

# The Assessment of Teaching Practice

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**E**ducation is concerned with change - with a process of change but generally speaking we educationalists aren't very keen on much change. Getting teachers or examiners or headteachers or Education Officers or College Principals to change their practices is not easy. We tend to be a cautious lot; we are inclined to be rather complacent and satisfied with the way we do things. We are imprisoned by our own comfortable habits and tightly constructed little worlds. As we progress through our professional life we progressively narrow the scope of our work.

We become trapped in our field of specialisation. We become caught in a web of fixed relationships. Our opinions harden. Our ideas congeal. Our horizons narrow. Our sympathies dry up. We develop set ways of doing things. Nothing surprises us.

The issue I wish to explore is about change but is essentially a technical one and is related to how we signify the degree of competence shown by student teachers during their teaching practice. I shall restrict my commentary, as far as I am able, to the question of assessing such competence and, in particular, I want to try to identify some of the pitfalls that we all get into when we try to grade such performance too finely. I am approaching the topic from the point of view of the Faculty of Education's External Examiner for the Practice of Education. The Faculty has been required, as part of a student's degree examinations, to give some kind of literal or numerical equivalent which it is felt accurately represents his level of competence as a practising teacher, as judged during his final teaching practice.

Many headteachers and teachers, too, in discussing students' performance with me over the past few years find it convenient to talk in terms of literal grades when describing the varying success of student teachers in their schools.

Before attempting to examine some of the problems associated with assessing student teaching performance, I thought I ought to reiterate a point made by my colleague and predecessor as the Faculty's External Examiner, Lewis Howdle, who, at a similar conference held here in Malta in 1979, is reported as having said that most students find their teaching practice worthwhile, if exhausting, but for many it is at the same time highly stressful and unsatisfactory. They see the teaching practice as an artificial event full of ambiguities.

The research evidence on teaching practice shows unequivocally that the assessment aspect of the practice bedevils the practice element. However much the student's tutors may stress that the important thing is to try things out, to experiment, not to be anxious and so on, the student is always conscious of the fact that he is being assessed by the very person who is acting as his adviser. In what I have to say about the problems of assessment that follow, we should not ignore this important proviso. It is worth recognising, too, that the practical school experience of student teachers in the Maltese student-worker scheme is acquired in a very similar situation though for a more prolonged period and often without the support of the teacher who would otherwise be teaching his class. I want, therefore, to outline some of the background that has influenced the current ways of assessing teaching practice. Such practice resists giving a single mark (whether literal or numerical) which purports to represent the level of competence that student teachers exhibit on their final teaching practice. It is certainly true to say, for example, that I know of no validating body which currently requires the final teaching practice examination to be assessed other than by a straight decision of pass or fail. The purpose of my talk is, therefore, to set down some of the reasons why current practice is what it is, and why those who believe that a finely tuned system of A's, B's, C's, D's and E's has much to commend it, might reconsider their position.

Current research on the assessment of teaching practice stresses the view that a close partnership between schools and teacher training institutions is the key to satisfactory arrangements for teaching practice and is worth almost any effort to achieve. The success of any system of practical experience stands or falls on the degree of contact between these two partners. I commend to you the splendid monograph, "Trends in Teacher Education", published by the Faculty of Education of this University in 1979 which admirably summarises some of the problems which are particular to the teacher training system in operation on the Island of Malta. For reference purposes one can consult the HMI discussion documents, "Developments in the B.Ed. degree", published in 1980, which describes current practice in a number of U.K. training establishments, which stresses the central issue that shared understanding between the schools and the training institutions is vital in determining how practical teaching situations are to be assessed. A further paper entitled, "Criteria of assessment of practical

teaching” produced by Bede College in Durham, sets down a number of interesting criteria for assessing teaching performance even though, as I shall point out later, you may not agree with any of them! Further papers, particularly that by Stones and Morris entitled, “Teaching Practice [Problems and Perspectives]”, identify the kind of minefield that we walk through when we try to get members of the teaching profession to agree on what priorities they would give to different criteria when assessing classroom practice. Such then is the background. Let now turn to the actual task that I hope to accomplish.

What I would like to do is to try to identify from some of this comparatively recent work in the U.K. and elsewhere, some of the problems associated with the assessment of teaching competence. In doing so I want to point out some of the conclusions these enquiries have come to which suggest that we are unwise to use a finely graded system when assessing such competence. My investigations have isolated five problems.

### Problem Number One

**H**eadteachers, teachers, lecturers, inspectors, external examiners, education officers don’t agree on the qualities and attributes which contribute to successful teaching. Even if a check list could be produced, like the one, for example, from Bede College or from the Malta Faculty of Education or from the Froebel College or from Homerton or from Leeds University, there is very strong evidence that there is no agreement about which factors should carry more weight than others.

Which, for example, is more important?

The objectives set down by the student for the work he is doing?

The quality of his notebook or his planning?

The contact and rapport he has with the children in his class?

The way in which he handles the class and maintains discipline?

The personal initiative of the student?

The variety and quality of wall charts?

The general impression one gets is that most of us generally rely on a kind of hunch and that many teachers I know would even question attempting to set down such factors in a hierarchy of importance anwaw.

### Problem Number Two

**W**e must recognise that schools themselves, the particular socio-economic areas in which they are situated, the level of community support they receive and factors

of that kind, all affect the quality of a teacher’s performance within them. Students on teaching practice will tell us that they are aware that all schools are not the same in terms of difficulty. There are what students call “easy” schools and “problem” schools and a student who does badly in a tough school can often justifiably claim he might well have done better in a more favourable environment and that any grading system is unfair when schools vary so much in difficulty. We might assume, therefore, that the teaching practice placement in a particular school will affect the assessment even before the student has entered it. I contend that such an assumption would be correct.

### Problem Number Three

**T**he different perspectives and reputations of the assessors, whether they be supervisors from the training institutions or, say, headteachers in the schools where the teaching practice is taking place, can markedly affect the grading/rating given a particular student.

There has been much work done on this since the classic piece of work done by Hartog and Rhodes in the 1930’s, who, through conducting an enquiry into how examiners marked written papers, established the view that the *subjectivity of the examiner* enters into the assessment of any performance whether he be assessing discursive prose or the way in which a student teacher performs in a classroom. This variance, we are all aware, bedevils all procedures where someone assesses someone else’s performance. Each of us needs no reminder of the teacher or examiner who is noted as a ‘hard’ marker or a ‘soft’ marker.

There is a good deal of evidence that:

1. an examiner’s prior knowledge of an individual affects his assessment of that individual;
2. the time of day that the practical performance is assessed can affect how it is judged;
3. the juxtaposition of such performance with other performances affects the judgement of it. (The assessment of, for example, a mediocre lesson given by one student can be over-rated if observed immediately following a disastrous one given by another);
4. the disposition of the assessor and the student teacher’s reaction to him can affect the judgement.

The point I am making is that there is evidence that assessment grades, whether given for a piece of discursive prose or for some practical teaching performance, can differ *quite independently of the quality of the candidate’s actual performance.*

## Problem Number Four

Some of the studies described in the papers which I mentioned earlier, make it quite clear that in the assessment of teaching performance the 'personality' of the student influences the assessment procedure. The extroverted, entrepreneurial student seems to be rated so much higher than his more reserved but equally competent colleague. One of the researchers, too, draws our attention to the fact that attractive female students seem to get higher ratings than unattractive ones, especially if the assessor is a man. Such ratings are quite independent of the quality of the student's teaching performance. Could it be because better teachers pay attention to their personal grooming? Could it be because attractive girls are more self-confident? There appears, incidentally, to be no relationship in these studies between teaching practice grades and the good looks of young men! There appears, again, to be evidence that factors *other than the individual's teaching performance* affect his grading.

If we look, finally, beyond the final teaching practice to the student's teaching career a further issue emerges:

## Problem Number Five

A very considerable number of researchers, whose work is recorded in the literature, tell us that there is little positive evidence that specific grades of teaching competence determined whilst the student is in training *predict* that student's future teaching competence in schools.

Some studies have correlated grades given to students on their final teaching practice with grades given by the headteacher of schools that they are working in three to five years later. Such correlations have been as low as 0.07 and only as high as 0.34. Statisticians will recognise that such low correlations indicate the relationship to be spurious. Such low correlations could equally occur by chance. Even when the headteacher is asked to rate particular skills the young teacher exhibits five years after his initial training, the relationship between his assessments and those given to the teacher whilst he was at college have been just as spurious.

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What then is the point of specifying in some kind of seemingly precise way an assessment that bears no relationship whatsoever to the later competences it is supposed to predict?

To sum up then, what I have tried to do here is to highlight what, for many people, are conclusions of research activity which they themselves might well have anticipated. I doubt whether there are many of you who have been surprised by what I have said. Yet, certainly up until comparatively recently there were still institutions in the United Kingdom and elsewhere which used a finely graded system for assessing practical teaching performance, in some cases basing the grading on a 12 point scale. The James Report, published in 1972, had made no bones about the matter. It said, without hesitation, "teaching competence should no longer be the subject of a graded assessment but should be assessed on a simple pass/fail basis".

I, therefore, rest my case and in doing so recognise that by removing the convenience of a finely graded system (and a convenience is all that it ever was) we give ourselves the important and more time-consuming task of ensuring that any report on a student teacher's performance in the classroom must be so written as to highlight his strengths and weaknesses and give guidance to him to improve or modify his future practice. In suggesting this I am also clearly indicating that the secrecy surrounding such assessments should be removed and the student given access to the advice such reports ought to properly contain.

It occurs to me finally that in the Maltese student-worker situation there is a much greater responsibility laid upon the schools and, in particular, the headteacher of these schools to assist in the whole business of helping its young practising teachers and in the compilation of such records.

The student-worker scheme, by its very nature, demands a much closer involvement of the professionals actually working in and associated with a particular school, all of whom have the professional task of helping students on their teaching practice improve their performance.

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