From theory to practice: implementing innovative and authentic assessment tasks within pre-service teacher education courses

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This research emerged from the authors’ concern that traditional, fragmented approaches to tertiary education assessment do very little to prepare pre-service teachers for their chosen profession. It explores alternative methods of assessment based on a commitment to innovative and collaborative approaches that seek to model more closely actual school experiences, thereby enhancing student learning. The researchers worked closely to develop common assessment tasks for two units in the third year of a Bachelor of Education course, historically taught separately. The core task involved the creation of a literacy block plan and a mathematics program for the same class ‘profile’. The assessment task allowed students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills related to the teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy within a contextualised classroom planning framework. In this way it was predicted that the task would measure the success of student learning outcomes for both units. The research confirmed a number of the researchers’ assumptions, including: that the traditional separation of literacy and mathematics is detrimental to learning; that this divide can be bridged; and that assessment tasks help students to identify practical strategies to that end. The researchers have concluded that the challenge of moving from traditional to innovative assessment creates exciting opportunities for lecturers to provide practical and authentic learning experience for their students. The response from pre-service teachers has been very positive, with many advantages identified, including most students reporting a higher level of engagement and commitment than would have been the case with a more traditional assessment task.

Keywords: authentic assessment; collaborative planning; cross-unit integration; innovative assessment; pre-service teachers

Theme: innovative assessment: opportunities and practices

Introduction

The assessment dilemmas faced by school teachers in relation to accountability, measurement and authenticity are no less evident in higher education. For many years researches have discussed traditional approaches to pre-service teacher assessment and how they do little to prepare students for their chosen profession (Reeves, 2000). More recently there has been strong movement by practitioners away from de-contextualised, fragmented tasks such as exams and essays, towards innovative, holistic assessment that is focused on the importance of building capacity and enhancing learning. According to Boud and Associates (2010), best-practice assessment “powerfully frames how students learn and what students achieve. It is one of the most significant
influences on students’ experiences of higher education and all that they gain from it.” As lecturers, we believe that assessment should challenge students to actively engage in the learning process while making explicit connections between theory and practice. This not only informs our teaching and our approaches to tertiary assessment, it also enhances students’ skills and understanding in relation to classroom practice. This study explores the implementation of a specific assessment task based on a commitment by the authors to enhancing student learning though authentic, innovative and integrated approaches, enhanced by across-unit lecturer collaboration.

**Research aims**

This research aims firstly, to better prepare tertiary students for the classroom experience by creating innovative assessment that demonstrates learning through authentic application of knowledge and skills. As lecturers of undergraduate pre-service teachers, we are working to provide innovative and authentic assessment that is perceived by students as being relevant and worthwhile. Previous unit evaluations confirmed that many assessment tasks are seen as a ‘necessary evil’, useful only in facilitating the passing of a course. Maclellan (2004) argues that students’ perceptions of an assessment task affects their level of engagement and depth of learning, creating a clear imperative to examine the nature of assessment and to measure what is truly important.

We have further noted that in the area of teacher education, assessment practices don’t always reflect the constructivist approach to knowledge acquisition and pedagogy that we promote in our teaching. In developing assessment tasks, lecturers should seek to move beyond an exclusive focus on the final product and also focus on the process. This means promoting assessment as and for learning rather than just assessment of learning. Such an approach lends itself to authentic assessment which, according to McMillan, “involves the direct examination of a student’s ability to use knowledge to perform a task that is like what is encountered in real life or in the real world” (2004, p. 198). To this end, we created a purposeful and productive assessment task which mirrors what is expected of teachers when planning classroom teaching and learning experiences.

Secondly, the aim is to promote innovative assessment practices by working collaboratively in the development and implementation of across-unit assessment and making connections and identifying explicit links between mathematics and literacy units. Innovative approaches to assessment contribute to building learning and assessment skills beyond the course content and scope (Boud & Falchikov, 2006). School teachers are expected to adopt an integrated approach and link learning across many ‘key learning areas’. In comparison, tertiary-level course structures often create distinct and separate academic units with little connection to real-life contexts. Learning is further fragmented through lack of opportunity for lecturer collaboration to create explicit links between different units. School teachers are also expected to work collaboratively and to share responsibility and workload for assessment and evaluation of learning. As lecturers of two distinct literacy and numeracy units, we have sought to model the reality of schools in our own approach to assessment. This has involved working closely with each other in the planning and implementation of each unit. Areas of
integration were identified and a common assessment task jointly developed. These tasks required students to identify explicit links between literacy and mathematics, which are traditionally addressed as two separate areas of inquiry and practice with very little connection made between them.

Methodology

The assessment for each unit required students to develop a program that addressed a wide variety of possible criteria relating to a ‘real’ classroom. This task allowed students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills related to planning of literacy and mathematics programs. The students were not only expected to create authentic programs that could be implemented in the classroom, they were also required to highlight the related contexts in which literacy and numeracy intersect, and to take into consideration the educational implications. In order to complete the task, students engaged in scaffolding, modelling and problem-solving activities during tutorials designed to promote active engagement and critical thinking.

The students were also provided with detailed and timely feedback on a draft version of the assessment, enabling them to modify and improve it as appropriate. In this way it was predicted that the quality of their learning would improve, while also enabling achievement of the learning objectives for both units. Various research methods were employed to evaluate this process: reviewing assessment strategies, obtaining student input and conducting questionnaires and surveys.

Major findings

• The critical dialogue between collaborating LICs enhanced the delivery of both units.
• The research confirmed the power of deliberate use of common language across both units. For example, assessment for learning and assessment as learning provided explicit connections between the two units and allowed the students to articulate synergies.
• The students were able to articulate the benefits of authentic and innovative assessment, both at the time of completing the task and when implementing the program in a classroom setting. This matches Boud’s definition of sustainable assessment as “assessment that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of students to meet their own future learning needs” (Boud, 2000, p. 151).
• When exploring reading and writing skills, students were able to use examples from mathematics as well as from literacy.
• The draft and subsequent final programs submitted by students demonstrated a high level of engagement with and motivation for the task.
• The assessment task allowed lecturers to modify and enhance the teaching and learning components of the units to better reflect the needs of pre-service teachers.

Conclusions and implications
The challenge of moving from traditional to innovative assessment creates exciting opportunities for lecturers to provide a more authentic learning experience for their students. The response from pre-service teachers to developing a program that can actually be implemented within a classroom was very positive. Many were able to identify a number of advantages and most reported that they had committed more time and effort to the assessment task than would have been the case for a less contextualised task. While we are still examining potential opportunities and challenges, the next step is to open a dialogue with faculty members in relation to the benefits of authentic and innovative assessment and the potential impact on assessment practice and policy.

References