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INTERNAL ASSESSMENT AND THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH: A RESPONSE TO THE ARGUMENT FROM R. MCGUIRE

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The recent contribution from R. McGuire to discussion on internal assessment was an interesting one and did raise a number of important issues on the nature of internal assessment, especially as operating within Queensland and especially as relating to the teaching of English. There were many wideranging statements within the article from McGuire, and it does seem that these statements do warrant some response. The following discussion, therefore, attempts to respond to the arguments raised within the McGuire article, on the nature of internal assessment, and also on the nature of the teaching of English.

McGuire commences the article with reference to previous discussion, and summarizes this as characterized by incorrect assumptions and misleading generalisations. Unfortunately, this is not supported in subsequent argumentation from McGuire, and thus it is difficult to respond to this in any detail. McGuire also commences by challenging the characterization of current internal assessment in Queensland as one with an emphasis on skills-based assessment, rather than norms-based assessment. However, this is precisely the characterization used in the official departmental introduction to current internal assessment in Queensland. It is one intended as characterization only, certainly not a detailed taxonomy of educational objectives.

The initial problem within internal assessment was that of practicality and here the McGuire article suggests the utilization of a specific designated period of assessment. However, the very nature of exit assessment still demands at least some final review of the work of each student over the of areas covered within the English Syllabus. It has yet to be explained exactly who is to undertake this and when. McGuire also attempts to suggest that the amount of assessment is not as great as would appear. However, too is not what is prescribed within the Syllabus. Assessment is required for skills of oracy and literacy, over a diverse range of expressive and receptive forms, and over diverse genres, registers, and test-conditions. Even if detailed check-lists are not required, and it does seem that McGuire is also mistaken in this, there is still no way the Syllabus requirements can be fulfilled without extensive assessment.

McGuire then attempts to deal with the problem of comparability within internal assessment, and here he finds himself in real difficulties. There is much discussion in the article on intricate performance criteria. However, the obvious and admitted reality is that institutions do tend to rely upon marks, marks which are, especially within the humanities, notoriously unreliable. Even the detailed performance profiles included by McGuire are rather suspect. The interpretation of the various modifiers and qualifiers within the profiles depends very much upon the subjective judgement of individual teachers. The problem of comparability remains.

Perhaps some comment should be made of the almost talisman-like reference to research within the McGuire article. The fact that research is being undertaken, per se, means nothing. Obviously, what matters are the results from any research, and the extent to which such results elucidate the particular problem under investigation. In this case, we are still awaiting substantial results. [1/2] If anything, the fact that such research is currently in process must be of some concern to teachers of English. Surely one would expect such research to be completed prior to the implementation of any assessment system, rather than years after the event.

The final assessment problem which McGuire attempts to address is that of originality, which McGuire prefers to designate as ownership. Here too it is not quite clear what McGuire is attempting to say. It appears he is suggesting a greater use of process writing for purposes of formal assessment. However, one problem with this is that process writing is a classroom-oriented technique, and the Syllabus prescribes a range of test-conditions. Within process writing it is also both permissible and desirable for students to bring writing completed either at home or elsewhere. There is no way, therefore, that any teacher can ensure that writing introduced into the classroom has not been copied from another source. The problem of originality remains.

At the commencement of the article it was suggested by McGuire that the criticism of internal assessment was based upon incorrect assumptions and misleading generalizations. Clearly this is not the case. The problems of (a)

practicality, (b) comparability, and (c) originality are real ones, and ones which cannot be dismissed in such cavalier fashion as attempted by McGuire.

Even in the discussion on alternatives to internal assessment McGuire makes fundamental errors. He suggests that utilization of objective-type testing of linguistic skills be regarded as absurd, ignoring the reality that such testing is recognized within the Australian Scholastic Aptitude Test and within the United States Graduate Admissions Test. He seems also unaware that the Australian Scholastic Aptitude Test has been used for individual assessment, within a number of educational systems within Australia, and for some considerable time. McGuire concludes the article with assertions regarding my own understanding of the Syllabus and of current assessment procedures. Unfortunately these assertions remain unsubstantiated. McGuire also concludes with a suggestion for increased in-service training. This is despite the fact that there is no clear indication from McGuire as to exactly what should be included within such in-service training.

Overall McGuire should be commended for the contribution to discussion on assessment in Queensland. However, unfortunately, there are fundamental errors of fact within the case he presents. The reality is that the fundamental problems within internal assessment in Queensland remain, problems which are quite critical within the teaching of the humanities, and the teaching of English. No amount of wishful thinking, unfortunately, will make these problems disappear. Clearly, what is needed is more public and professional discussion on this issue, and, hopefully also, some sane initiatives towards positive and enduring solutions.

References

McGuire, R. 'Lets Come to Terms with ROSBA ', *Words' Worth*, Vol. 19, No. 3, 1986. pp. 1-11.

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