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'The Map is Not the Territory'¹

Assessment, Accreditation and their Documentation within the framework of Situated Learning

By Bob Groves

I am privileged in having been an adult education tutor who was 'in at the birth' of the Open College Network's presence in the North East. Probably the very first course run under OCN accreditation arrangements locally was a small effort called 'Introduction to Word Processing', sponsored by the WEA and written/taught by me in a rather too-small room in Wallsend. Even at that stage, assessment and accreditation was something controversial in both its philosophy and application, and I must say that working on NEOCN accredited materials over the succeeding years has greatly added to my own knowledge of what the pitfalls and assets of these educational topics can be. During those exciting days of that first course, I distinctly remember long talks with Nigel Todd (then sole OCN development worker in the region) on the topic of whether a Level 3 word processing course was logically possible. That controversy, I know, still goes on... but it was the spark that set me off thinking about assessment, accreditation and its limits - a process that has continued up to this day.

Classically speaking (and I mean by this, the 'classic' training that tutors get through famous courses such as the City & Guilds 730), assessment is about finding out what a person has learned, comparing this against standards and providing feedback on whether a standard has been met or still needs further learning. Assessment is thereby a diagnostic and accounting tool; used formally or informally as is appropriate. The focus throughout is on the individual and their internalised mental processes. Both of these are (technically speaking) physically 'inaccessible' to the teacher. I therefore seem to spend my time constantly plunging into the unknown area of what an individual has or hasn't mentally learned during a course or other experience, this being largely a matter of finding evidence of learning which 'points at' internalised knowledge and skill. My educational detective job (very 'a la Sherlock Holmes' sometimes) is, more or less, what assessment is considered to be all about.

Underpinning this approach is the theoretical assumption that the individual is the clear focus of any learning. Most teachers have had this drummed into them via 'student centred' approaches, taught during their training. However, any theoretical understanding of what learning actually is in turn affects how the process of assessment, and hence accreditation, works, since it is upon physical evidence of this 'hidden' learning (in one form or another) upon which certification and progression depends.

¹ Quote from the work of Alfred Korzbyski

For example, during the assessment of learners on the course 'Intro' to Word Processing mentioned above, evidence consists of a checklist of dissected word processing skills, backed up by learner print outs of their work, marked by me and verified by an OCN moderator. We could be 'sure' (as far as that word has meaning in this case) that someone could word process if they were capable of evidentially demonstrating the various stages of practice that entailed the overall physical task of operating word processing software and hardware correctly. The other issues connected with such learning, such as how students related to one another, or how much discussion of word processing took place were attractive but non-essential items. Word processing was simply something observed; understanding was inferred from the observation.

It was (and largely still is) logically assumed that observing and recording the successful completion of individual components of a skill also implied that the student would 'know' the whole skill, since the former were evidently subsumed into the latter. Consequently, since any skill or process could be broken down into its component parts and each successful stage of learning recorded individually, it was clearly logical to assume that a dissected view of human learning was the most accurate, the most educationally rigorous and the most convenient model for an accreditation system. With the coming of restricted funding of non-accredited provision, many tutors and providers had to adapt rapidly to accreditation in order to get their courses off the ground at all, and hence the model hastily described above was adopted by all and sundry. Who can blame anyone for doing this? We're talking survival here! Add to that NOCN's influential adoption of the same system, and the 'dissected model' has provided a foundation for a very large growth in accredited adult education over the past decade.

So be it! Looking at OCN course submission forms, I see the 'dissected model' displayed throughout, asking for Evidence of Learning attached to particular Methods of Assessment, and Criteria matched to specific Outcomes. The Outcomes themselves are the 'components' of learning. The Criteria specify the range of acceptable circumstances in which a component may be recorded, and the Evidence is the final individualised physical outcome in portfolios, files, diaries, sundry bits of paper, etc.

By the way, I am not being cynical or sceptical here simply for the sake of it! If I'm critical of the above, it's because monocultural hegemonies always make me a little wary, and the above reeks of one-size-fits-all mentality... something we naturally abhor when its applied to us in other circumstances. Recent developments in the submission form have improved matters, at least in layout and extended definition if not in overall philosophy... so I am not without a sense of hope that ongoing discussion will allow even greater flexibility in how assessment is understood. However, there is a deeper problem than just the layout of a form. What bothers me is that educational research over the last decade has continually flagged-up a view of learning which throws grave doubts on the 'dissected model' and advocates an approach which has been variously called 'anthropological', 'holistic', 'social', 'cognitive apprenticeship'... or most famously 'situated' learning. Up to now, this model has been consistently ignored by most educational bodies, but I feel its day may well be just over the horizon.

Begun by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's remarkable book 'Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation' (1991), though with foundations in the work of Vygotsky back in the 1940's, this model describes learning as a product of the group to which a learner belongs and the processes the group have evolved in attacking a particular subject. Lave even goes so far as to suggest that individual learning really doesn't exist and that it is the group that learns (the individual's perceived learning being a product of the group environment). She brings a variety of examples of this type of learning-in-practice to bear on her argument, drawn from anthropological case studies from across the globe. What they all indicate is how the context of the process of learning is vitally important in this model, the background context being the key to understanding what learning is happening and how it is being learned.

Situated learning calls for a highly non-dissected approach to assessing learners. The 'dissected model' fails because it sees only the detail (specifically: the evidence) and not the context, which is often forgotten. One might say that the 'dissected model' mistakes the isomorphic map of a student's evidence with the territory of his or her learning, and jumps to the conclusion that the individualised evidence is the vital part of learning (is the learning itself!) purely because it shares homologous form with it (i.e. the physical evidence 'equates' with the hidden learning I mentioned earlier. See note ²).

For me, it is a great relief to find that Lave and Wenger's version of events indicates that learning is clearly visible, but one has to describe the context and process of the group in order to get at it. The weight of recording shifts from the individual-alone to the individual-in-context, not abandoning the idea of individuality but elucidating it through the processes in which individuality develops. For my word processing course this means possibly a more descriptive view of how word processing works, taking in (perhaps):

- The 'world' of the course itself
- The expectations of the students
- How they relate to one another
- How the assessment process affects them
- How they relate to the concept of ICT
- What is expected of them from outside bodies (employers, other educational bodies...)
- Their family and past learning 'baggage'
- Etc.

Definitely more work, but less mechanistic and more organic in its outlook to word processing in context.

Calls for a radical move toward such a social theory of learning have not been uncommon. In 1999, Professor Frank Coffield of Newcastle University stated that:

'There is a large hole in the heart of the government's policies for lifelong learning and the same fatal weakness can be detected in the rhetoric about The Learning Society: plans are afoot to create a new culture of lifelong learning without either any theory of learning or a recognition that a new social theory of learning is required.'

... and later in the same address:

'Teaching and learning remain, even for many experts in education, unproblematic processes of transmission and assimilation, but no Learning Society can be built on such atheoretical foundations' (Coffield, 1999)

(It's notable that he reiterated the self-same warning at a talk he gave earlier this year at Wallsend Peoples Centre organised by APTT).

Then just this month, a Round Table report from the normally conservative City & Guilds of London Institute stated that:

'...a growing body of research points to social, cultural and economic factors within local communities that affect attitudes to learning amongst adults and young people in FE colleges, the wider community and workplaces. Yet we tend to see problems of motivation, retention and achievement resolvable on an individual basis.'

² This criticism is similar to Wittgenstein's critique of his own early philosophy of language, which he later abandoned for a more anthropological viewpoint on how language and (coincidentally) learning work. See 'Philosophical Investigations' (1953).

I would suggest that both Professor Coffield and City & Guilds are talking along similar lines and indicate that more needs to be done to support the dissemination and practice of aspects of social theory of learning. Within organisations such as NEOCN, which influence the structure and practice of learning curriculum across the region this is an urgent matter, since a social theory of learning is one that a body such as the Open College Networks, being federative, would find most congenial. Both C&G and Professor Coffield indicate the pragmatic and personal benefits of such a radical change for the sake of the adult learner and the growth of a true Learning Society. I would also wish to emphasise the benefits to the practice of teachers, their reciprocal role with learners, their professionalism, and how these elements of their work are assisted by community organisations such as NEOCN. One step towards this would be wholesale revision of NOCN course submission documentation methods, allowing for greater flexibility in introducing holistic assessment based around situated learning. This would allow for experimental work in the area of community education in particular, and encourage the growth of a range of practical approaches around Professor Coffield's 'social theory' goal.

A small step perhaps, but a vital one if we all are to truly accept the challenge of situated learning and break out of the moribund towards an honest strategy for an inclusive learning society.

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