

Seminar 2: Process Orientation & Assessment

Slide 1 - Introduction

Hi there and welcome to the second of three seminars that have been developed to support the work and thinking of the co-construction group within the Camau i'r Dyfodol project. Now unsurprisingly, this builds from some of that thinking that we explored in the first seminar in which we drew upon some of the work of James McKernan and Laurence Stenhouse among others, to unpack and kind of build a picture of how we might understand a process orientated approach.

Now what this work showed was that taking a process approach was not simply about just concerning ourselves with the processes of learning, but in fact, is a different way of thinking about curriculum learning and teaching. Now very briefly, there were a few things that came out of this: we know, so far, for example, that those who take a process approach would still have to select content as you would if you took another curricular approach, but that this content wouldn't be pre specified as learning outcomes. Teachers would select content on the basis that it's judged to be worthwhile and use their understandings of the values and purposes of the curriculum in order to do this. Working with the curriculum in this way was seen as quite a creative and empowering process through which teachers would create learning experiences that allow pupils to engage with that worthwhile content in ways that allow them to develop towards the overall purposes or aims of the curriculum.

In this input, we unpack things further still, and ask ourselves what a process orientation means for how we might think about and approach assessment.

Slide 2 – A Process Approach

Now, any complex curricular reform, particularly those at national level, invite people across the system to ask questions about the three key message systems that make up education. Namely: curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. We know that all three of these are often intertwined in quite complex ways, and we know that of these three, assessment can exert quite a significant influence on how, and what, we teach.

Assessment forms an integral part of the relationship between curriculum and pedagogy, but a process orientation invites us to think differently about learning and assessment. Now, while this next bit might seem obvious, it's simply because how we think about, and develop, and practise assessment depends very much upon how we think about learning. Previously, as part of the work of the co-construction group, people have had a chance to think already about one of the longstanding distinctions that people toil with in education - the distinction between learning and performance.

Soderstrom and Bjork recognise that what we observe as part of the process of instruction or training are changes in performance, and that these don't necessarily tell us about changes in learning, which here, is understood to be relatively permanent changes in what

someone is able to understand, know and do. Process approaches, as we explored in the previous seminar, are very much about learning in this sense through growth and development - of the individual pupil to cultivate understanding that's broadened, deepened, enhanced, and enriched, to steal once more the words of Mary James.

The point here is that our assessment practices need to be sufficiently aligned with our understandings of teaching and learning. And in adopting a process approach, assessment would not drive those processes of teaching and learning, but rather allow us to evaluate and understand pupil learning in ways that support continued learning, development, and growth. As far as possible, we seek to avoid what McCormick describes as the proverbial assessment tail, wagging the curriculum dog.

Now, to help us think this through a little bit further, I'm going to introduce two views and one position. The first view sees assessment as a convergent process, the second view sees assessment as a divergent process, and the position is that process approaches suggest a shift from the convergent view of assessment to the divergent view of assessment.

Slide 3 – Convergent View of Assessment

Now, before I go on to describe a little bit about these views of assessment, it's important to note that these are synthesised from the work of John Pryor, Harry Torrance and Sue Swaffield and references are included to these associated papers at the end of this input. Part of the reason why we think it's helpful to explore and contrast these different views of assessment is because it helps to picture more clearly how the work of people such as Kelly, Stenhouse and McKernan convey – collectively - a different way of thinking about learning and teaching.

Here, we see then, some of the characteristics associated with a more convergent view of assessment. By its very nature, its purposes are narrower than might be the case with other more divergent views of assessment. Much of the focus and assessment practise is concerned with questions about the extent to which learners have attained a particular learning objective or outcome. It's notable also that in his own writing, Stenhouse very much associates this type of process with the business of success and failure.

Now, we often see a more convergent view of assessment associated with product or standards-based curricula in which learning is captured and framed as a series of outcomes and these outcomes, and hence the learning is seen as predictable. And by predictable, I mean that it can be specified in advance of any teaching and learning taking place. In this sense, learning is seen as a largely linear process that overtime, or the course of a lesson, would converge on meeting particular learning outcomes or objectives. Assessment approaches are designed to help ascertain the extent to which this has happened and from that feedback can be used to help pupils improve performance. This fosters a form of feedback loop which can be seen as closed if the pupils able to act upon it and use that to help improve performance and attainment, and ultimately more fully meet the learning objective or outcome. Fundamentally, this convergent view of assessment rests upon

behaviourist theories of learning, and this sits in contrast to a divergent view of assessment that rests upon social cognitive and social constructivist theories of learning.

Slide 4 – Divergent View of Assessment

It will come as little shock to people that the divergent view of assessment encompasses comparatively broader views of assessment and of assessment purposes. It more strongly reflects process approaches to curriculum, learning and teaching, in that it's concerned with understanding and evaluating pupil learning. Here, the underlying question that shapes how we think about these assessment processes shifts from the extent to which pupils might have met particular outcomes to what can each learner do, and what do they know.

What's interesting here is that by changing the question, we also change our frames of reference, and if we think back to what we already know about the process approach, we can see how this more closely reflects the ideas of individual development and individual growth. In a sense, it's no longer about assessment that supports pupils to more fully attain learning outcomes. And in fact, this view of assessment sees the outcomes of learning as somewhat fuzzy and not predictable. It sees that different pupils might respond differently to learning experiences through both individual and collective sense making - the way one pupil understands something might be slightly different to the way another pupil understands something.

Now at this point, if we're all honest, many of us will be thinking in our heads about the big practical implication that this has for assessment practices. Because our process approach to curriculum doesn't specify or frame learning in terms of outcomes, neither do the assessment processes. In fact, curriculum assessment and pedagogy, in terms of process approaches, are highly, highly integrated. Assessment, in this context, provides opportunities for the teacher to evaluate learning - to support further learning. It's therefore about understanding what pupils know and can do in relation to the worthwhile content that they engage with through learning experiences. And it's also forward facing.

But how might we approach assessment if we're not doing so with reference to learning outcomes?

Slide 5 - Divergent Assessment: An Evaluative Process

As part of the first seminar input, we drew upon a definition of process curricula offered by James McKernan. Now, this was the definition where he spoke about the curriculum as being a proposal that set out an educational plan. That plan would offer students socially valued knowledge, attitudes, skills, abilities, and that these would be made available to students through a variety of learning experiences at all levels of the system. Now, in that same section of text, the next paragraph begins by McKernan arguing that the above definition, and I quote, does not separate curriculum from assessment or evaluation, nor from instruction, as is often the case in contemporary thinking.

Notably, McKernan and others who work with a process-based approach would never think of assessment as something separate to learning and teaching, and in fact they often see it as so intertwined with it that it's not easily distinguished. It's for this very reason that if you read work from authors who use a process approach, you're unlikely to find separate sections that discuss assessment, and it's simply because they don't see this as a separate process. What they do tend to do, and which we've hinted at already in this input, is view assessment as an evaluative process; one that's interested in understanding the learning and development of the individual, the collective learning, development and meaning making of the group, and also whether the unit of work and learning experiences themselves are effective in helping pupils to learn.

Here then, instead of assessing against particular outcomes, teachers evaluate and make inferences about what pupils are able to do, and know, in relation to what's being taught and why. In many ways, this leans into what lots of teachers will already be doing as part of their practice. Assessment, in this sense is not an exact science, but it's a process, and it's one in which teachers make their own subjective evaluations and inferences based on their knowledge of what's being taught.

Now, learning for the most part, is something that we cannot directly see, and most assessments therefore involve teachers making lots of evaluations of pupils' learning based upon different forms of evidence. Now this can be pupil work, dialogue, discussion and formal observations, pupil activities and so forth. What we tend to find is that if people are adopting a process approach, dialogue and discussion become particularly powerful means through which teachers get a sense of how pupils are understanding and thinking about things. Now this is regardless of the topic or subject area, and in some instances, it can be quite clear cut whether they understand and know something. If a teacher, for example, notices a pupil using the equation, *force equals mass divided by acceleration*, it's the teacher's own expertise of that particular subject that allows them to recognise this is incorrect. Similarly, if pupils are engaged in developing their own interpretations of a passage of text, or a section of a story, then it's the teacher's own expertise of that passage of text that allows them to evaluate the extent to which pupils' interpretations are supported by it. In both of these examples, it's the teacher's evaluation that sparks discussion and dialogue with the pupil, perhaps around the relationships between force, mass and acceleration, or about why particular aspects of an interpretation might not be supported by a text. This again reflects the importance of the role of the teacher and of subject knowledge.

Now, finally, on this slide we also talk about the process of making inferences from these different evaluations that take place as part of learning and teaching. The reason for doing this is that we can't see learning and no one source of evidence is able to form a complete picture of what pupils know and are able to do. The forms of evidence we engage with when we make evaluations are all necessarily incomplete and partial. We must therefore infer from across these different evaluations in order to build a picture of what pupils understand, know and are able to do.

Slide 6 - Divergent Assessment: An Evaluative Process

This more divergent view of assessment suggested by process approaches, therefore involves teachers making evaluations and inferences based on noticing things in pupils' responses and in relation to what it is that's being taught and learned. The evaluations that teachers themselves make support, deepen and enrich pupil learning. Much of this is captured by Stenhouse in his own writing, where he sees teacher's evaluative responses as being guided by the understanding of the nature of the subject and to provide thoughtful and productive evaluation which helps the student to improve their work.

Slide 7 – Assessment Activities as Learning Activities

In this final slide then, we summarise some characteristics that might be helpful in thinking about assessment activities as learning activities, as things that aren't really separate from the processes of learning and teaching.

Firstly, and very much in keeping with the ideas of a process approach, these activities should be educationally meaningful and worthwhile in terms of supporting and developing learning. And here, it may be helpful to think of an approach these as activities that are part of the wider educational experience that's developed for pupils, rather than specific tasks or tests.

Next, in order to support rich learning, these activities need to have an appropriate level of challenge and developed in such a way that allow learners to engage with sense making, with enquiry, with questioning, with exploration. Activities should also provide opportunities that allow pupils to demonstrate their learning, and this should include the knowledge, the understandings, the skills and the ideas that emerge from the worthwhile content that pupils engage with.

Lastly, giving consideration to how these activities can be made as authentic as possible to ensure that they have real world applications and connexions rather than test knowledge that's more decontextualized.