

Book Reviews

Beyond the Tyranny of Testing: Relational Evaluation in Education

KENNETH GERGEN and SCHERTO GILL, 2020

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This book details what's wrong with the current exam-focused approach to educational assessment and offers a viable counter-vision. A distinction is drawn at once between what the authors term 'educational evaluation', and the all-too-common processes surrounding high-stakes summative testing, which they term 'assessment'. I think of assessment as encompassing much that the authors understand by 'evaluation', so I had to readjust my definitions as I read. Leaving aside this slight confusion over terms, I found arguments across the book clearly and accessibly made. Overall, the book's tone is refreshingly optimistic about what is being done around the world to pioneer approaches to educational assessment which are humane, helpful to learner and teacher, and serviceable to society. In other words, entirely unlike those which pupils and students in England and Wales currently endure.

Gergen and Gill found their argument on two contrasting conceptions of schooling. The school as factory is set against the school as conversation. A factory model of schooling uses high-stakes summative testing to ensure the system functions properly (in its own terms) and the quality of the 'product' is reliable. Such a model privileges individual performance as against that of the collective, thereby generating conditions of oppressive individual accountability rather than productive responsibility. This individualised, top-down, measurement-obsessed approach is set against a conception of school as 'conversations-in-motion'. Conversation is mobilised as a metaphor for schooling because a conversation is relational and co-creative. The authors urge that, since it is within human relationships that meanings are made, knowledge constructed and reconstructed, and values arrived at and contested, human relationships are at the heart of the educational process in school. Furthermore, they seek to 'replace the traditional idea of a relationship as composed of independent persons with a vision of relational process from which individuals emerge as who they are' (p33).

The authors note the need to re-learn 'generative' ways of relating, and not least how to disagree without offending. They have advice to give and examples to share about how to manage disagreement constructively. They acknowledge that education is embedded in power-relationships, and recognise that dialogue established with the best intentions can nevertheless generate hostility and antagonism. They have faith in thoroughgoing democracy, want all voices heard and responsibility collectively shared. Those who

hold that a clash of arguments in conversation can work to refine truth rather than symbolically ‘annihilate the other’ (p188) may need to hold their peace.

It is all too obvious, at least in England, that, as the authors write, ‘test performance is becoming the very purpose of education’ (p. vii). Human values are driven to the margins when pupils and students are recast as data-points. The current high-stakes summative testing regime grinds out results, and when it can’t – as in the 2020 GCSE crisis – panic ensues among the powers-that-be. Government, and its administrative bureaucracy, has long scorned any approach to formal educational assessment other than the snapshot summative high-stakes test. Those who laud and defend the exam-mill, and claim such testing is fairer than any other system, must close their mind to the influence on learning of a student’s experience and conditions of life, and disregard the importance for learning of students’ individual interests, their degree of anxiety in the face of the test, their particular responses to the range of pedagogical approaches they have met with, and so on. In making these arguments, the authors bleakly note the misery exams inflict upon cohorts of students, the constraining effect test-readying has on the curriculum offer made by teachers, and the way such readying crimps and confines pedagogical practice. They contend that ‘[o]ur tradition of educational assessment damages relationships, undermines well-being, and radically constrains the potentials for learning’ (p50). Summative exams create ‘hierarchies of worth’ (p43) which have a lasting impact on the way young people regard themselves and are regarded. These hierarchies help shape the nature of the educational experiences students are offered.

All this is in keeping with the ‘neoliberal assumptions’ (p5) which work to fashion education as a product and to instrumentalise what it means:

[M]easurement of the product has come to determine the value of the system. As education becomes less about engagement in learning and more about succeeding in tests, it is stripped of any other value or meaning. Whether the educational process enhances creative potential, curiosity, moral sensitivity, aesthetic appreciation, a sense of justice, openness to others who differ, or capacities to collaborate with peers, is of minor significance. Or worse, such considerations only matter as they are related to test performance. (p6)

Gergen and Gill hope to inspire transformation in the human relationships which, they urge, are at the heart of successful education. Against the ever-grinding exam-mill, they advance no single alternative model. Rather, they explain and explore what they mean by ‘relational evaluation’ as it pertains to young people busy learning in primary and secondary phases, to the evaluation of teachers, to schools, and to the education system as a whole. They draw on theory (including their own previous work) and on a range of real-world examples of pedagogical practice where an understanding of ‘the relational’

has been used to change practices and attitudes. Just as schools are better seen not as managed structures but as dynamic conversations and active living processes of relating, assessment is better understood (as Eliot Eisner has also suggested) not as measurement-based judgement but as the process of ‘valuing’. That is, as evaluation, a process which breathes life into learning.

So they propose ‘three central goals of relational evaluation ... to *enhance the process of learning* ... to *inspire sustained engagement in learning*, and ... to *enrich the process of relating*’ (p53; original emphasis). They argue that ‘enhancing learning’ currently has no place in assessment in schools, for measurement-based approaches are ancillary to learning. Their approach offers an ethical basis for assessment as against traditional approaches which ‘undermine trust, friendship, and authenticity and lend themselves to anxiety, alienation, and antagonism’ (p57).

What might relational evaluation look like? Practical examples in use in schools offer a glimpse. They include enhanced scope for listening to student voices, reflective dialogue, collaborative inquiry, documentation and archiving. Schools successfully draw on student-led reviews, portfolios, records of achievement and varieties of presentation and reflection. Such approaches make it possible to illustrate individual development in learning over time, and to enable multiple perspectives to come to bear on a student’s learning processes and growth. One hallmark of ‘relational evaluation’ is an expansion of what is to be understood as ‘educational progress’. An expanded understanding entails a more commensurate ability to make such progress visible in and for each student: not measuring learning, but measuring-up to it.

Further chapters explore the implications and ramifications of ‘relational evaluation’ at primary and secondary phases, for teachers as well as students, and for schools as a whole. In the authors’ view: ‘[R]esponsibility for learning should never reside in the individual; it is a collective achievement. Thus, to define the quality of teachers’ work in terms of student outcomes disregards the ways in which students are active participants in their own learning ... to say nothing of classroom relationships, family, economic conditions, and so on’ (p113).

Against a version of teaching reconfigured in the neoliberal capitalist order as delivery, instruction and transmission (and in which the teacher is only valuable insofar as she or he fulfils their function as deliverer, instructor, transmitter) the authors champion a version which returns to teachers the intrinsic value of their work. Teaching is seen as responsible co-creation, and teachers as expert at what they do. This means that: ‘The primary source of development should take place within the teaching community itself. The major repository of wisdom and knowledge about teaching lies within this community. In sharing stories, values, opinions, and practices’ (p115).

The antidote to top-down approaches develops, as ever, from the bottom up, among those who do the actual work.

A concluding pair of chapters address several obvious objections to the implementation of ‘relational evaluation’ in practice system-wide. How can adequate time be made for it? Can it be suitably rigorous? How may national standards be upheld? How can it mesh with the need to select a cohort to enter higher education? Further debate will strengthen arguments here, especially as regards the degree of faith to be placed in digital technology as a solution. And since issues of ‘assessment’ are inextricably bound up with issues of curriculum and of pedagogy, debate will further ramify into these areas. Gergen and Gill already challenge what they see as the outmoded notion of ‘essential knowledge’, currently such a driver of government policy, along with its inevitable institutionalisation in standardised curricula. They support emergent and inquiry-based approaches, and list examples of schools around the world where this happens. They also advocate the idea of a school as a learning community which ‘expands learning to beyond students, teachers, and administrators. Parents, caretakers, neighbours, businesses, local government, and other stakeholders are invited in as learning partners’ (p161).

In her book *Assessing Children’s Learning*, Mary Jane Drummond shows how any consideration of educational assessment or evaluation must begin not with questions about how and when to assess, but with questions about why. The question ‘why assess?’ implies the deeper question of ‘why educate?’, for to do justice to our pupils and students through the act of educational assessment, which is their right, we must understand our purposes as educators and our hopes for those we teach. Currently dominant forms of assessment, enacted daily in the exam-mill, fail to value so much about children and young people as learners, and about their learning. A conference-invitation I recently received gave proof yet again of the malaise which locks us down. Among the papers to be given was one called: ‘Re-imagining assessment: measuring student performance following Covid-19’. Another promised to help me improve my ‘delivery of online learning’, while a third spoke of ‘effective’ curriculum design. Meanwhile, MPs and their advisers lament the ‘amount’ of learning ‘lost’ because of the pandemic and urge pupils to ‘catch up’. This vocabulary, and the conception of learning and of young people as learners which it articulates, offers nothing for those who understand educational assessment as a subtle and continuing activity in which the significance of the learner’s meaning-making needs to be respected in its own terms, and the learner’s thinking itself thought about. Against the rush to return the state education system in England and Wales to the way it used to be, with all the educational harm which attends life in the exam-mill – ‘assessment as learning’, in Harry Torrance’s phrase – Gergen and Gill’s book offers a highly-readable, provocative set of arguments for a better way.

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