ECSWE

European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education

Assessment: Friend or foe of learning?

Brussels, 26th August 2016

Summary

The paper is structured in three parts:

1. Potential effects of assessment on learning and implications for education systems
2. Assessment and feedback: Good practices
3. Basic principles of assessment in Steiner Waldorf education.

Standardised tests and grades can turn learning into competition for the best ranking and teaching into methods for maximising test scores. This undermines flexibility, creativity and innovation. Dialogic assessment emphasises constructive, individualised and documented feedback. Involving students in the assessment process through journals, portfolios, self-assessment and peer feedback substantially increases students' ownership of their learning. Standardised tests can have a role in verifying that students reach minimal standards, for example in literacy and numeracy. To achieve flexibility, creativity and innovation, educational systems should promote effective levels of school autonomy, freedom of curricula and avoid dictates from state authorities and business interests.

This approach is supported by an assessment culture that favours documented individual feedback of teachers and peers over marks and grades. This can also find expression in yearly verbal reports, or alternatives such as dialogic reports consisting of minuted conversations with students and parents. Steiner Waldorf schools are also piloting qualifications based on learning outcomes and competence based assessment criteria that do not specify the method of assessment. The potential of transnational usage through the Lisbon Recognition Convention is currently being explored. Furthermore, some schools are working with portfolios such as the European Portfolio Certificate that was developed as a Comenius Project.

Waldorf education offers an individual-centred educational approach and places the well-being of students at the centre, by educating the autonomous, socially orientated person and by prioritizing cooperation and association over competition. Only open curricula can accommodate the needs of a truly individual centred education. These need to be accompanied by forms of assessment that takes the unpredictable development of individuality into account. Assessment practices should reflect the social nature of learning and therefore foster relationships between learners and teachers instead of alienating them. This requires an atmosphere of trust and esteem.

Assessment can drive learning in different directions, depending on the role of assessment.

On the one hand, it can turn education into a race with some winners and many losers. "Learning to the test" in order to compete continues to increase. The end result of this kind of assessment tends to be a grade that can be converted to a number for linear ranking.

On the other hand, all the documented feedback a student gets, is a form of assessment, as it allows for a later presentation to others and review. Students need feedback and students want feedback. They get it from teachers, they get it from their peers, and when they reflect, they get it from themselves, why not inform assessment through feedback?

It is a fundamental question what kind of assessment drives learning in education and how this affects learning and indeed the subjectification of the learner (to use an expression coined by Gert Biesta). Do students compete with each other for the highest grades? Do countries compete which each other for the best PISA results? And what happens to education when they do? Or are students encouraged to document their own learning as a process, through journals, portfolio, posters, presentations etc.? If so, does this documentation lead to dialogue with their peers and with their teachers, who take an interest in how each student develops and adapt their lessons to this feedback accordingly? Instead of textbooks that give rise to prescribed lessons with prefabricated tests at the end, precision of assessment can be much improved by also basing it on the documentation of an (individualised) dialogic learning process that also works with "naturally occurring evidence". Waldorf favours assessment-by-teaching, rather than assessment while teaching. Assessment-by-teaching enables the teacher to start with a plan of progression but then to modify this in response to the learning questions the students have, which cannot be predicted but which more accurately reflect their learning needs than the predicted plan. Dynamic assessment helps each learner to attain the next level of learning that he or she is capable of and shows not only what has been learned but what can be learned[1].

In the initiative report on the new strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020), the European Parliament draws "attention to the fact that standardised tests and quantitative approaches to educational accountability measure at best a narrow range of traditional competences", and that this "may result in schools having to adapt teaching syllabi to test material, thus neglecting the intrinsic values of education". The EP furthermore "points out that education and training have an important role in developing ethical and civil virtues and humanness, whereas teachers' work and students' achievements in this area are overlooked by test scores".[2]

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[1] Cf. Poehner, M.E and Lantolf, J.P. (2005) Dynamic assessment in the language classroom. Language Teacher Research, 9(3), 233-265

[2] European Parliament resolution of 23 June 2016 on follow-up of the Strategic Framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) (2015/2281(INI)), no. 38, cf. www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&reference=P8-TA-2016-0291&language=EN&ring=A8-2016-0176

When asked by the German government to produce a position paper on assessment, Prof. Eckhart Klieme, together with a group of ten of the top German educational experts, suggested the use of centralised testing only for minimal standards[3]. Beyond that, more generic learning outcomes can be formulated with competence-based assessment criteria. This sets clear standards without binding learning outcomes to a fixed set of contents and skills. Although commissioned by the German government, it chose to ignore Klieme's advice, instead introducing standardised centralised tests for all state run qualifications that test the whole gamut of the curriculum, which ends up standardising education through normed tests. Before centralised tests, a teacher could go more deeply into something and then test that. With centralised tests, students have to be prepared for everything. Since the syllabus tends to be huge, this has led inevitably to a more superficial and short-term learning. What is called for is the opposite.

In order to progress sufficiently quickly in everything that might come up on the centralised exam, basic skills may be neglected. Furthermore, time is often not taken to deepen an understanding of what is learned, its relevance to life and practice and its meaning for the learner. Learning outcomes begin to look like plants reared for maximum yield, but with stems hardly strong enough to carry the yield, and much more susceptible to disease, draught and bad weather than the wild plants that would overgrow their brethren on high heels were it not for the roundup weed killer needed to ensure the survival of the weakest.

With uniform standards for schools legislated and enforced through the authority of the state, schools tend to turn into learning factories with centralised normative testing regimes which thwart the flexibility, innovation and creativity in educational settings that can boost learning quality and educational attainment. In the initiative report on the ET 2020, the European Parliament highlights exactly this: "The need for flexibility, innovation and creativity in educational settings which can boost learning quality and educational attainment"[4].

Flexibility, innovation and creativity can only thrive when the educational sector is given sufficient independence from the state to break out of the tight confines of fixed curricula and their accompanying testing and qualification schemes. Education needs to become much more independent of both state and business interests. That will enable it to emphasise "the crucial role of an individual-centred approach in education and training systems which benefits the development of creativity and critical thinking while focusing on students´ personal interests, needs and abilities"[5], which the European Parliament calls for.

Lip-service is often paid to "flexibility, innovation and creativity". Instead of forcing students into defensive learning in order to do well on prescribed tests, Waldorf education enacts an educational system that places the well-being of students at the centre and fosters

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[3] Zur Entwicklung nationaler Bildungsstandards – Expertise, cf. www.bmbf.de/pub/Bildungsforschung_Band_1.pdf . For example on p. 224: „Alle Schulen wären verpflichtet, alle Schüler wenigstens zur Mindeststufe zu führen. Damit – und das gab es noch nie im deutschen Schulsystem – würde der Schüler zum Kunden, der ein Recht hat, etwas so oft erklärt zu bekommen, bis er es verstanden hat – individuelle Förderung statt Auslese. „Wir müssen verhindern, dass Schulen weiterhin einen großen Teil ihrer Schüler als Risikofälle abtun", sagt Bildungsforscher Eckhard Klieme"
[4] ibid
[5] Ibid, no. 40

and assesses their ability to communicate, cooperate, lead and to take appropriate action in unforeseen situations. It seeks to develop the autonomous, socially orientated person who is needed in a globalised, uncertain, and somewhat anxious and frightened world. Educational spaces should therefore be interdependent eco-systems that reflect the needs of the individual learner and nurture expansive learning through appropriate assessment methods that support the learning process.

Waldorf education sees association and cooperation as a better solution to the challenges of sustainable living than competition, one that sees nation states generally set up state controlled monolithic education systems, within which students compete -- instead of encouraging a wide range of educational approaches that are not legislated into existence by non-educators, but that arise out of a pedagogical practice that encourages engaging with peers, teachers and indeed the world through cooperation and association. The world needs thriving and effective examples of counter-practice to monolithic school systems. Education has to change. The status quo of Steiner Waldorf education needs to continuously evolve from within.

Students were often not given time to seek that inner space out of which knowledge can be mastered, so instead, knowledge masters them. In its initiative report on the ET 2020, the European Parliament "stresses the need to develop basic skills in order to achieve quality education"[6]. It is time to take up Klieme's suggestion.

How to assess and give feedback?

In "Changing teaching through formative assessment"[7], Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam point out that "whilst students' learning can be advanced by feedback through comments, the giving of marks or grades has a negative effect because students ignore comments when marks are also given (Butler, 1988)". They advocate an interactive style of classroom dialogue where teaching is informed by continuous feedback from students, noting, however, that this requires "a radical change in teaching style from many teachers, one that they found challenging, not least because it felt at first as if they were losing control." Black and Wiliam showed that this kind of assessment improved learning by about a factor of two. Experience showed that "the provision of comments gave both students and their parents advice on how to improve. It also set up a new focus on the learning issues rather than on trying to interpret a mark or grade."

Peter Gallin and Urs Ruf developed a similar method of "Dialogic Learning" as colleagues of mathematics and mother tongue in a Swiss school. They work with frequent written feedback from students that they use as the basis for their next lessons. Such lessons become more biographical events, with unforeseen learning achievements that sometimes reach a profundity students are normally not deemed capable of.

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[6] Ibid, no. 39
[7] FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT – IMPROVING LEARNING IN SECONDARY CLASSROOMS – 92-64-00739-3 © OECD 2005, cf. http://www.oecd.org/edu/ceri/35337920.pdf p. 7

In addition to the classical, more "objective" assessment they also use, the "Häkchen" represent an additional, more subjective and ipsitive dimension of assessment: Feedbacks are marked with "Häkchen" (one to three check marks or a crossed-out checkmark) that give value to the undertaking the student engaged in *against the backdrop of the capabilities of each particular individual.*

Steiner Waldorf schools have been working with yearly verbal reports instead of linear grading schemes for almost 100 years. In the last decade, many of these schools feel the need for renewal within this tradition and look for more precise feedback methods without adopting linear grading systems. Some schools have for instance piloted dialogic reports that consist of minuted conversations with every pupil and parents at the end of the school year, instead of written report cards. This has proven to be a much more precise and effective method of feedback to students and parents.

Some Steiner schools have begun to work with qualifications based on learning outcomes that do not completely define the curriculum and competence-based assessment criteria that do not specify the method of assessment. The latter is left for teachers to choose. Diverse forms are available, from classic test all the way to "naturally occurring evidence" of achievements, which can be recorded by the teacher, but also by the student (for example through portfolio). Such qualifications were for instance developed by the Steiner schools in New Zealand and are on the New Zealand qualification framework. Steiner schools in Flanders are also free to choose any method of assessment to give evidence that learning outcomes have been reached. provided that the teacher can indicate the criteria used for assessing. Instead of centralised state testing, teachers in the schools determine whether a student has reached a qualification or not. The question arises here if and what transnational usage can be made of good and best practice schemes, possibly on the basis of the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

The Steiner schools also developed the European Portfolio Certificate, a Comenius star project, that allows students to record and reflect presentations of formal, informal and non-formal learning of their choice. This gives their achievements a personal note and make the learner much more visible than a report card. Unfortunately, this approach is so far only being used by a small minority of schools. It is open to adaptation by other interested (non-Waldorf) schools.

Most schools counsel students regarding career choices. Beyond that, talking with students regularly each year about their development and listening to what they have to say acknowledges the student and gives assistance in identifying future learning pathways and how to deal with concrete difficulties the student choose to address.

Finally, Steiner Waldorf education seeks to work with novel approaches to teacher education, new approaches to learning in schools, new approaches to teaching and assessment for learning, new forms of school-based research and new forms of international cooperation.

Steiner Waldorf education is an approach among other valuable approaches that try to tackle the educational challenges in their own way. Education needs novel approaches made possible by the freedom of choice in education.

Basic principles of assessment in Steiner Waldorf education

- Assessment should holistically encompass intellectual, personal and social skills and should not be limited only to measurable intellectual skills. Not even everything in the field of intellectual skills is measurable.

- Assessment is an important part of learning: It makes both students and teachers aware of the state of knowledge, of skills and of the learning progression.

- Ideally, all learning settings appeal to and stimulate the innermost core of the individual[8], including assessment.

- This aim can be furthered by an assessment that stimulates and guides the interest of the learner. Intrinsic motivation is the strongest driving force in learning.

- Continuous assessment for learning needs age appropriate formats.

- In order to awaken interest in the student for new knowledge or new skills, teachers must be given the time and freedom to adapt and re-adapt what they teach to the students afresh for every lesson. This necessitates open instead of fixed and detailed curricula, fixing neither methods nor time frames for any given learning outcome.

- Because learning is always a highly individual process, assessment of knowledge and skills needs to take an interest in individual development.

- To meet basic requirements of knowledge and skills, minimum standards can be set. These make basic expectations of society visible (e.g. literacy and numeracy), for careers as well as for life in general.

- Last but not least: Learning takes place through human encounter and unfolds between teachers and students and between students as peers. Therefore all assessment should foster these relationships and occur in an atmosphere of trust and esteem.

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[8] Learning should also involve the spiritual dimension of the human being, the innermost core of the individual. The latter manifests itself in the capacity of every individual to find ways to change whatever situation it finds itself in: the capacity of development.