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Unit Standards: An ‘Easy’ Pathway for Foundation Learners

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“To be a good liberating educator you need above all to have faith in human beings. You need to love. You must be convinced that the fundamental effort of education is to help with the liberation of people, never their domestication” (Freire, 1971, p. 62).

Anne Barrer

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ABSTRACT

Foundation learners come into the tertiary environment at levels one, two and three. They can select from courses of study that include unit standard assessment. These unit standards are credits toward a vast array of national certificates. In recent years, learners have been faced with an ever increasing variety of ways in which they can complete these qualifications from classroom based to online modes of delivery. Many of the programmes and courses on offer are zero fee and promise a self-paced and individualised learning environment. Further investigation reveals that even at this foundation level these programmes play an important role in the political and social agenda to upskill all New Zealanders to better prepare them for the 21st century. The sweeping reforms of the 1990s have turned educational courses at all levels into industry focused curricular (Peters & Marshall, 1996; Olssen & Mathews, 1997; O'Neill et al., 2004) and unit standards are increasingly the chosen pathway of those changes.

Over the last 15 years, polytechnics and private training establishments have incorporated New Zealand Qualifications Authority unit standards into many of their programmes. The intention was that these units would be assessments only and would be able to be 'massaged' into existing courses. This proved to be challenging for educators (Goodwill, 1999) and unit standards now dominate the curriculum (Codd, 1997).

This research focused on how foundation learners were experiencing unit standards. Nineteen foundation learners, studying at an ITP and two PTEs, were invited to talk about their feelings about assessment, what they thought unit standards were, and how they were finding them. These learners took part in an individual interview and a focused group conversation. The results identified that foundation learners are having an 'easy ride' with unit standards. They can learn the material and then pass the unit. If they don't meet the requirements of the unit standard, they get another chance and do a resit. They like learning 'unit' by 'unit' and doing the assessment straight after the learning, while it is still 'fresh.' If possible they prefer to do it at their own pace, working through the material and being assessed when they are ready.

They are now finding assessment less scary than previous experiences and there is opportunity to feel a sense of achievement and not be compared with others. The transparency of the units appeals and the relationship with the tutor is seen as important.

It was also evident that students are studying 'units' and that sometimes they find the language of the assessments difficult to understand.

There has been a shift in learning, from curriculum-driven 'education' focused programmes to student-driven 'industry-influenced' credit acquisition. The National Qualifications Framework has succeeded in its goal of offering units as attractive learning packages. These learners accept the new language of learning; they don't have the knowledge or understanding about assessment to question the units that are offered to them. "They have no insights into the reforms, no understanding of their political rationales, nor any methods of critiquing them"(O'Neill et al., 2004, p. 17).

The biggest challenge for educators is not to teach the unit standard, rather engage learners and encourage them to explore their curriculum in a broader sense. Foundation learners now understand the value of credits; they also need to be encouraged to understand the value of education. 'Learning for life' should be more intrinsic than getting a box ticked. This research highlights the importance of the learning environment, the relationship between learner and tutor, and the relevance of explaining clearly what unit standards are, and how they fit into the bigger picture of the National Qualifications Framework and education itself as a life changing path.

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For me the journey became a political awakening unfolding and capturing me in ways I couldn't have imagined prior to its commencement.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

ACCESS	Government funded programme for unemployed
ACE	Adult and Community Education
ATTTO	Avionics Tourism Travel and Training Organisation
EFTS	Equivalent Full Time Student
GTE	Government Training Establishments
IALS	International Adult Literacy Survey
ITO	Industry Training Organisation
ITP	Institutes of Technology & Polytechnics
ITPNZ	Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics New Zealand
NCEA	National Certificate in Educational Achievement
NCES	National Certificate in Employment Skills
NQF	National Qualification Framework
NZQA	New Zealand Qualifications Authority
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation Development
PEP	Project employment programmes
PTE	Private Training Establishment
QMS	Quality Management System
STEPS	School-leavers Training and Employment Preparation Scheme
TEI	Tertiary Education Institutes
TEC	Tertiary Education Commission
TEP	Temporary Employment Programme
TOP	Training Opportunity Programmes
YPTP	Young Persons Training Programme
YT	Youth Training

INTRODUCTION

This project is the culmination of many years of observation, questioning, and reflection. The research process often begins long before the decision to take it to a formal investigative stage. That was how it was for me. I began to get curious as I experienced major changes in the tertiary sector. On the one hand I felt excited by the changes, yet on the other hand I was aware of a deep rift cutting across the sector as teaching staff either embraced or negated the changes. I was torn between convincing arguments for the reforms and equally convincing arguments against. Teachers, including myself, were unwittingly and certainly sometimes unwillingly, “drawn into the massive programme of social, economic and cultural reconstruction undertaken by the National Government (1990-1999) and continued by the current Labour administration” (O’Neill et al., 2004, pp. 17,18). Education underwent major reforms, in particular in the way assessment was carried out. “One of the more dramatic trends in education, over the last decade, has been the shift towards the use of criterion-referenced assessment” (Peddie & Tuck, 1995, p. 9).

My position as a tutor and coordinator of government funded foundation programmes within the polytechnic sector, gave me opportunities to observe first hand the changing face of education. Codd (1997) suggests that the change I was experiencing was between society, knowledge and higher education. He saw the agent behind the change as the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and the mechanism for the change as the National Qualifications Framework and the policies surrounding it. For myself, I began to wonder how it was for teachers, and how it was for learners. The focus of my curiosity was unit standards, in particular unit standards as they were being used on levels one to three foundation programmes in the tertiary learning environment.

At the end of the year 2000, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority celebrated “Ten Years On” (QA News, 2000). This prompted me to pause, reflect, and consider—at what cost, to teaching and learning? In the year 2001, I carried out a research project (Barrer,

2001), which aimed to find out how the teaching and learning environment in foundation programmes at a regional polytechnic had been affected by the introduction of unit standard assessment. I was interested in the impact on everyday teaching and learning in the classroom. How were teaching staff coping with the new changes? Were unit standards being used as an assessment tool or were teachers teaching to the unit? Were teachers and students being shaped by the new qualifications? Was learning being compromised? My research focused on how tutors were finding it. I did not carry out any interviews or discussion with students at that stage.

The project highlighted some of the dissatisfaction that tutors were feeling about unit standards. They were getting used to them, but they were still finding them very rigid and time consuming. Some of the tutors were teaching to the unit even though they were philosophically opposed to the idea of doing that. They were feeling driven by the units and felt that their teaching had been compromised. In many cases, they were rushing through the units to complete the qualification in the prescribed time. They were concerned by the number of assessments and the nit-picky nature of all the boxes that had to be ticked. They felt that the units had shaped their teaching programmes and that some aspects of the curriculum were being dropped to fit the units in.

I concluded there was a need for further research to be carried out in relation to unit standards and classroom practices in the tertiary sector. I began to question, 'how can we promote best practice for assessing unit standards?' Although NZQA had encouraged integrated assessments, there was growing evidence (Codd, 1997; Goodwill, 1999) to suggest that tutors and students were feeling that units were dominating. In 2000 The Association of Polytechnics New Zealand (APNZ, now ITPNZ) initiated a series of workshops around the country aimed at promoting best practice in teaching and assessing unit standards. More recently NZQA published a paper promoting good practice guidelines (NZQA, 2005), which encouraged assessment at an element, rather than criteria level and in an integrated fashion where possible. These guidelines (Appendix J) emphasised using naturally occurring evidence, professional judgement and focusing less on individual performance criteria. The fact that these guidelines were published seemed

to me indicative of a sector that was seeking help when it came to unit standard assessments.

My Experience

I began to consider how learners in foundation programmes in the tertiary sector might be experiencing this method of assessment. How were unit standards being experienced at this level? Were students embracing them? Anecdotal evidence suggested that some students were finding them better than previous experiences of norm-referenced assessment. They understood what they were being asked to do. They liked having a second or third chance to complete an assessment. Other observations highlighted that some learners were feeling rushed through assessments to gain a qualification within a set time frame. In addition, as some students came to understand how the new system worked they demanded to work only on topics that led to the achievement of the credits. They weren't interested in understanding at a deeper level.

The credit-driven learner was emerging as the new 'pacman' seeking credits to gobble up! This was illustrated to me recently when our institute designed a low level hairdressing course for senior secondary students. At the school's request we included only a few unit standards as it was thought that this would suit the less academically able students. In fact the opposite has proven to be true. The students are demanding more credits and are threatening to drop out unless we redesign the course with more unit standards included in it. These and similar experiences caused me to reflect on whether we were contributing to the 'dumbing down' of society. Were unit standards dominating the curriculum to the point that students only wanted to do 'them' and not participate in wider more holistic learning? On the positive side the credit system was 'catching on' and more students were seeking courses that offered qualifications.

My own experience as a polytechnic tutor for the last 22 years has given me opportunity to observe the changing environment, from the early government funded life skills courses for the unemployed (STEPS, YPTP, TEP) in the 1980s (Department of Labour, 1984) through to the vast array of industry-led NZQA national certificates offered today.

During the 1990s I experienced first hand the business of getting ‘everyone onboard’ with the new Framework. For tutors, this involved attending workshops run by NZQA on how to integrate unit standards into their programme and how to assess them. At an educator level the pros and cons of unit standards were debated vigorously and within the ITP sector today there is still a divide between those staff who teach on unit standard based programmes and those who don’t. Some staff endorse them, others dismiss them.

Unit standards tend to dominate lower level national certificates and one of the most popular is the National Certificate in Employment Skills which is made up of 60 credits from fields such as core generic, communication, literacy, computing and employment skills. This qualification is offered in many guises but perhaps most significantly it is offered as a distance learning programme through the Open Polytechnic (‘Lifeworks’) and through Te Wānanga o Aotearoa (‘Mahi Ora’). These programmes have been successful in enrolling thousands of learners from throughout New Zealand.

Finally I had to admit that my whole philosophy of teaching and learning was being challenged. I had always seen learning as essentially an emancipatory process, giving students autonomy to explore new ideas, and I had always felt that the ‘journey’ was at least as important as the task. The unit standard model was making me focus more on outputs and outcomes. I was noticing that the ‘words’ being used in our sector were changing. In some areas we were now ‘delivering’ courses and teaching ‘units.’

Focus on assessment

Over the last 15 years, I have observed this shift, this move away from learning, to a more deliberate focus on the unit standards being offered (delivered?) At first, this was driven by the new Framework with its vast array of qualifications. Providers gained accreditation in wide-ranging ‘fields’ and offered National Certificates and Diplomas that contained many unit standards. Students could learn in an ever-increasing range of flexible ways, from classroom-based to distance learning, from web-based to marae-based. Once students understood how the new qualification system worked, they too began to ‘drive’ the curriculum.

Student-centred learning had taken on a whole new meaning. Now the learner had taken charge. The final recognition that this change had taken place was when I realised that, learners, on their own initiative, or through an employer, were approaching providers, such as an ITP, to teach them a unit standard. They were also asking whether local provider qualifications were linked to national qualifications. If they weren't, they were choosing to take their business elsewhere. This lure of the national qualification has been used as a strong marketing ploy by some providers who have taken their qualifications nationwide and offered them flexibly. Examples of this were the Open Polytechnics "Life Works" and Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology's "Cool IT" programmes which allowed learners to study at their own pace and in their own time.

Research questions

The main aim of this research was to find out how foundation learners were experiencing unit standard assessment. Were they studying topics or unit standards? Was this new kind of assessment encouraging deeper learning? Were they feeling pressured to get the boxes ticked within a certain time frame? To what extent, if any, had unit standard assessment motivated them to continue with their learning? At another level I was also interested in the reasons behind the wider political platform that launched the Framework and completely changed the face of education. I felt it was time to look back on the thinking behind the reforms and to investigate whether, in today's climate, they were relevant for this group of learners.

My research was carried out with groups of volunteer students from a tertiary institute of technology and two private training establishments. I explored a learner perspective. The selection of both an ITP and private training institutes was in recognition of the current diversity of providers and to give me a wider range of responses.

My questions were:

- What role do tertiary foundation students feel that assessment plays in their learning? How important is it? How do they feel about being assessed?

- What is their understanding of unit standards? How are they finding them?
- How successful are unit standards in motivating them as learners? If they are, in what way?
- Have unit standards impacted on their learning? If yes, in what way?

Contextual issues

These research questions emerged within a context that was influenced by the following considerations:

1. The renewed interest by the government in providing funding for adult literacy programmes. Unit standards are being written, while this research is being undertaken, to assess adult literacy progression. There is still some debate as to whether unit standards are the best form of assessment for adult literacy. There is also a qualification being developed for tutors of foundation learners called the National Certificate of Foundation Teaching.
2. The continued financial support of the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) for Training Opportunity (TO) and Youth Training (YT) programmes.
3. Industry Training Organisations (ITOs), and to a lesser degree prospective students, continue to put pressure on Tertiary Education Institutes (TEIs) to teach units. This can cause an educator to feel torn between meeting the needs of the ITO or student, and yet compromising learning by shortcutting the educative process.
4. The continuing interest in the changing face of teaching and learning at the tertiary level. The Deputy Prime Minister, Michael Cullen, has now taken over the responsibility for Tertiary Education. He is working toward a new tertiary funding model and phasing out the EFTS (equivalent full time student) based system (Marlborough Express, July 13, 2006). The EFTS (“bums on seat”) model has resulted in some TEIs enrolling students on ‘shonky’ programmes to

gain revenue from the government.

5. I was aware also of a wider context which involved the public's interest in the NCEA assessments currently being offered in our secondary schools. Some schools are choosing to offer their students an alternative Cambridge exam which uses norm-referenced assessments. There is huge potential here for New Zealand to end up with two or more layers of students i.e. an elitist group who sit percentage-based exams, and the other group who sit unit standards and achievement standards. To an extent this is currently reflected in the tertiary sector with universities refusing to integrate unit standards in their courses, compared to ITPs and PTEs who offer many lower level courses which include them. The Careers Adviser of a local secondary school recently reported to me that some parents say they don't want their son doing a 'unit standard' school subject. They see it as second class.

The focus of the research was on the students who were studying foundation level programmes being offered at the tertiary level. For the purpose of this research I defined a foundation learner as someone coming into a tertiary environment at levels 1-3, according to the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) level descriptors, needing basic skills in order to pathway to higher learning. These skills can be loosely grouped into essential skills such as language, literacy, numeracy, communication, self management, and computer skills. They may also be completing a specific industry qualification such as tourism, business administration or carpentry. I have further explored the definition of foundation learner in Chapter 1.

Rationale

Foundation learning has hit the spotlight after New Zealand participated in the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) in 1996 and the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation Development's (OECD) Survey on International Literacy in 1997. This highlighted that New Zealand had adult literacy issues that could no longer be ignored. Since the publication of the IALS findings, foundation learning has gained significant

attention and many TEIs have been encouraged to provide, through innovative funding pools, a literacy component or service within their institutes. Foundation learning has been included in recent government policies and strategies (Ministry of Education, 2001, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2006).

In New Zealand many learners are studying at a foundation level (over 100,000 students enrolled in levels 1-3 in 2003 according to a TEC Monitoring Report, cited in NZQA, 2005) and represent a range of literacy and language capability. Therefore, of interest, was the recent foundation learning project (Benseman et al., 2005), funded by the Ministry of Education, which provided a critical evaluation of research evidence about effective practices in adult literacy, numeracy and language provision. The researchers stated that they were not able to “identify any research, (that met the criteria for their study), on assessment and its effect on learning outcomes” (p. 11). This highlighted for me the lack of research in this area.

They did however note that assessment that includes self assessment by learners, and constructive verbal feedback from tutors may enhance learner gain. The fact that unit standards, and in particular the National Certificate in Employment Skills, have been used widely, (in particular in TOP, YT and transition courses), to assess foundation learners may provide some interesting data for other researchers and providers. The concern, for some educators (Codd, 1997), is that the assessments currently being used are industry driven and don't assist the learners to address the broader competencies that may be lacking. Students need to learn how to learn. They also need to be encouraged to think. “Most important, is to provide intelligence on how to improve things” (Bruner, 1966, p. 165). Teachers are teaching to the unit; they are constrained by time to help the learner reach their qualification (Barrer, 2001; Duncan, 1996; Goh, 2005; Singh-Morris, 1997). Some tutors, in tertiary institutes, work part time and come in for only a few contracted hours a week, to teach a unit, and then leave. Their task is to get through the unit (Barrer, 2001).

In addition, some of the teachers working in the foundation area, as in the rest of the tertiary sector, are not qualified teachers (Benseman, 2001). They are therefore encouraged to complete some form of adult teaching qualification for the provider QMS (quality management system) accreditation requirements. In some cases this is limited to the unit standards 4098 and 11520, which are the workplace assessor unit standards. These units focus on gathering evidence rather than facilitating learning. They are not pedagogically focused teaching qualifications. They have an industry focus and are about learning how to assess against unit standards in a workplace context. As a coordinator of the Certificate in Adult Teaching programme I have noticed that some of the tutors who participate in the programme have literacy needs themselves. Many of them are teaching at foundation level on ACE funded or TEC funded programmes.

The foundation area of adult education is highly critical. There are increasingly high numbers of students accessing learning through a wide range of courses. It's important that, as educators, we get it right. It requires well qualified, empathetic teaching staff that can work alongside these learners and challenge them to think creatively and gain the essential knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will help them survive all the challenges that they will face in their lifetime, not just equip them for the workplace. If learners are only seeking to get the boxes ticked they may not be receiving the valuable constructive feedback needed to broaden their thinking skills. The learners themselves are often the least critical. They don't know any different; they have been 'captured' by the New Right (Peters & Marshall, 1996; Snook, 1995). "Needs, interests and choices can themselves be manipulated because the autonomous chooser is highly manipulable and easy to pick off" (Peters & Marshall, cited in O'Neill et al., 2004, p. 122). Learners at a foundation level are the most vulnerable; they have the least power to change things.

Chapter Outline

The first three chapters of this thesis outline the background and theoretical parameters of this study. Recent literature is examined and the relevant historical and political contexts are explored producing an explanation for the dramatic changes experienced in the tertiary education sector in the 1990s.

Chapter 1 gives background information about the National Qualifications Framework and the context within which unit standards have emerged. Where do unit standards fit in the broader political backdrop of what was going on in the 1980s and 1990s? What caused the massive shift to competency-based assessment? What is the ‘face’ of tertiary education in New Zealand today? Considering the huge arguments for and against unit standards some 15 years ago, what are the pros and cons today? How are unit standards being used by tertiary providers?

This chapter also gives an explanation of what is meant by ‘a foundation learner’ in a tertiary context. It attempts to describe the kinds of learners we might find in foundation courses within the tertiary sector and what learning environments work best for them. It investigates the impact of unit standards on these learners and examines findings from relevant research especially that commissioned by Skill New Zealand and NZQA.

Chapter 2 examines different approaches to unit standard (competency-based) assessment, in particular, the ‘integrated’ versus the ‘tick box’, the ‘holistic’ versus the ‘unit by unit’ approach. Competency-based assessment is explored to provide a background to the unit standard model. Unit standard assessment is critiqued and evaluated. The chapter considers what works best for foundation learners. What role do tutors play in helping students achieve/complete units? Are there any differences in the way private training establishments (PTEs) approach assessment compared to institutes of technology (ITPs)?

Chapter 3 analyses student-centred learning. What is it? How has the market-led model been interpreted by TEIs? What has been the impact of the Framework on the autonomous learner and on course design? How has the reductionist process, of breaking learning down into bits, been received by learners? How do learners like that? How are unit standard assessments being carried out with foundation learners? What methods are being used?

Chapter 4 outlines the methodological approach to the research and why it was chosen. It gives an overview of the paradigms of research and where this particular piece of research is located. Justification is given as to why I moved into the chosen methodology and includes how I progressed that decision. Detailed descriptions are given of the process including what went wrong, how I fixed it and how the use of an online diary helped focus the research.

Chapter 5 presents the findings. It investigates first how the interviewees feel about being assessed. Then it focuses on what they thought a ‘unit standard’ was and how that has impacted on their learning. The positives and negatives of unit standard assessment are explored. Some comparisons are made with previous experiences of other types of assessment. Links are made between unit standard qualifications and pathways to employment. This chapter also explores whether unit standards challenge and motivate learners and in what ways.

Chapter 6 discusses the findings and draws conclusions based on them. Key themes emerge based around the learners’ experiences. These are explored and discussed in relation to the literature reviewed. In particular the spotlight is on the influence of the market-led model, the feeling of being able to succeed, the idea that units are easy, the reductionist model and surface learning, the transparency of the units, doing it in their own time and the importance of the tutor.

Chapter 7 identifies the implications of this for providers, educators and learners. Recommendations are made for tertiary providers, tutors, students and NZQA to consider.