Rethinking Assessment

Discussion paper 1:

Transforming education through technology enhanced assessment

Q: Has technology enhanced assessment (TEA) the potential to transform examinations?

Q: Can TEA enable a wider range of achievements to be assessed?

Q: How can the barriers to implementing TEA be overcome?

This paper considers three aspects of technology-enhanced assessment:

- Assessment in a changing world
- The potential of technology to support transformations in assessment
- Implementing technology enhanced assessment

Key recommendations

 Governments, examination authorities, private testing organisations, universities and research institutes now need to pool their efforts in the search for ways of bringing assessment practices into the mainstream of the digital revolution.

 The results of existing research and development projects in TEA should be widely disseminated and discussed, so that their potential in different settings can be properly evaluated.

 Government needs to invest in the development of TEA and to work actively with educational partners to understand and remove the barriers to its wider adoption.
Assessment in a changing world

The world is changing rapidly and with it, the knowledge and skills - even the dispositions and attitudes - that educational systems need to deliver. Where once the focus of education was on the inculcation of knowledge, now it must reflect emerging new priorities. Creativity, problem-solving, adaptability, complex decision-making, innovation, collaboration, global awareness, digital literacy, communication, the ability to be self-motivated, resilience, resourcefulness - even spiritual and moral ‘literacies’ - are found in the curriculum aspirations of many countries.

Yet in practice, education is becoming more and more out of step with the wider world. As daily life is transformed by the digital revolution; as business demands recruits with very different competencies; and as the world faces an unprecedented number of global threats, educational practices continue much as before. This is largely because assessment practices act as a barrier to educational change.

If education systems are to respond effectively to contemporary social, political, environmental and economic challenges, assessment practices need to change. They will need to include evidence of achievement presented in a diversity of formats and to recognise achievement across a much wider range of knowledge and skills.

The methods of assessing students’ learning that have so far been developed are surprisingly limited. Written examinations, multiple choice tests and oral examinations, are almost the only tools that are trusted for use in any highly-competitive assessment situation. Most new assessment tools such as the use of portfolios remain largely confined to judging whether students have reached an appropriate standard rather than in highly-competitive testing situations.

Implementing technology enhanced assessment

Some of the barriers to achieving these benefits of TEA are practical. Expressed concerns include: 

- The increased risk of plagiarism and security issues.
- The lack of techniques that are sufficiently practical and robust.
- The need for teachers to be trained in the use of TEA.
- The cost of investing in the necessary hardware and software.
- Practical constraints such as a lack of suitable physical spaces.

Some of these constraints is insurmountable where there is strong policy leadership and the will to impose system-wide imperatives and facilitate these. Unfortunately, educational assessment is big business and is becoming increasingly politicised. Given the range of stakeholders involved, there is little appetite to address the risks and practical difficulties of introducing even a modest use of TEA. Yet there are potentially enormous rewards. The result is a creative desert - little new thinking; little development of new assessment tools; little innovation where it matters.

Mozilla Open Badges, for example, has developed a System Framework. The badges are image files that hold metadata outlining the skills or achievements of the badge-holder, as well as the issuing body. Badges can also link back to the evidence supporting the award, can be portable and displayed on various social networking or recruitment sites. The framework allows badges to be awarded via various mechanisms: through formal awarding bodies, from multiple assessors (experts in a particular online community) or self-awarded. Mozilla is developing an Open Badges Infrastructure that will allow the creation and hosting of badges, including a ‘badge backpack’ that individuals can use for storing and moving their badges.
1. Transforming education through technology enhanced assessment

Assessment is universally recognised as one of the most important – and powerful – elements of an educational experience. It is also seen as one of the hardest to reform. However, there is an increasingly accepted need for rethinking assessment if it is to keep up with current theoretical, cultural and technological developments affecting teaching and learning.

Digital technologies open up new possibilities for more personalised, immediate and engaging assessment experiences. However, the use of digital technologies for assessment (referred to as ‘technology-enhanced assessment’) has yet to be ‘transformative’, with current practices either replicating traditional assessment methods or manifesting in pockets of innovation that are not widespread.

How the potential of digital technologies can best support improved assessment practices and preferred educational outcomes is becoming an issue of increasing importance. An acknowledgement of the potential that digital technologies offer should recognise the complexity of the task, the many factors affecting successful educational change, and the significant ethical questions raised by the use of digital technologies in assessment.

This series of discussion papers draw on a substantial review of literature which aimed to identify the different ways in which technology currently impacts on educational assessment practices and how it could contribute to a new vision for assessment.

The review of literature is available at: bristol.ac.uk/education/research/sites/tea

The following discussion papers have been produced in order to highlight key issues and questions identified by the review of literature:

Paper 1: Transforming education through technology enhanced assessment
Paper 2: Integrating the formative and summative through technology enhanced assessment
Paper 3: Exploiting the collaborative potential of technology enhanced assessment in Higher Education
Paper 4: Learning analytics and technology enhanced assessment
Paper 5: Ethical issues in technology enhanced assessment
Paper 6: National standards and technology enhanced assessment

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