BEST INTENTIONS: USING CONVERGENT PRACTICES DIVERGENTLY

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Abstract

Summative assessment and explicit teaching are on the increase in New Zealand primary and intermediate learning spaces; either, or both, frequently used by teachers to assist with requirements for National Standards. Combined use means learning destinations are set by teachers within convergent practice, allowing little room for student exploration, curiosity and questions. In contrast, the vision, values and key competencies in the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) promote teacher action towards more divergent practices that enable multiple opportunities for student input and negotiation. In this article we draw on collaborative observation and teacher reflection, to provide an example of an integrated curriculum approach effectively incorporating summative assessment and explicit teaching within a divergent learning programme, that enhances rather than constrains student learning autonomy.

Keywords

Summative assessment; explicit teaching; student autonomy; integrated curriculum; divergent practice

Introduction

New Zealand (NZ) primary and intermediate schools are compelled to recognise and record student achievement through standards-based assessment known as National Standards. Each school principal and Board of Trustees needs to identify data-informed targets for student achievement in relation to these standards, then report with evidence how the targets are being met by their school (Ministry of Education, 2009a). To this end, teachers are required to provide triangulated learning proof in core curriculum areas, a process that requires formal assessments. Such formal assessments can include teacher-made tests (such as unit summary tests, strand maths tests, and reading/writing monitoring checks), but frequently include externally-sourced summative assessments (such as Progress and Achievement Tests (New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 2017), Online Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning (Ministry of Education, 2017), and GloSS/IKAN tests (New Zealand Maths, 2017a&b). Alongside increased use of formal or summative assessments, the demand for evidence of achievement has prompted teacher use of explicit or deliberate teaching. It is important for teachers to have evidence in their planning and preparation to show they are responding to the learning needs of students determined from assessment results, and explicit teaching appears to be one way of providing that evidence.

The aim of explicit or deliberate teaching is to focus student attention towards the *learning* (concept, understanding or skill) rather than the *doing* (task or activity). Teachling (2015) indicates that explicit teaching is often introduced to students through expected or intended learning outcomes or intentions. For example, WALTs (We Are Learning To), designed to make the learning, concept, understanding or skill clear to students, or alternatively WALAs (We Are Learning About), designed to clarify understanding of a broader concept and not necessarily hone in on the specific skills identified in a WALT. In tandem with learning outcomes, criteria that indicate successful achievement of the expected outcomes are an essential aspect of explicit teaching; their creation, alongside learning intentions, assist teacher and student learning clarity (Absolum, 2010). Generally identified as Success Criteria (SC), or alternatively as WILFs (What I'm Looking For), both are intended to specify what it is exactly that learners are expected to demonstrate or produce for the teacher

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(Teachling, 2015). As such, learning intentions and success criteria can be perceived as convergent strategies utilised by teachers so that students produce what it is that the teacher directs.

Torrance and Pryor (1998) suggested a framework of convergent and divergent models for formative assessment. Convergent assessment aims to discover whether the learner knows, understands or can do a pre-determined thing. Divergent assessment aims to discover what the learner knows, understands or can do.

Summative assessment, explicit teaching, and the New Zealand curriculum

Summative assessment and explicit teaching, when used routinely, have the potential to close down student input. Marshall and Drummond (2006) identify the notion of such routine as teachers adhering to the 'letter' rather than the 'spirit' of a strategy. Even when used with the best teacher intentions, mechanical use of explicit teaching can get in the way of quality student learning. For example, having a list of learning intentions can limit both teacher and student perception of how far the learning will go ('we've met the WALTs and are moving on to the next unit of learning'). As well, learning intentions established before beginning a unit can reduce the element of 'surprise' and can easily become repetitive. Moreover, a class curriculum dominated by pre-set WALTs can constrain student imagination, voice, creativity and ability to inquire. Arguably, routine summative assessment and explicit teaching use has the potential for teachers to become the deciders of student learning destinations and goals.

In contrast, *The New Zealand Curriculum* (NZC) (Ministry of Education, 2007) promotes students taking greater responsibility, accountability and leadership for their own learning. Three of the eight principles in the NZC, Learning to learn, Community engagement, and Coherence, advocate for active student involvement in their learning. Similarly, in a list of seven key values, the same NZC document specifies students are to be encouraged to value "innovation, inquiry, and curiosity, by thinking critically, creatively, and reflectively" (p. 10). In such statements, the NZC document establishes the importance of student exploration, curiosity and questions—elements that contribute to the development of learner autonomy.

A need for balance

So how do teachers strike a balance between summative assessment and explicit teaching and students contributing to their own learning destinations? Teachers can fall into rituals of practice but can deflect routineness with regular reflection and articulation of their own practice (Fraser et al., 2009). Collaborations between the University of Waikato and partnership schools has facilitated the reflection/articulation process for some NZ teachers in the Bay of Plenty (Whyte, House, & Keys, 2016). Observations, followed by discussions, encourage teachers to contemplate, explain and record their learning space practice. One such collaboration between the article's authors in 2016 indicated that achieving a balance between summative assessment, explicit teaching, and student input *is* possible in a quality-learning programme.

However, that balance is best achieved under certain conditions. For example, when based on ascertained student learning needs; when explicit teaching is considered as fundamental learning undertaken to open doors for further learning; when students are aware of their current learning and have thinking time to make connections; and when students can identify the relevance of the learning. Learning intentions co-constructed during the learning can reinforce for students what they are actually doing and learning, as this may not always be apparent to them; but once they have base knowledge or skills to work with, exploration, curiosity and questions then become their next step. To illustrate, a snapshot descriptor of author Penny Deane's 2016 learning space in action by co-author Barb Whyte is included here to establish a context, followed by Penny's reflection on her pedagogy and rationale for including summative assessment and explicit teaching into her learning programme.

Snapshot of Penny's divergent learning space in action

The NZC states, "Every decision relating to curriculum and every interaction that takes place in a school reflects the values of the individuals involved …" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 10).

Penny is an experienced Bay of Plenty teacher, and witnessing her programme in action reveals how values permeate her beliefs about learning and are embedded in divergent socio-cognitive teaching practice.

This is Term 3, 2016. Penny's learning space has the trappings of a Flexible Learning Space (Ministry of Education, 2016), with the usual colour and relaxed feel of trust evoked by couches, beanbags, large cushions, tall tables and stools, low geometric-shaped tables and chairs, tote trays, carpet squares, student and teacher-created artwork displays (YouTube, 2017). When students arrive in the space, however, there is an added dynamic of invigoration generated by the students' obvious eagerness to be in this space, willingness to take responsibility for getting the room ready and organised, and keenness to get on with their learning. Anticipating the routines and expectations, some already continue with unfinished activities from the previous day, or look to the list of learning tasks on the board to set goals for the day, even before the teacher has officially started the day.

Penny values an integrated, student-centred approach, but her take on this varies from that of other New Zealand curriculum integration approaches to learning (c.f., Boyd & Hipkins, 2012; Brough, 2008). Her approach reflects experiential beliefs about how to engage students in a meaningful learning programme and what a teacher needs to do to enhance learning. Penny said that at the start of the year, she makes the physical environment as attractive as possible and tries to create an invitational atmosphere that nurtures student desire to work at and value learning. Once established, the continuation of that learning atmosphere becomes the responsibility of the students, who often make layout or furnishing changes to suit their needs and preferences. It is evident from the way students are self-managing themselves into the day, sorting and arranging the mat/bean-bag layout for the starter-hui, gathering together needed equipment detected from reading the new tasks on the board, tidying up resources, mounting displays of finished work on the walls, or starting on their learning tasks from their own volition, that they have shared-ownership and responsibility for the space.

At 9.00am a teacher-student class hui establishes the learning expectations for the day. There are seven concurrent learning topics currently in process, of which students are at various stages of understanding and task participation. The seven topics are Class Camp, School Garden, Issues (for this class), School Speech Competition, Te Reo Māori, Local Community Garden, and Rio de Janeiro/Olympics/Paralympics. There are student and teacher representations of these topics and relevant learning tasks up and around the learning space walls, which provide a snapshot of what goes on in the learning and teaching programme (see Table 1).

Table 1: The Seven Concurrent Topics and Learning Activities

Class Camp—student wall display of photos from camp, with teacher prompts and examples of genres for writing experience-based poems; completed poems displayed.
School Garden—advertisements for mature plants from previous year's class to be sold for fundraising purposes, while new plants are in the propagation and potting process for sale by the next year's class.
Issues—recent school cross-country event prompted several students in class to be 'ill' and absent on the day; a student committee formed to write a persuasive letter to school management to explain the dilemma and suggest alternative events; committee has displayed ideas generated so far for class to read and add to.
School Speech Competition—teacher-made step-by-step guides and a planner for writing and practising an engaging speech entry; sign-up sheet for inviting review/appraisal student-pairs.
Te Reo Māori—Charts indicating content of online digital resources available for individualised learning of the language.
Local Community Garden—a display of class-generated suggestions to help develop and foster this local garden e.g., make decorative terracotta plant signs or numbers, which involves research of plants and their categories, planning and creating a pottery sign with good visibility, research of plant propagation, and growing of plants from seed to sell for garden fund-raising.

Rio de Janeiro/Olympics/Paralympics—a range of activities along one wall variously challenging students to locate and interpret 2016 Olympic and Paralympic sports and statistics; find out about Rio de Janeiro geography and culture; the 'carnival' festival and the significance of masks for this event; instructions on how to make a mask; interpret Olympic and Paralympic images and the emotions they convey.

A daily list of new tasks and activity suggestions to choose from reflects where students are up to with each of these seven topics. The list provides choices to select from and acts as a launching pad from which students individually plan their day (see figure 2). During the hui, Penny utilises her personal knowledge and records the capability and learning achievements of each student; she verbally motivates and challenges individuals to continue on with activities, move to new tasks, and balance their day's work.

Table 2: Today's List of Learning Task Suggestions

'If you are not working with the teacher or student teacher today':

- Complete an Olympic activity.
- Collect your prints and decide which one you would like 'mounted' and decide how you would like that done.
- Consider how you would like to enhance one of your other prints—mixed media, woven, 3-D.
- Edit your cinquain poems—count your words carefully, check the opacity of your background.
- Edit your bio-poem—no repeated ideas, show respect for your individuality and creativity.
- Create a title for your camp print.
- Publish your letter—remember genuine thoughts only.
- Go to http://tokureo.maori.nz/ and open series 2, episode 6 to practise counting in Māori to 100.
- Consider if you wish to design and create a quality mask.
- Complete your camp book—it is a treasure.
- Help choose three haiku for the haiku poems so far.
- Use a maths game to develop your speed and accuracy.
- Start to plan your Term 2 presentation—what your topic will be and how you will engage your audience.
- Read.
- Practise your new spelling lists.
- Decide if you would like to make a garden number for the local Community Garden and plan your font and materials.

Alongside this list is a sign-up sheet headed:

I have checked and double-checked, AND had a friend check my cinquain, and it is now ready to be printed.

Students, though, are not constrained to this list of task suggestions and some propose alternatives e.g., 'Class Camp': "We'd like to make a scale model of a flying fox to demonstrate the physics involved when we're on it." Penny checks out the group's 'who, what, how' intentions and sanctions the project, but only once a collaborative drawn plan of the model has been shared and critiqued by the class. Some students have already decided what they are going to do during the day, while others peruse the task list suggestions and then make decisions as to what to start with and what to do from then on. Students gather up the materials they require from the storage areas in the room, such as

cardboard for 3-D mask making, and locate their own spaces for carrying out their tasks. Sometimes others gravitate towards the same area so a group is working in parallel, while others find their own workspace on the floor or at tables.

Penny and the student teacher rotate through pre-organised teaching sessions with groups of students and facilitate 'just-in-time' learning as needs arise, and ensure individuals are balancing their task types and curriculum coverage. At the same time, students peer-teach, peer-appraise, and/or help each other. The day flows seamlessly with students engaging in a range of learning tasks individually, in parallel, and/or collaboratively. 'Stock-takes', usually before or after a break, punctuate the day to help the teacher and students re-group, monitor, and gather evidence of learning, task progress and completion. In Penny's own words: "One lot of learning just merges into another."

Teacher voice: Penny Deane's reflection on practice

Penny explains her perspective of that learning space described above, with particular reference to how summative assessment and explicit teaching is incorporated into her integrated curriculum programme, to align it with NZC and National Standards expectations.

Everyone can learn;
Just not in the same way
And not on the same day.

To me the adage 'Know me before you teach me' is a cornerstone of effective teaching, and because of this, I am an advocate, of sorts, for assessment. Teachers who have taught lessons which, on reflection, weren't well suited to that particular group of students, and therefore of limited value, may well agree. Part of this 'knowing', but not all, can involve using some traditional methods of assessment (adapted where necessary to suit individual needs) to understand strengths, needs, and patterns in learning. The time taken to create, implement, mark and interpret the results of high quality assessments yields valuable dividends by providing assumption- and bias-free information about individuals, taking the 'guess work' out of teaching and making it more enriching for students and teachers. The key is to use only those assessments which lead to improved learning and teaching, and that the term 'assessment' is not restricted to meaning pen and paper tests taken by students.

Each year my long-term goal is to empower my students to be curious, to raise questions, to assess the value of the status quo and consider alternatives. I encourage them to know themselves as learners and communicators, to contribute academically, physically and socially to our learning environment and to our community, and to value others. This, combined with decision making, working collaboratively, assuming leadership roles, and demonstrating social agency, doesn't come naturally to many students and needs to be explicitly taught over an extended period using a range of learning opportunities. Because it takes time, it takes patience.

While I may not know the exact inquiry or units of learning my students will have been involved in by the end of their year with me, or in their future years, I do know the skills and attitudes they will need to be confident, proactive learners when those challenges arise. Teaching and embedding those as early as possible, is invaluable. Like other 'time poor' teachers, I have had to look for ways to maximise learning by providing supported challenge. This has meant dedicating Term One to teaching my students good organisation and time management skills, establishing the Key Competencies and Values which form the basis to many of our future investigations, and introducing responsible learning habits by allowing some choice with semi-independent activities and flexible timetabling. The activities chosen are curriculum based but also provide information about their individual backgrounds, their work habits, preferences and learning styles. By explicitly teaching skills which allow quality independent work, I begin to gain uninterrupted time to work with individuals or groups to better understand what is needed to have my students invest in, and enjoy, their learning. Because I need to know whether I have been effective and what our next steps are I assess. This may be a written assessment for students but could also be the completion of a media or arts driven presentation, observation of independent or group learning, brain storming activities,

verbal reflections by students and evidence of practical application. Using a variety of assessment methods provides a wider understanding of next steps for students.

Deliberate acts of teaching at the beginning of the year include using WALTs and success criteria, for example, as we identify what learning involves, which skills and tools are useful and how investigations may be undertaken. Clearly depth of student voice is compromised at this time, although not completely lost, in order to develop the skills and attitudes they will need to use independently or collaboratively in the future. The benefit of such scaffolding, however, includes removing learner stress and confusion, reducing other barriers to learning and developing an informed relationship between student and teacher, and between students. Assessing student progress throughout this process either formally or informally enables me to apply the "Teaching as inquiry process" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 35), particularly early in the year.

Many students need this specific teacher direction for a short time only. Once curiosity becomes normalised, learning tools are understood and confidence to take risks and ask for help from adults or other students exists, then most learners begin to drive their own learning. With good fundamental skills embedded they are set up for success, ready to adapt familiar approaches to suit new learning, keen to innovate and resilient enough to cope with the challenges of independent inquiry.

In short, I feel directed learning and assessment have an unnecessarily negative connotation. In conjunction with knowledge gained from previous teachers and the student's whānau, they empower teachers to empower students in the long term. Directed learning does not need to be a 'creativity killer' but can provide a platform for success. Assessment should not be associated with deficit thinking but seen as a window of opportunity to create powerful learning. When used judiciously both have their place as fundamental steps in developing truly curious, independent life long learners who are responsible agents of change[i].

Closing observation

It is clear from Penny's reflection that she respects her students foremost as people and that she undertakes genuine consideration of each student's social, emotional, physical and academic needs. She revealed the key to her inspiration comes from the concept of *Tu Pono* (Know yourself), derived from the Ministry of Education (2009b) document: *Te aho arataki marau mō te ako i te reo Māori - kura Auraki.* From her understanding of *Tu Pono*, Penny understands students first need to know themselves as people, in order to know themselves as learners. Therefore she endeavours to cultivate a student-centred learning environment that encourages autonomous student exploration, curiosity and questions. However, appreciating that the latter may not happen consistently nor at the same time for all students, she utilises the flexibility of a divergent programme to support development of autonomous learning habits.

Within such a learning environment, Penny makes use of summative assessment to determine student learning-needs and uses explicit teaching to clarify learning. However, her use is underpinned by the belief that both are just starting points for further learning. Conveying this belief to students, she then ensures they are able to identify their current learning, know where it can go, and have thinking time to make connections. In her view, they are then more likely to understand the relevance of what they are learning, which prompts exploration, curiosity and relevant questions. Used in this way, summative assessment and explicit teaching can be seen to be contributing to divergent, rather than convergent, teacher practice.

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[i] Further reading about Penny's practice can be found in Fraser & Deane, 2010.

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