevant law.
- v. Misrepresentation of facts or instructions.
- vi. Lost control of negotiation.
- vii. Unprofessional or unethical conduct or gross discourtesy.
- viii. Significant exceeding or disregard of instructions.

General comments

1st assessor's decision: competent
 refer (signed)

2nd assessor's decision: competent
 refer (signed)

External examiner's decision: competent
 not competent (signed)