

Assessment and the Observer Principle: How does assessment affect education?

1. The Observer Principle says that the act of observing changes that which is being observed. Assessment changes education: it changes the nature of what is being taught; it changes the attitude of the students; it changes the approach of the teacher. These things are unavoidable, except by not assessing.
2. Assessment takes place in different contexts and for different reasons. On the whole, we are assessing how efficient teachers are at getting information into their pupils and getting them to understand it. When some of them struggle, we assess them to see if there is something wrong, so that we can provide extra help.
3. Assessment looks for the most efficient way to get information into each child, and we come to the conclusion that not all children - 'learners' - take in information in the same way. Some are visual, some aural, kinetic or some other kind of learner. Then we teach them in a variety of ways so that they can all learn. Nothing wrong with that.
4. So far we have been very conscientious; we have checked that all of our children have the opportunity to learn and we are aware of the children who have some difficulty with learning. We may also be giving them extra help to make sure they keep up with the others, or at least make progress at their own pace. This is what is being done in good schools all over the country from the moment children start school.
5. So what's wrong with this picture? The things most people think children need to learn are more or less dictated by convention, by tradition, by government who, in turn, take their cue from public opinion, which is based on convention: *'The purpose of the National Curriculum was to standardise the content taught across schools'* It has certainly done that, but why?
6. We have the freedom in the independent Waldorf schools in this country to decide what is the best curriculum and what are the best methods of teaching for our students, but do we use it? Or is our curriculum also dictated to us?
7. If we are using standardised tests, it certainly is. The Wikipedia page about the National Curriculum continues: *'The purpose of the National Curriculum was to standardise the content taught across schools to enable assessment, which in turn enabled the compilation of league tables detailing the assessment statistics for each school. These league tables, together with the provision to parents of some degree of choice in assignment of the school for their child (also legislated in the same act) were intended to encourage a 'free market' by allowing parents to choose schools based on their measured ability to teach the National Curriculum.'*
8. Do we ever ask ourselves what we need to assess ? Is this a decision we ever have to make?
9. Assessment for Learning is a method devised in the 1990s to use assessment to help students learn. *'Teachers need to know at the outset of a unit of study where their students are in terms of their learning and then continually check on how they are progressing through strengthening the feedback they get from their learners. Students are guided on what they are expected to learn and what quality work looks like.'*
10. What we assess, as we have seen, affects what we teach. If what we assess is dictated to us, how free are we in choosing the best curriculum for our students? In Steiner schools, we have complete freedom. What affects our choices apart from our own judgement?
11. If children struggle because they 'have something wrong', we focus our attention on getting the information into them *somehow*.
12. When I was a class teacher, I used to ask my class about once a term 'what do we come to school for?'
13. We have made a clear distinction between children who can learn just by being told things, and those who can't. The implication is, firstly, that being able to learn just by being told things

makes you 'clever', or even 'normal', and that people who learn in other ways are less bright. This attitude begins to stigmatise not only these 'less bright' people, but also practical education itself. Courses that teach or use practical skills are called 'vocational' and have lower status than 'academic' courses. For schools like ours that know the value of practical and artistic work, this perception damages our standing in the world. So we try to make our schools more like mainstream schools so that they are acceptable.

14. We should be clear about whether we need to assess and why. What are the reasons for doing it? What should we consider? It is expected, the students want it, their parents want it, employers want it, universities want it, it would be difficult not to do it.
15. What do we do when we assess? We measure and rank students against each other; we measure teachers,
16. When does assessment stop?
17. Summing up: Assessment allows us to engage in reflection on our work as teachers, to learn from what we do and to change it to suit what we see in our students. This is its educational purpose. If we don't use it to do this, its purpose is not educational. The question is, how can we assess our students in a way that does not interfere with the process of their education? It is our task to find a way to do that.
18. But we still haven't addressed the underlying question, which is 'what is education for?' We are deciding on a curriculum and methods of assessment that don't interfere with it, but what is it for? Because education is not about ensuring that our students know this or can do that, it's about who they are. Our task is to help them become who they are and to take their places in a world to which they can make a useful contribution. That doesn't mean finding a job, it means being able and prepared to work; it doesn't mean being law-abiding citizens, it means doing what's right because they know it's right; it doesn't mean being sensible, playing it safe and having insurance, it means consciously taking risks when necessary and being prepared to take responsibility for the consequences.

- Students value assessed work; work that is not assessed loses its value.
- Students are measured against each other
- Students and teachers aim to pass the test; the test dictates what you learn
- How you teach is determined by how efficiently you can get the required information into the students. Assessments for learning difficulties are based on this premise; that getting the information into the children is the important thing.
- People put their faith in the authority of the test in deciding what they should learn. This prevents them from thinking beyond it and asking 'What am I interested in?' 'What do I need to learn about?' 'What do I want from life?'
- Talent is rewarded regardless of effort; effort becomes worthless and people think of themselves as predestined for certain things and not for others.
- It is no longer worthwhile to try hard at something unless you know you can be successful
- Contributing to the group's learning is not valued; it's every man for himself
- Students can orientate themselves in the 'world' of qualifications
- The competition makes them work harder
- Their work is focused; they are working for a particular outcome
- They begin to confuse being educated with knowing what the answer is
- Parents, who are less involved in their children's education as they get older, have only assessment results to gauge how they are doing and cling to the idea that something 'recognised' is better.
- So what is assessment for? What is education for? and how can we have both?