



Useful assessment is timely assessment

TESTING AND TEACHING ARE NOT OPPOSED: TESTING IS AN INTEGRAL PART OF GOOD TEACHING, EXPLAINS RALPH SAUBERN.

‘Over testing’ and ‘teaching to the test’: they’re the ever-present bogeys of monitoring student achievement. Why? When you add up the column inches devoted to My School and the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), not to mention the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, you easily get to the idea that teachers, schools and systems are spending too much time and attention on assessment and not enough on simply teaching and learning.

It’s a temptingly simple dichotomy: you’re either ‘testing’ or you’re ‘teaching.’ The reality for the professional educator is, of course, quite different.

In addressing the 2008 Big Day Out for Victoria’s government school principals, Professor Geoff Masters of the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) described the process that teachers under-

take in addressing the learning needs of their students.

He presented this process as a ‘decision-making loop,’ as shown in Figure 1, by which a teacher’s understanding of the current situation, knowledge of how to address the situation and the required resources are translated into *action*, which leads to improved learning outcomes. The ‘loop’ part comes with the feedback and evaluation that provides the teacher with an updated understanding of the situation, builds the teacher’s knowledge about effective practices and identifies the resources that may be required for effective action in the future.

The best teachers target their teaching based on what they know about effective teaching, what resources they have and, critically, what they know about exactly where their students are in their individual learning journey.

Masters took up this theme again in his 2009 review of education for the

Queensland government. In discussing the pedagogical importance of the ‘targeting of teaching on students’ current levels of readiness and need,’ Masters quotes Michael Fullan, Peter Hill and Carmel Crévola from their book, *Breakthrough*.

‘In an ideal world, the teacher would have precise and current knowledge of each student’s starting points and also of what assistance each student requires to move to the next level.’

Where Fullan, Hill and Crévola talk about ‘precise and current knowledge,’ Masters talks about ‘timely, relevant and useable’ feedback.

Where does NAPLAN fit in?

NAPLAN and other system-wide assessments, like PISA, are used for a variety of purposes and to generate different kinds of reports for different audiences. The My School website is a high-profile example, but of course there are also individual stu-

dent reports going to parents, school data going to principals and system-level reports and data going to state or territory and Commonwealth governments.

This is useful for state, territory and Commonwealth planners to evaluate the performance of their systems as a whole, monitor the progress of innovations and improvements, and look for system problems as they arise. It's useful for school principals to track issues across the school and to look at elements of school performance compared to other, similar schools. It's useful for teachers and parents to identify individual students who are struggling in particular areas.

With NAPLAN testing taking place in May and results not reported until September, though, there's limited oppor-

tunity for classroom teachers to respond directly to the results of students in their classes. For example, by the time NAPLAN identifies or confirms a problem or strength with a particular student, the school year is deep into third term – the student is heading towards the next teacher's class and won't be tested again for another two years, so any changes in the student's performance within that time won't be monitored.

Put simply, NAPLAN and other system-wide testing provides teachers with relevant and useable feedback on student achievement and learning, but the timing of the tests and reporting schedule don't always meet the classroom teacher's need for timely and current knowledge – hence the need for in-class evaluation tools that can be used

exactly when the teacher needs them and which provide immediate feedback on student learning.

Progressive Achievement Tests

The *Progressive Achievement Tests* – known generally as the *PATs* – are a series of objective, summative, achievement tests published by ACER for use in schools.

Each of the different *PATs* is used to monitor student achievement in a particular area of the curriculum. So, for example, there's a test for reading comprehension and vocabulary – *PAT Reading*, a test for maths – *PAT Maths*, and a test for science – *PAT Science*.

The *PATs* are used by schools and teachers for a variety of purposes, but the three main purposes are:

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Assessment for learning

TO ADDRESS THE LEARNING NEEDS OF EACH STUDENT, YOU NEED TO TAKE A SNAPSHOT OF THE RANGE OF LEVELS OF ABILITY WITHIN YOUR CLASS OR CLASSES. **ANDREA DART** AND **VICTORIA HAZELL** EXPLAIN.

Using the *PAT Reading* and *PAT Maths* assessments gives us current, whole-cohort data about our students' levels of achievement in a range of specific areas. This information assists classroom teachers with planning learning activities and teaching lessons that meet individual student's learning needs.

Early in the school year, it sheds light on what students can already do well and where there may be misconceptions in their levels of understanding. In addition, it provides teachers with a snapshot of the range of levels of ability within their classes.

The graphical information becomes a vehicle for collaborative work with colleagues in terms of how best to provide differentiated curriculum to meet the needs of all learners.

We approach the testing program as assessment for learning with a view to using the information derived from it most constructively and in a timely sense. **T**

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Haileybury is a school that strives for academic excellence. To achieve this as educators, it's imperative that we understand the learning needs of each individual.

The *PATs* in the areas of mathematics, reading and spelling provide a clear picture of a student's capability. This information then allows our teaching staff to ensure their academic programs address individual learning needs. Where appropriate, this information can also become the basis of discussion with parents who, in partnership with our educators, can address the learning needs of individual students.

The tests also allow us to track the students' academic growth from year to year. We're able to compare their standardised scores to give us a picture of their progress. By looking at class and year-level data we can also gain a picture of the progress of these cohorts. In particular, this can facilitate discussions with teachers around the progress of students or classes.

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- to provide immediate and timely information to teachers about the current level of achievement attained by their students in a particular curriculum area
- to monitor student learning over time, and
- to allow for comparisons of student achievement with other students and with expected or average performance of students across Australia.

At the core of these tests are measurement 'scales.' The scale is the device that allows the developers of the tests to describe a pathway of achievement in a particular area of the curriculum – maths, reading comprehension, vocabulary, grammar and punctuation, science, and so on. The test itself is the objective instrument which teachers use to assess their students' achievement at that point in time.

Just like NAPLAN, where there's one scale for maths but different test forms for Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, each of the *PATs* has a whole suite of test forms that can be used at different year levels and with the same year level for pre-testing and post-testing. This allows teachers and schools to use the tests as a way of monitoring student achievement in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes at the individual, class and whole-school level. It also allows teachers to monitor individual progress across the years of school.

For example, teachers can use the tests to gauge the achievement levels of individual students in their class to provide a basis for targeted and differentiated teaching and learning strategies. At a class, year or whole-school level, the tests can be used to identify areas of school strength and weakness or to monitor the effects of school-wide strategies for improving literacy and numeracy.

Future developments for *PAT*

A major new development for the *PAT* series is the online rollout planned for 2010. *PAT Maths* is now available in a no-fuss electronic format through the iAchieve online testing platform. For the first time schools will be able to use a directly comparable online assessment as an alternative or supplement to *PAT* paper-and-pen testing.

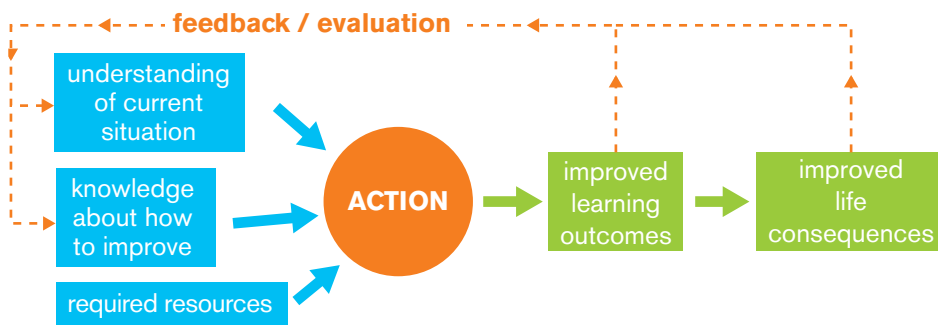


Figure 1: The 'decision-making loop'

Schools that have the facilities to do online testing will have the advantage of simple and flexible online administration and instant scoring and reporting – of both group and individual performances. The online version of the tests can be used in a variety of ways, including:

- testing whole cohorts where the school has appropriate computer facilities
 - testing individual students who were absent on the day when the rest of the students were tested, and
 - testing individuals or small groups of students again for follow-up monitoring.
- With the direct comparability of the tests, schools will be able to continue using the PAT student achievement data from paper-and-pen testing they have already collected over time.

A further development is a research project investigating links between NAPLAN scores and *PAT Maths* and *PAT Reading* scores. Such a link will enable teachers and schools to actively monitor student achievement and development in real time against reported and anticipated NAPLAN outcomes. This will be particularly useful for monitoring teaching and learning improvement initiatives between the NAPLAN testing years.

Finally, there's a new PAT test planned for publication in 2011, *PAT Language Conventions*, which will focus on the areas of spelling, grammar and punctuation.

Assessment for teaching

Teachers have multiple opportunities to collect data and feedback on student learning.

As Geoff Masters says, effective teachers 'actively enquire into students' understandings and create classroom activities capable of revealing student thinking.'

Some of this assessment is subjective, some objective. Some is formative, some is summative. A range of assessment is required for a teacher to develop a full and accurate picture of each student's learning and to have evidence to describe and demonstrate this learning.

Rather than worrying about the 'teaching to the test' bogey, teachers need to engage actively with assessment as a tool to improve their ability as professionals to

deliver the most effective learning experience for their students. Tests like ACER's *Progressive Achievement Tests* are an essential part the teacher's toolkit. **T**

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REFERENCES

- Fullan, M., Hill, P. & Crévola, C. (2006). *Breakthrough*. Thousand Oaks, CA.: Corwin Press.
- Masters, G.N. (2009). *A Shared Challenge: Improving literacy, numeracy and science learning in Queensland primary schools*. Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research.

LINKS:

- For more information on the full suite of PAT tests, visit www.acer.edu.au/pat
- For more information on iAchieve online testing, visit <https://iachieve.acer.edu.au>

