Reconciling Educational Standards and 21st Century Learning?

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I would like to thank Sean Cudmore and Debbie O'Neill for inviting me to join this seminar today and to share some brief thoughts that I hope will be of interest. There is a question mark in the title, suggesting some contestation and uncertainty in the topic.

In framing my thoughts for today, I was reminded of Thomas Hardy's poem "The convergence of the twain (Lines on the loss of the 'Titanic')" published exactly one hundred years ago in 1915. In it Hardy describes and traces the separate formation and building of two formidable creations – an iceberg and the Titanic. The poem concludes with the eventual meeting of the *twain*. I'll return to this image later.

In education a feature of modern policy and curriculum development is the way in which information is shared and made more accessible. This has led to a convergence of practice worldwide, what Alister Ross (2000) calls the Tamed Curriculum, or we might consider, the Tamed Policy. We are only a few clicks away from all we need to know about literacy initiatives in Queensland or Sweden and this information is increasingly presented in English.

A newer dimension of the tamed curriculum or tamed policy is the move towards targets and standards: that knowledge and skills that learners should demonstrate at specified points along the educational journey. Standards are frequently expressed as levels, expectations about what students should know at each succeeding step of the education/schooling ladder. Often, standards are at their sharpest, most detailed and most influential in relation to first language, mathematics and to a lesser degree science, the first two of which are the focus of today's session.

Monitoring and assessment has grown up around such standards and this will be familiar to many of the principals and teachers in the room. The pendulum has swung constantly in relation to the nature of the assessments: assessment tasks, controlled assessment, standardised tests, and teacher judgement to name a few. These assessments engender varying degrees of contestation, upset, and maybe, if we're honest and optimistic, some progress.

Standards tend to emanate from within educational power structures - ministries, statutory agencies - often through consultations with stakeholders, sometimes not. Many reasons are advanced for promoting, monitoring and raising standards.

We need educational standards so that our citizens are equipped with the knowledge and skills to be as good as the best; in business, trade, innovation. - The competitiveness argument.

Citizens deserve the best education to reach their potential, to remain inquisitive learners throughout their lives – the "rights" argument.

Education is an expensive business; it accounts for a significant proportion of national wealth, so we need to be assured that we are getting value for money. - ipso facto we need standards.

But, like Hardy's poem, there is a parallel narrative, one that does not necessarily sit easily with the standards agenda, as tightly defined in relation to literacy and numeracy.

This parallel development relates to another feature of the Tamed, Global Curriculum: the emphasis on so-called cross-curricular skills. In the Northern Ireland context this means: Thinking Skills, Personal Capabilities, Communication, Using mathematics, and Using Information and Communication Technologies. In the South the NCCA's Junior Cycle curriculum emphasises, or is trying to emphasise skills such as: Managing myself; Communicating; Being creative; Managing Information & Thinking; Working with others; Staying well.

Globally, common elements of the key skills agenda include:

Think creatively, flexibly and critically
Identify, interpret and solve problems
Relate, collaborate and communicate effectively
Use technology seamlessly in learning.

These are challenging skills to learn; they are demanding to teach; they are difficult to assess.

Examples of practice have emerged; evaluations of practice are not quite as plentiful. With colleagues in the School of Education and the School of Computer Science and Statistics at Trinity College, I am involved in evaluating what is termed the Bridge 21 programme, rolled out in 10 schools. This is designed to promote key skills in lower secondary education through the use of technology and active project learning approaches. We have identified successes and challenges. There is no magic wand. And one of the main obstacles to embedding key skills in teaching and learning is the assessment backdrop, focused as it is on standards, certification and accountability in its various forms.

A brief review of three broad educational initiatives brings a sobering reminder that planned initiatives frequently fall short of expectations. In the United States, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 was designed to transform the lot of American students, especially those "falling behind," or below standard. There are many perspectives on No Child, but one of the most intriguing came from one of its chief instigators and sponsors, Senator Edward Kennedy.

The recent OECD report: *Students, Computers and Learning* leaves us no more optimistic about the value-added by the ICT revolution in schools and society. At least in relation to two foci of this morning's session: numeracy and literacy.

And in reviewing the efficacy of formative assessment initiatives in Scotland, Louise Hayward questions the sustainability of initiatives, unless policymakers, developers and practitioners continue to meet, engage and problem-solve throughout the life of a programme, not just at the outset.

This all begs the question, how can we succeed at all? Are strategies associated with literacy, numeracy, ICT and inclusion, for example, all doomed to failure? Perhaps we need to look for evidence in the right places and look for the right type of evidence. For example, why would we expect that increased investment in ICT would increase scores on the PISA test of mathematics, even a computerised version of the paper test? What else might ICT bring to the table, for students, for teachers, for society? Are we looking for that?

This leads me to derive three implications and challenges for assessment.

When systems prioritise novel or alternative types and approaches to learning, we need to build assessment systems sufficiently sensitive and calibrated to reflect and capture them. Some sacred cows may need to move, if space is to be created for assessments that reflect the richness of the educational experience for students.

Education is about people, ideas and experiences. Assessment needs to accommodate different perspectives, interests and capacities. The more the buy-in from all stakeholders, the greater the chances of change and success.

We know from the literature that educational change doesn't come quickly. If educational systems sign up to concepts such as cross-curricular skills, those in charge (and by that I include the funders) and those charged with implementing the change, need to stick with them. They need to play the long game. We need to anticipate and design for the setbacks; we need to channel sufficient resources in an intelligent and meaningful manner.

Can cross-curricular skills approaches co-exist with and flourish alongside standards-based testing/assessment, especially where standards focus especially on literacy and numeracy? In the minds of teachers, parents and students, what is tested usually trumps everything else. So we may need to redouble our efforts to find ways to recognise, monitor and celebrate alternative *ways of knowing* by students. This necessitates a re-envisioning of some traditional standpoints on technical qualities of tests, especially reliability and comparability of assessments.

To conclude, I have juxtaposed some of my thoughts around an admittedly restricted interpretation of standards alongside a broader vision of the type of learning and development that schools might promote. All this was set in the context of how these constructs are assessed.

We have Standards. We have Cross-curricular key skills.

Let me leave you with one question: Thinking back to Thomas Hardy,

Which is the Iceberg and which is the Titanic?

Sources

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