

Exploring the role of Assessment Literacy in times of uncertainty

Conference Symposium Abstract

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Symposium Overview

This session comprises three linked presentations around the concept of Assessment Literacy. The concept was the focus of a number of discussions at AEA 2021, and this led us to want to consider further how it might link with the conditions of uncertainty that have characterised the pandemic period and beyond for stakeholders such as students, teachers and others involved in education.

In many international settings, responses to the pandemic have meant sometimes rapidly changing expectations around teachers' assessment practices (e.g., increased roles in assessment grading, and participation in national testing systems usually led by external agencies). There is also evidence that this change in role has contributed to heightened levels of anxiety for some of those involved and may suggest that there is a lack of confidence around some assessment concepts that underpin assessment practices. This interplay of assessment understanding and practical application in context implicates consideration of Assessment Literacy.

This symposium will collate reflections on the concept of Assessment Literacy from across a range of contexts with the aim of exploring some its potential in improving practice and also better understanding how test takers and their teachers 'make sense' of challenging situations (such as COVID-19) and changes to policy (invoked by new views of practice in educational settings). The collected presentations will consider how individuals make sense of assessment, based on their past experience and their positionality (e.g., their professional responsibilities, their role as an assessor or someone being assessed, the field of knowledge they are engaged in, their international context etc.). Using a nuanced conceptualisation of Assessment Literacy the presentations will unpack the sorts of assessment knowledge, skills, and beliefs that are pertinent from across a range of contexts and will seek to address a number of questions:

- How does Assessment Literacy differ across contexts?
- What forms of assessment knowledge and skills are useful and generalisable across contexts?
- What are the implications of the concept for supporting education that is adaptable to future changes?
- What do students value in their assessment experiences?
- Can Assessment Literacy be conceptualised in ways to meet a wide range of expectations?

We don't expect to provide definite answers to such large questions, rather this symposium aims to generate evidence-based discussions that challenge how we, in the assessment community, view Assessment Literacy and how a better understanding of its character and structure might improve contemporary assessment practices more broadly.

The first paper considers the Assessment Literacy of Language teachers on the basis of a large-scale survey study exploring their assessment attitudes and accommodations during

COVID-19 thus adding to the discussion of how we need to conceptualize its definition especially during times of crises.

The second paper takes a school student perspective on Assessment Literacy by exploring how students have made sense of the significant changes to accepted assessment practice during COVID-19. Results of a survey with 17-18 year olds in England will discuss their experiences and the implications of these for their trust in practice, outcomes and how this relates to a sense of being a literate assessee.

The third paper explores data from teachers' diary entries and concept maps to explore how the idea of 'Powerful Knowledge' might relate to Assessment Literacy.

The session will also include a discussant who will relate the papers to each other and will lead a group discussion.

The session will be structured in the following way:

- Introduction – Dr Martin Johnson (Convenor) (*Senior Researcher, Cambridge University Press & Assessment*)
- Paper 1 – Professor Dina Tsagari (*Department of Primary and Secondary Teacher Education, Faculty of Education and International Studies, Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway*)
- Paper 2 – Professor Mary Richardson and Dr Catarina F Dias Filipe Pancada Correia (*IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society, UK*)
- Paper 3 – Dr Martin Johnson (*Research Division, Cambridge University Press & Assessment, UK*)
- Discussant – Dr Simon Child (*Head of Assessment Training, Cambridge Assessment Network, UK*)

PAPER 1: Teachers' Language Assessment Literacy during COVID-19: What have we learnt? Dina Tsagari

With the global outbreak of COVID-19, educators worldwide have encountered challenges in implementing planned on-site assessment. Most, if not all countries had to announce responsive measures. The pandemic prompted debates on the shift to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) and ways of coping with the New Normal.

This study aimed to explore assessment measures and practices in different countries. It specifically investigated the assessment literacy (AL) and practices before and after the pandemic. An online survey was administered to 300 educators from 57 countries to scrutinize their perceptions of the measures and correlations between their self-efficacy, AL and practices.

The results revealed patterns of relatively controversial practices that could affect assessment quality. Weak to no correlations were found between AL and practices as the crisis itself may have mediated this relationship. Personal and contextual factors emerged in the qualitative data to reveal the limited effectiveness of some of these accommodations. Future research should lead to redefinitions of the AL concept to encompass *flexibility* to embrace adjustments to assessment frameworks and guidelines during crises.

PAPER 2: *Where's my exam? Students' perspectives of interrupted assessments.* Mary Richardson & Catarina Correia

Student participation in assessment is often conceptualised as a means to inform and support development of teaching. Advances in practice might seek to promote student agency in assessment (Charteris and Smardon, 2019), but in reality (in England) students have little say in how they are assessed (Dann, 2014). Assessment remains something done to students rather than with students. Attempts to examine students' understanding of assessment have been less about literacy and more about learning in general (e.g. DeLuca et al, 2018); or subject-specific knowledge (see Butler, Peng, and Lee, 2021). However, Smith et al. (2013) argue that assessment literacy requires understanding of the purpose and processes of assessment, and how these affect students' perceptions.

The impact of COVID-19 on national examinations revealed a system shaken to its core and endlessly criticised. Students initiated public debates on examination practice revealing interest in assessment literacy, but what does that look like?

We surveyed the "covid-cohort": 17-18 year olds sitting A levels in 2022 following two years of disrupted schooling and little test taking preparation. Their experiences characterise test taking and being a test-taker: these unique insights provide some evidence about student assessment literacy in a time of challenge and change.

Through this study we seek to explore how students perceive the value of exams and make sense of their experiences of preparing for and taking them. We also hope to gather insight into the ways in which students gather information about exams, and how they make sense of this information both individually and as a community

PAPER 3: *Did the pandemic expose a deficit in teacher assessment literacy in England – and is there a role for 'Powerful Assessment Knowledge'?* Martin Johnson

In this session I review data collected from 15 teachers in England over a 5-month period of the pandemic. During this time the teachers were responsible for assessing their students and submitting their grades for their end of school certificates, and this arrangement differed from teachers' practices in the past.

The teachers report wellbeing concerns, affected by heightened levels of assessment anxiety and workload. A combination of well documented weaknesses in assessment coverage in teacher initial training, a reduced role for universities in teacher preparation, and a lack of timely government guidance during this period of assessment change, suggest that the teachers were generally underprepared to deal with the assessment demands at this time.

The study teachers appeared to suffer from a transfer deficit, as their assessment literacy (AL) was inadequate for dealing with the changing professional conditions, which also included shifting social relationships. Consideration of the Powerful Knowledge concept allows insight into the characteristics of knowledge and expertise, and how it is acquired and incorporated into AL. It also allows discussion of the limitations of experience-based learning for professional teachers, highlighting the importance of ensuring that teacher development programmes enable them to encounter knowledge that has generalisable qualities.

DISCUSSANT RESPONSE: *Exploring the role of assessment literacy in times of uncertainty.* Simon Child