MAKE THEM LAUGH MAKE THEM CRY

Re-imagining the initial assessment process for GCSE English students in the Further Adult and Vocational Education sector in England

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Abstract

This paper reports on a practitioner-led research study funded by the Education and Training Foundation in England. The project was part of the Foundation's National Research Development Fellowship (RDF) programme, which aimed to encourage and support practitioner research in the Further Adult and Vocational Education (FAVE) sector. The project was conducted in collaboration with a team of research-active teacher educators at the University of Sunderland's Centre for Excellence in Teacher Training (SUNCETT). The purpose of the study was to address perceived shortcomings in widely taken for granted approaches to initial assessment for students aiming to study for the General Certificate in Secondary Education in English (GCSE) in England.

Of particular concern was the way in which the dominant ICT-based approach to initial assessment was not only restricting what could be measured and valued but was also serving to diminish and demotivate students whose previous experiences and achievements had led them to believe that this was a subject they had not been and could not ever be 'good at'. Another concern was that this approach to initial assessment was students' first encounter with the subject of English since their (often negative) experiences of schooling. The instrumental, decontextualized, individual and impersonal nature of this encounter in the form of the initial assessment test appeared to be operating not only to inhibit students' engagement with the subject of English but also to confirm their previous perceptions of the study of English to be irrelevant and even boring.

The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the possibilities and practicalities of developing a more holistic and creative approach to initial assessment of GSCE English students. Our aim here is to try to discover if/how such an approach might be capable of connecting with the individual and collective experiences of students by tapping into the emotive power of the language. Through the media of music, art, literature, drama, film and popular culture this approach to initial assessment aims to create new worlds of imagination to encourage deeper engagement with the subject of GCSE English.

Keywords: Initial Assessment, creative teaching, student engagement.

Introduction

"All great truths begin as blasphemies"

- George Bernard Shaw (Annajanska, 1919)

The current orthodoxy would have us believe that the private companies which provide widely marketed Computer Assessment Tools (CATs) for initial assessment in the Further Adult and Vocational Education (FAVE) sector offer the most appropriate approach to establishing the previous achievements and the current learning needs of students of GCSE English. Across England and elsewhere, Further Education (FE) colleges spend thousands of pounds on computer programmes that collect data from vast numbers of students to produce readily auditable documents, which we would argue are of dubious educational value. We need to ask ourselves is this good educational practice in the initial assessment of students whose experiences and achievements in studying English may have led them to see themselves as failures and to regard the study of English as being irrelevant or even boring? This also raises the question of whether an ICT based 'one size fits all' approach to initial assessment echoes the ethos of *Every Child Matters* or indeed the enduring educational values which have placed human dignity, mutual respect between teachers and learners and the pursuit of individual and common good at the heart of good educational practice across the ages. The strength of the grip of such approaches upon the imagination of teachers and education leaders and managers is evident in the `largely unchallenged assumptions (to date) about the educational worth of ICT based approaches to initial assessment and the current taken-for-granted use of these practices in our college and no doubt in colleges across England and elsewhere.

Our contention is that current institutional systems, which utilise automated computer software fail to assess many parts of the English curriculum and conduct educational assessment (or to put is more accurately battery testing) in a clinical and dehumanised manner which neither motivates nor engages students in the study of English. We argue that such approaches are open to challenge and worthy of close and systematic scrutiny. In our view the study of English should be an enriching and rewarding experience for every student, but an unfortunate consequence of current practice is that their first post-16 encounter with the subject is a computer that has a predetermined bank of bland decontextualized questions which as we argue above are of dubious educational value, debatable validity and questionable reliability.

In this paper we appraise currently dominant systems of computer-based initial assessment and consider why they were seen to be sufficiently intuitively appealing to be implemented in the first place. We then propose alternative approaches to initial assessment and intervention strategies which we believe may not only be more educational but also more useful to teachers and learners alike. As educators we recognise that students are human beings who bring to our classrooms different experiences, needs and ways of learning, unique levels of 'intelligence' alongside distinctive personal and cultural biographies and trajectories of learning. Powell and Kusuma-Powell (2011:3) point out that it is *"the most effective teachers that incorporate these factors into their instructional planning".*

Literature Review

Making sense of ourselves and our world is and always has been, inextricably related to our language. As Wittenstein observes,

> *'The limits of my language mean the limits of my world'*
> (Wittgenstein,1922).

Here Wittenstein reminds us that the reach of our minds, the range of signs we manage to interpret, in the course of our lives is what defines the intellectual, emotional, and moral space within which we live. Carter (2000) and Corbett (2010) point out that it is through language we can imagine other worlds and what it might be like to be other people and in this way we can begin become clearer to ourselves both in terms of what we see in others that seems familiar to us as well as that which seems unfamiliar, exotic or remote. Corbett (2010: 4) shows how language can enable us to 'step outside the darkness of ourselves' and that this is what makes the development of language genuinely educational.

The Education for All (EFA) *Global Monitoring Report* (UNESCO, 2005) draws attention to why the acquisition and development of language and literacy is regarded as being an essential human right because it is through the exercise of language and literacy that we develop a sense of agency and the ability to access our other civil rights including the right and ability to participate in a democratic society.
This is a far cry from an approach to the assessment of language acquisition and development in terms of a mechanical and instrumental encounter which the acquisition of language and literacy can be reduced to the auditing of a battery of technical skills which routinely place a crude number on learner achievement and immediately place the learner and their learning in deficit.

The key concepts and issues in this study grew from our experiences of initial assessment practices in our own organisation which generated embryonic doubts concerning the educational value and impact of our institution's current initial assessment (IA) processes. Sixteen years before we started this study Margaret Hodge, who at the time, was chair of the House of Commons Select Committee on Education, nurtured the seeds of technical- instrumentalist views of education when she added her voice to those of her many political predecessors across the political spectrum who argued that technology can and should replace teachers:

"…we should be thinking of employing fewer teachers, not more… Over the next few years information technology will revolutionise our schools… and the use of interactive software could replace more formal lessons (1998:10).

From a benign perspective the justifications for arriving at such a conclusion may be traced back to Skinner (1961 cited in Coffield, 2008:7), when he notes that: *"Any teacher who can be replaced by a computer, should be."*

Concerns controversies and ambiguities inherent in the dominant zeitgeist regarding the unfettered use of technology in education originated in the work of Vygotsky, his associates and successors, whose research and ideologies promote and defend the indispensable role of teachers who, they argue, do what technology is unable to do in enabling learners *"to operate just beyond their established capabilities and to consolidate this experience as new ability and understanding."* (Mercer 2000: 141). Fielding et al (2005) and Biesta (2010) argue that education is a deeply personal, existential encounter which influences individual and collective understandings of who we think we are and what we think we are capable of now and in the future, and as such always require teachers to exercise educational judgment in complex and unfolding contexts. This is not to say that technology has no contribution to make to education. It has. It is simply to say that we need to be careful about the pedagogic purposes to which technology is put in educational contexts in order to ensure that it enhances (not replaces) good educational practice.

This line of thinking also poses challenging questions to tutors and education leaders and managers. For example, whose interests are being served by this practice of using ICT in IA? The interests of the learner? Of the staff? Of the institution? Of the Government? Auditors? Inspectors? The commercial companies which design and market the software? Or some combination thereof? In this study and through our engagement with literature and research in the field of assessment theory and practice we want to explore three clear key questions:

1. How accurate are the computer assessment tools for IA?
2. Whose interests are being served by this particular practice of IA?
3. Is there a more educationally sound and research informed alternative?

Our research may be seen therefore as a response to current Government legislation and a cultivation of research culminating in a report from Professor Alison Wolf who recommends that:

"Students who are under 19 and do not have GCSE A-C in English and/or Maths should be required, as part of their programme, to pursue a course which either leads directly to these qualifications, or which provide significant progress towards future GCSE entry and success"*

Wolf (2011: Recommendation 9).

This recommendation has important and substantial consequences for the FE sector as it means that GCSE cohorts will significantly increase across the sector in the 2014/2015 academic year, in direct response to the Wolf Report. Our institution will therefore need to address the issues

and practicalities of these challenges throughout the London Borough in which we teach and from which we recruit our students.

Context of the Study

- Barking and Dagenham is the 22nd most deprived authority in England and many families in the borough are either on low incomes, where full-time salaries are lower than in any other authority in London.
- Barking and Dagenham pupils are less likely to achieve C+ in English and maths at GCSE level and are less likely to achieve A and A* grades.
- Progression into higher education is much lower than the national average, largely because qualification levels for 18 and 19 year olds are too low.
- The average point score per candidate is still lower than national and London comparisons and it is this measurement that ultimately determines success in terms of getting to university.
- A third of Barking and Dagenham's 19 year olds either have qualifications lower than GCSE level or have no qualifications at all.

Summary Needs Assessment: Barking and Dagenham's Children and Young People's Plan (2011 - 2016)

Coffield (2008) highlights *'Ten principles of effective teaching and learning'.* Number three is of particular interest to our study: *"Recognise the importance of prior experience and learning', the very essence of IA".* Furthermore, he goes on to discuss how effective teachers are aware that they need to take into account what learners know already, but the third principle also requires them to respond to the *"Personal and cultural experiences of different groups".*

Crowley (2008) suggests that:

"…if we accept the importance of prior learning and experience, then the trajectory of learning must be shaped by both the teacher and the learner; the teacher can be the source of ideas to consider, but the informed decision must be owned by the learner."

Such interactions amount to more than just *"active engagement".* Echoing the thoughts of Crowley, our research draws attention to the importance of the transition and overlap between IA and T&L. We will explore further this notion of assessing and initial learning (AIL) in our recommendations.

Coffield (2008) also asks us to consider *"what practices should we as teachers be holding onto and which ones should we be abandoning?"* IA is a process through which the learners' disposition towards GCSE

English are confirmed, developed, challenged or changed. One of Piaget's earliest breakthroughs was his realisation that the mistakes and misunderstanding of children/students provided him with an insight into misconceptions and shortcomings in thinking. This is why paying close attention to the processes of thinking and the how and why of misunderstanding is an intrinsic part of the IA process. It is our contention that this is not well served by ICT based approaches to assessment.

A rational response described as *'robust intervention'* in the first ever FE White Paper (2006) notes the tendency for senior managers, leaders and teachers (SLT) faced with pressing policy imperatives and challenging targets to play it safe and abandon any risky new approaches… in case they failed. Reed & Lodge (2006) argue that SLT need to create *"a safety zone within which risk can be encouraged and supported"* (2006:8). We argue that teachers, education leaders and mangers must not get caught up in the seductive but empty rhetoric and rituals of accepting ICT and Computer Assessment Tools [CATs] in place of teachers. Teachers need to be innovative at all levels to ensure the wellbeing of our students and the defence and survival of enduring educational values across the profession through the exercise of careful educational judgment and dynamic and encouraged risk-taking and an IA processes which serve authentic educational purposes.

The most successful and influential approaches to IA are not simply techniques to present the same old content in a different manner. Bloom's (1956) lowest order levels of cognitive thinking – recall and comprehension, have their place in theories of human development but education that remains solely at the lower levels of human thought have never and never will be enough to constitute good educational practice. Higher levels of human thinking in the cognitive domain (application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation) also need to be nurtured and encouraged in the pursuit of good pedagogic practice. Furthermore, Affective and Psychomotor domains of learning identified by Bloom (1956) and his associates Krathwohl and Dave, point to the importance the role of these other domains and levels of learning in education. The latter two domains have long been neglected in favour of their cognitive counterpart. There is therefore an urgent and pressing need for the role of the affective and psychomotor domains of learning to be researched and explored in practice in terms of how all three domains interplay in human thinking and learning in formal and informal educational contexts.

McNeil (2008) argues that taxonomies of human learning need to influence IA. He draws attention to the importance of attending to all three of Bloom's domains, with a concentration on dealing with higher order verbs, such as, build, construct and value rather than solely in the lower domain of recall, as well as those in the higher levels of the affective and psychomotor domains.
Johnson & Johnson (1989) draw upon the work of Deutsch (1968) for inspiration in formulating their interdependence theory on cooperative learning. It is the apparent success of this human approach that leads Slavin (1999) to suggest it is one of the greatest educational innovations of recent times. We must take note of the benefits of human interaction during the earliest stages of IA and appreciate the role of the teacher.

There has been a remarkable growth in the interest of initial assessment, largely in the form of online, pre-programmed computer input/output assessment toolkits. The nationally recognised CAT our institution employs has, to date, assessed 40 million students. In 2012 alone, 1.2 million learners passed through this machine and its website lays claim that 92% of their '***clients***' renew their licence. The very use of the word 'client' connotes commercial values and attitudes and the language and practices of 'the market'. Coffield and Williamson (2011) describe this as the creeping 'marketisation' of the education system under successive governments in the last few decades and how they have taken a flawed educational system, with promising elements, and turned all sectors of education into authoritarian *'exam factories'.*

The Advisory Committee on Mathematics Education (ACME) (2011) found that of the 330,000 students studying university courses that require mathematical knowledge beyond GCSE level, 210,000 of them (64%) did not have the required skills, causing problems for both students and universities. *''An individual learning plan cannot be prepared, with any hope of its being pertinent, without the most careful interview and, probably, well-chosen testing" Adult Learning Inspectorate* (ALI, 2002). The table below, although focused on mathematics reflects the initial assessment results against their GCSE results:

Table 4: Initial assessment results against GCSE results

Learners with maths Grade	IA RESULTS						TOTAL NU OF LEARN
	E1	E2	E3	L1	L2	L3	
A*	0	0	0	0	1	16	17
A	0	0	1	11	30	18	60
B	0	0	1	19	53	8	81
C	0	3	29	138	64	0	234
D	0	1	31	33	7	0	72
E	0	5	12	8	0	0	25
F	0	5	15	3	1	0	24
G	3	4	4	0	0	0	11
U	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
	4	18	93	212	156	42	525

Excerpts taken from:
http://www.ifl.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0013/33007/Gail-Lydon-PRP-article-PDF.pdf

The majority of students fell into the Orange category, where they were underperforming during the initial assessment process. This suggests that there may be some fundamental flaws in the IA process itself. Our working hypothesis for this study is that a combination of factors may be at work here including the lack of inspiration and engagement in the assessment material and the low validity and reliability of the instrument of assessment (the CAT), resulting in unreliable and invalid assessments.

"Inspectors will make a judgement on the quality of teaching, learning and assessment by evaluating the extent to which staff initially assess learners' starting points and monitor their progress, set challenging tasks, and build on and extend learning for all learners."

Ofsted (2012:6).

To date only limited attention has been given to the underlying nature of IA in English and its consequences for leaners and learning. Concerns arise when IA is construed as a simple and instrumental measurement process, the role of teacher judgement in evaluating the quality of students' prior knowledge is side-lined, marginalised or even considered irrelevant.

In our quest to discover the importance of IA, in the absence of literature focusing on its importance in the FAVE sector in England, we were drawn to use the metaphor and language of trauma wards in hospitals to describe where:

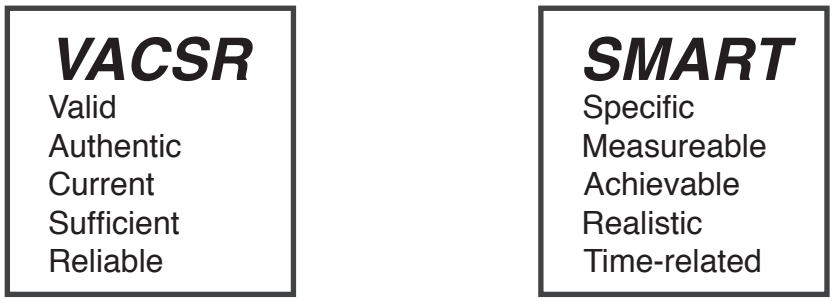
> ***The Initial Assessment and resuscitation of a*** ~~**trauma patient**~~ *English student* may happen in a ~~**pre-hospital field**~~ *pre-educational* setting by one or two people or in an ~~**ER Department**~~ *a classroom* by small team or large team, dependant of resources. Regardless of where it happens or by whom, the goal of early ~~**trauma care**~~ *IA* is to assess, diagnose and simultaneously address ~~**life threatening problems**~~ *English language issues* which can cause ~~**death or serious morbidity**~~ *serious underachievement.*
> Delayed or unsuccessful treatment of ~~**hypoxia or haemorrhage**~~ *grammar and comprehension* will result in complex problems such as ~~**acidosis and coagulopathy**~~ *a diminished student experience.*
> In order to recognise ~~**life threatening problems**~~ *English language issues* and initiate prompt treatment, a systematic *and pedagogically sound* approach to IA is necessary.
> In many ~~**ER**~~ *English departments* this means activation of ~~**consultant**~~ *teacher* led, multidisciplinary ~~**trauma**~~ *English teams* with skilled personnel who have the prerequisite knowledge and skills.

Excerpt taken from: Cole (2009:24-26) Trauma Care

Mindful of the moral parallels between medicine and education, we must attend to and value the critical importance of IA in education and do what Florence Nightingale asked of hospitals and *"Do no harm"*. IA in education is just as important as trauma units in hospitals and there is a fundamental need for the activation of teacher led, multidisciplinary teaching teams with skilled personnel who have the prerequisite

knowledge and skills. Our concern here that the wide use of IA based on ICT packages may be doing more harm than good.

Simpson and Gravells (2014) bring to the forefront two acronyms which represent the fundamentals of successful assessment, as seen below:



When appraising and designing assessment processes the above rubrics are a suitable reference point for gauging success.

Let us now take stock of the critical concepts that underpin our understanding of the multidimensional relationships between IA and actual prior knowledge, and explicate the nature of IA as a formative assessment process more than just a summative judgement (Clarke, 2001). IA comments and outcomes need to be focused on moving our students' learning forward by providing information, encouragement and diagnosis of what has been well and not so well done and with explicit guidance on what could be improved and how. Clarke (2001:2) captures the gulf between formative and summative assessment:

"If we think of our children as plants…summative assessment of the plants is the process of simply measuring them. The measurements might be interesting to compare and analyse, but, in themselves, they do not affect the growth of the plants. Formative assessment, on the other hand, is the garden equivalent of feeding and watering the plants – directly affecting their growth."

There is merit in measuring the starting point of a student's abilities, but this alone does not provide insights into the processes which helped or hindered their previous or help to shape their future goals. As such, formative approaches to assessment are essential to nurture the growth and wellbeing of competency in students and should be embedded in initial and continuing assessment processes.

In summary, improving our IA process calls for expansive rather than restrictive methods and assessment practices. Unwin (2007:1) discusses *"the often accidental and incidental nature of learning as part of everyday human activity."* Spontaneous occurrences of learning are near impossible to replicate using a pre-programmed tool. Unwin and Fuller (2003) identify expansive characteristics in a learning environment as consisting of "mechanisms to facilitate sharing of knowledge and skills as well as boundary crossing across job lines." Here we can see the merits of a platform of learning that is dynamic collaborative and unpredictable in nature.

We do not want to give the impression that we are engaged in an act of idle criticism or embarked on a witch-hunt against computer assessment tools (CATs). However in the light of our experiences of the impact of these practices upon learning and teaching we strongly support Coffield (2011) when he draws attention to the value of creating friction and principled dissent in attempts to challenge taken for granted aspects of educational practice. Piaget also reminds us of the importance of challenges to complacency and the taken for granted: *"I want to introduce an element of disequilibrium in the 'continual search for a better equilibrium'* (1982: 820). To return to our opening quote at the beginning of this paper, if we want to deepen our understanding of what good IA practice in education is, then we must not be afraid to challenge what is currently widely taken-for granted.

Research methodology

What was the perceived problem?

Current college IA practice:

- Uses pre-determined, instrumental, decontextualized bland questions to assess student competency in English
- Perpetuates inconsistencies within the assessment protocol, with specific reference to timings, authenticity and measurability
- Marginalises, and in some instances, ignores specific writing and speaking and listening curriculum elements
- Offers little scope for exhibiting creativity and originality through the computer platform
- Does not engage or motivate students in the study of English

Student case study

This case study is based on the experiences of an English Lecturer working at Barking and Dagenham College. The student in question was afforded the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym - DN.

Identified as an entry level two student, it was clear the computer which DN had sat in front of had not taken into account her oral fluency and clear gift for creativity. 9114 (the computers electronic name), recognised a student who couldn't spell but could be bothered to sit in front of what Wikipedia describe as *'a general purpose device that can be programmed to carry out a set of arithmetic or logical operations automatically*'.

Despite her less than positive start, DN was confident. At school she had been pushed from pillar to post, from isolation to detention room. She challenged authority. She had a strong command of the use of old Anglo Saxon swear words that could be described as being so caustic that they could (to use and English colloquialism) 'strip the toughest of Artex plaster' from a ceiling. I looked forward to teaching DN the minute I saw her.

I decided that the watchwords in developing a more holistic and more authentically engaging and educational approach to IA would be: Engage! Be dynamic! Be funny! Make them laugh, make them cry! We ran around the room, we used our mobiles, we watched films and documentaries and we wrote (and boy could she write)! Her spelling lacked strength, but her thirst for words was refreshing coupled with our

'no fear' classroom environment, she wasn't afraid of getting it wrong. I regularly challenged her in spelling competitions. At first I got the spellings wrong on purpose, I became vulnerable, I showed her it was ok to fail, but what do we do when our backs are against the wall and we can't spell that word? We have a go and if it's wrong we simply use strategies, tools and methods to find the correct spelling. We entered competitions, we experimented and, ultimately, we learnt a lot.

DN, on paper and according to 9114, was a statistical Entry Level 2 student. In a classroom with peers, a no fear environment, and stimulus that she enjoyed she changed her attitude to English. She is no longer a statistic but is a holder of a Level 2 Functional Skills qualification. She is a young dynamic woman with an energy for language, a smile on her face, and one less teacher on her hit list!

Methods

Exploration of the key questions posed was realised through:

1. Interviews with staff who conduct the computer-based initial assessments
2. Interviews with staff who deliver Functional Skills and GCSE English
3. Collating the assessment durations of randomly selected student IA results
4. Collating the IA result of students compared and corresponding FS English result
5. Analysing the instructional verb employed by questions featured in the computer assessment tool (CAT)

The first means of data collection was through interviews with four internal administration staff members responsible for the facilitation of the students' initial assessment process. Concurrently to this, we asked Functional Skills English staff to share their opinions too. Staff voice was logged anonymously using an electronic online form. In both instances, members of staff were posed the following question:

"What do you think of the college's current use of CAT and how effective do you believe these systems are?"

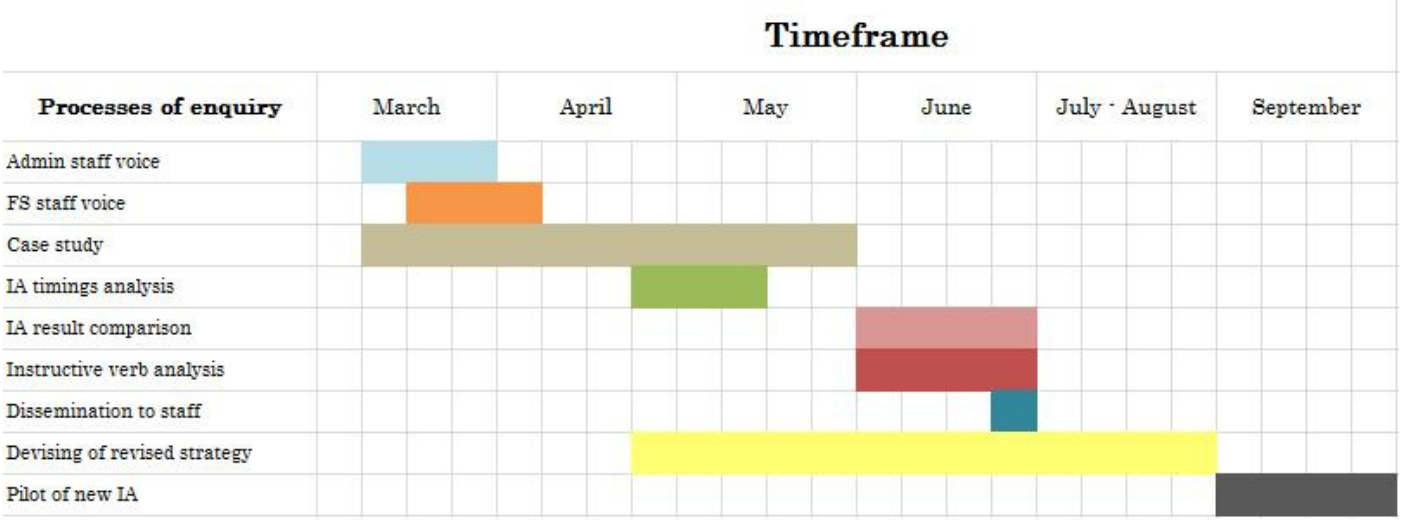
These were conducted on a one-to-one basis and the staff members were encouraged to be candid and write as much or as little as they deem appropriate.

In addition to staff voice, we wanted to explore the results the CAT was providing for students and staff. As such, further analysis studied IAs that had been completed by current students at the beginning of the 2013-2014 academic year. The samples used were as follows:

- 50 IA results from students across vocations including brickwork, motor vehicle and beauty.
- 200 IA results from students across vocations, including plumbing, carpentry, travel and tourism, electrical, beauty, ICT and motor vehicle.

These were comprised from several entire classes' IA results accessed using the CAT and were randomly selected to ensure that no one vocation was overrepresented. The sample of 50 results was studied in relation to the length of assessment. From this, a mean average time was calculated, providing the opportunity to compare the time taken by our students with the time advocated by the CAT manufacturers. The sample of 200 IA results was analysed alongside the same students' final year Functional Skills English level results to determine if the IA was producing an influential result that was influencing tutor decision in what level students are working at.

In order to explore the process the CAT used, we also studied the instructive verbs used by a random sample of 75 Entry Level 1 to Level 2 questions from the IA question bank available on the software. Analysis was conducted through categorising these verbs using the Bloom's (1956) Cognitive Taxonomy, with the intention to determine what cognitive domain level at which the software was challenging the student to function.



The above chart is a visual representation of the processes we have undertaken to analyse and revise current IA strategy. Dates span March 2014 - September 2014

What we planned to do

The project sought to identify and understand the limitations of the current IA practice in place in our college and determine a set of guidelines that a new IA should abide by to ensure it is of maximum benefit to students and staff. With this intervention in mind, we were reminded of Coffield et al (2004: 135) when he proposed one preliminary consideration:

"Before making any change in practice, professionals are duty bound to consider two possibilities: first, that the proposed change may make matters worse; and second, that some alternative change may be more beneficial than their preferred option."

Rather than creating a prescribed, definitive alternative to the current IA

regime it was the intention of these researchers to provide what Michael Bassey (2003) described as *"fuzzy generalisations."* Alongside this, Bassey goes on to define a best estimate of trustworthiness (BET), *"a professional judgement based on the experience and reading of the researcher. [...] Making a best estimate of trustworthiness demands that the researcher thinks about the empirical findings of a research project in terms of who may use it - and how useful it may be to them."* (2003: 1) It is important to note that in setting out the findings and recommendations that feature below we are not proclaiming that the approach we are trying to develop is or can be a panacea for all challenges in IA. We encourage you, the reader, to identify parallels and contrasts between your own practice and what we think we have found in ours.

Ethics

It is our intention to write as clearly and concisely as we can from a teachers' point of view. Ethical issues that have been taken into consideration are based on the British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines. We propose that our research contemplates and has been conducted within the ethical respect for:

1. Research population
2. Participant anonymity
3. The pursuit of rigorous research, scholarship and new knowledge
4. Democratic values
5. The protocols and moral imperatives of Educational Research and academic values
6. Academic Freedom
7. What we found

What we found

The exploration of our key questions offer a critical appraisal of the effectiveness of the current college English IA procedures. In the context of this study we outline below positives and negatives already known about the CAT before deeper analysis began.

Positive - The current assessment is auditable, swift in its execution and easy to facilitate in large groups.
Negative - It does not measure competency in free writing or speaking and listening, two major facets of the English curriculum.

Finding 1

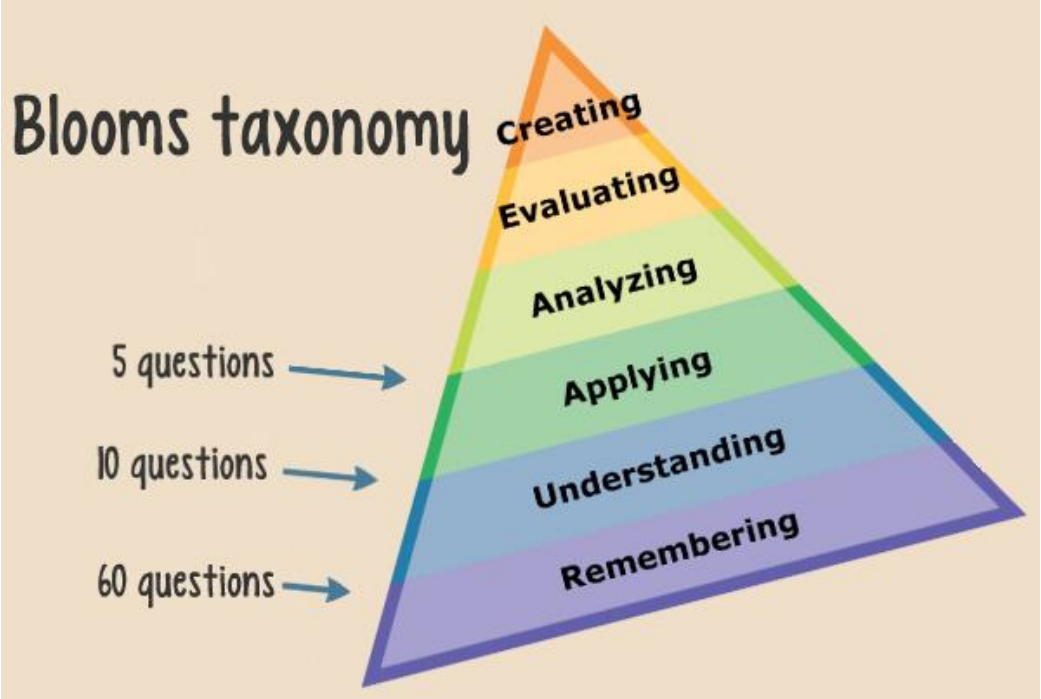
Assessment durations of randomly selected student IA results - The average time taken to complete initial assessment from a sample of 50 students was 11.92 minutes. A distinction can be drawn here between the mean average time we obtained and the 30 minutes per assessment the CAT developers advocate. Further analysis of individual assessment times showed that:

- 12 of the 50 students took under 5 minutes to complete the assessment
- 6 of the 50 took at least 30 minutes
- the remaining majority averaged between the 15-20 minute mark

The gulf of the difference in time taken, posits an interesting scenario, suggesting that some students were taking the assessment more seriously than others. Such disparity between the actual and recommended times taken suggest that, at least in some instances, the results garnered from such an exercise are far from accurate.

Finding 2

Analysing the instructional verb employed by questions featured in the CAT - a sample of 75 randomly selected E1-L2 English questions were analysed alongside Bloom's (1956) Cognitive Taxonomy. The results are as follows:



Of the 75 questions selected, 60 employed instructions that required students to operate at the lowest cognitive domain. Moreover, 27 of these 60 offered students a multiple choice selection of answers. The table below shows a breakdown of the verbs used.

Table 1

Bloom's cognitive domain	Frequency	Verbs used
Remembering	60	list, choose, label, name, type
Understanding	10	match, rewrite
Applying	5	produce

The swift completion of some assessments, as identified above, may be attributed to the prevalence of these lower order thinking skills. Question content sought students to 'label the verb' and 'put the following words in alphabetical order'. Whilst having some semblance of relevance in the remit of English, the merits of these questions lose their fruitfulness when considering the nature of the student audience. The socio-economic demographic profile of the college's catchment area consists of students who in the majority have not always had positive experiences of compulsory education, previous experiences of 'testing', and may have negative preconceptions of themselves as learners. Fears of educational

failure need to be addressed and challenged in positive and educational ways by the student's first experience of GCSE English in college, not reinforced by the first approach to assessment and the first assessment instrument used to test and place yet another deficit label on the student, their lives and their achievements to date.

Whilst largely failing to stimulate students on a cognitive level, the CAT falters entirely in engaging students through Bloom's additional two taxonomic domains. The affective domain, concerned with feelings, behaviours and emotions; and the psychomotor domain, consisting of manual and physical skills, are both intrinsically linked to interaction, collaboration and discovery that can only be fully actualised through the presence of other human beings. Trends in all sectors of education in sector in England and elsewhere over recent decades have seen an inclination to adopt a more human approach to learning, a shift illustrated by the abandoning of rote and instrumental learning in favour of active learning. On the face of it, such advancements are regrettably not apparent in current IA systems. The CAT's chosen computer-based medium has led to self-imposed restrictions that compromise the core principles for assessment in exchange for an 'easier' solution which does not seem to 'solve' anything other than the need for audit.

Finding 3

Interviews with staff who deliver Functional Skills and GCSE English gave us an insight into their overwhelming distrust of CAT, with a member of staff saying *"I don't believe in it"*. Even more worrying was that staff felt the need to adhere to the culture and practices of the IA even though they did not have confidence in the outcomes of the CATs assessment process. This need appeared to be driven by the perception that Oftsed would regard the use of the IA as 'good practice' and Internal Quality Assurance for this reason among other teams insisted upon the use of the IA across the college. Our findings suggest that such bias and unsubstantiated preferences towards CAT IA systems compromise educational values, diligence and validity in favour of a redundant box ticking exercise.

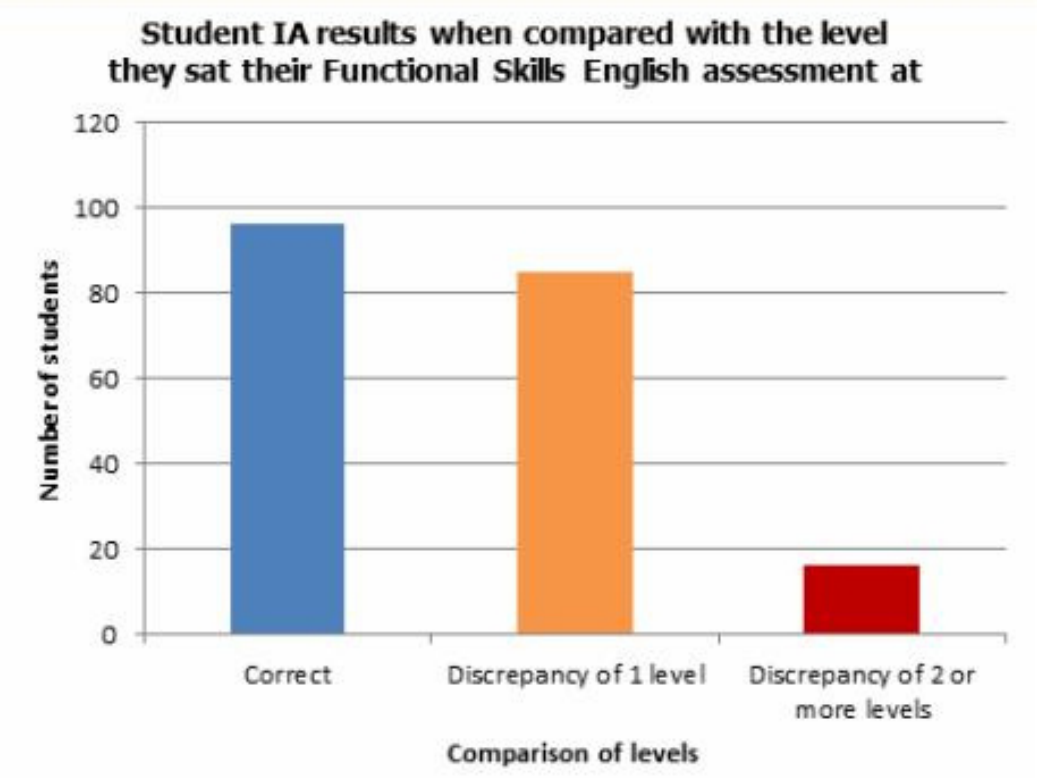
We heard sentences bandied around including "*…it is quick and easy", "…you just print it out and put it in the teacher folder"* and "*…we make our own judgements once we know the students better"*. The instrumental nature of the language used by staff suggests an open disregard for the integrity of the assessment and a concern with the commodification of the assessment process. The inconsistency means that teachers now don't know what is expected of them during the IA process. In our ideal world, we want to tell teachers that they shouldn't design themselves around the misguided perceptions of Ofsted requirements; that they should focus on what they believe to be great teaching and learning from the very point of initial assessment right through to the end of a course.

From our dialogue with the Interactive Learning department it seems thousands of pounds of money is being spent on IA because it is *"… quick, easy and auditable".* Coffield (2008:7) suggests *"that a senior manager in each post-16 institution be asked to compare the annual cost of ICT (hardware, staff, etc) with the annual budget for staff training,"* as a proactive exercise in up-skilling staff rather than upgrading technology.

Finding 4

The comparison and corresponding FS English results showed disparities in 51% of a 200 randomly selected samples against the student's end of year FS achievements. Further analysis of our sample manifested different results in relation to our student's end of year achievement as follows:

- 98 student diagnosed at correct level
- 83 students misdiagnosed one levels above or below
- 19 students misdiagnosed two levels above or below



Of the 19 students that exhibited a discrepancy of 2 or more levels, one case in particular was of real interest to us. The student in question was deaf and entitled to a learning support assistant (LSA) when working on completing his Initial Assessment. The software judged him to be working at Level 2. When the academic term started and his teacher began working with the student in class it became apparent that the software had grossly over-assessed his abilities, and that he was working closer

to Entry 2. It is assumed that he was guessing the answers or received considerable support from the Learning Support Assistant (LSA). Such findings fly in the face of Coffield's (2008:12) maxims of "recognising the importance of prior learning and experience" and responding to the "personal and cultural experiences of different groups." Significantly, Coffield makes the crucial point that teachers are the proponents of effective teaching and learning. He makes no mention of computer systems. The results above are so provocative because each of the sample students was assessed in class by their teacher after the IA anyway, as seen below.

Finding 5

Interviews with staff who conduct the computer-based initial assessments. Concerns previously identified by our other analyses were reiterated here, with comments including "…it's not a fully rounded assessment" and "…some students click through it and finish in 5 minutes." Contrary to what might be expected , members of staff conducting IA are not teachers but administrators. This provided us with an insight into the execution of the assessment and the environment it takes place in. Comments included:

"Students don't receive feedback after completing the assessment."

"The environment where assessments take place are not always appropriate conditions for everyone."

"The assessments are unsupervised. Some students use Google to find out the answers."

Consideration of the environment the assessment was taking place was not an area of interest to us as researchers before commencing this study, although from our analysis it is apparent that this is clearly an area of utmost importance. The use of external sources, through the internet or collusion with other candidates, rendered any assessment conclusion invalid. Furthermore, the large volumes of students completing assessments (in some instances over 100 at any one time) made the policing of student behaviour during the IA test nearly impossible.

An environment in which large numbers of students are steered into a computer suite and given a predetermined bank of computer questions seems a far cry from Crowley's (2008) call for a recognition of the importance of both the learner and teacher being engaged shaping the future trajectory of learning. In our current situation there is in fact no teacher present at all, only administrators. As English Teachers, such a scene is reminiscent of George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four vision of the Ministry of Truth in which the lead character Winston Smith works, with its endless sea of computers succinctly aligned in a cold, clinical fashion. (see next page)

An Orwellian vision of Nineteen Eighty-Four in the Ministry of Love or 2014 in UK FE colleges?

Is CAT a representation of what the post-16 educational establishment considers to be an accurate, relevant, comprehensive educational assessment in the 21st century? Or is it another example of Coffield's (2008) claim that 'quick fixes' seldom fix anything and never quickly. Coffield (2008: 1) points out that *"in essence education is not a market and is suffers if it is treated as such"*. Using the example of various assessment instruments which aim to identify students' different visual, audio, kinaesthetic or tactile (VAKT) learning styles and, with reference to a sketch from the Monty Python comedy series, Coffield points out that:

"*There is no justification for teaching or learning styles based on VAKT and tutors should stop using learning style instruments based on them. There is no theory of VAKT from which to draw any implications for practice. It should be a dead parrot. It should have ceased to function"*
(Coffield 2008: 32)

Coffield notes however that learning styles appear to have strong, persistent and intuitive appeal which means that they continue to be used apparently impervious to evidence based criticism and the absence of any theory or empirical evidence to support their uese. Our concern is that the seductive, intuitive appeal of IA processes based upon computer assessment tools may prove to be equally difficult to shift despite their unreliability and invalidity.

A summary of our findings

- There was a distinct lack of engagement in the assessment from some students. Other instances included students not taking it seriously or misunderstanding its purpose
- Staff do not rate or believe in CAT - yet they adhere to it because of quality protocols and a perceived notion that somehow Ofsted will regard this approach to IA as 'good practice'
- The IA assessment process itself is instrumental, bland, non-contemporary and uninspiring to our students
- The IA assessment process is un-inclusive of those who have low computer literacy or a physical disability including visual and auditory impairments
- The IA assessment process through which the student pass has been seen to be too regimented and rushed. The lack of humanisation in the implementation has led to early point disengagement and is of questionable validity
- Results garnered from the IA are not sufficient, with 51% of results providing an under representation of actual student ability. Moreover, the CAT does not assess for free writing or speaking and listening competency
- There is a real need for a positive shift in the culture of IA. CAT was brought in to standardise the IA process and now as the English department grows in size and in view of the Government's reform on post-16 compulsory GCSE study in response to Professor Wolf's report, assessment practices need to be educational for both students and their teachers and not merely instrumental. As a result, we as a department will need to develop professionally in relation to our understanding of assessment theory and practice.

Conclusion

In the light of research evidence and our findings from our small-scale study, we tentatively conclude that a summative assessment approach to IA is in need of urgent review. Our research has identified the need to treat our students as human beings and not as an instrumental means to an end (particularly whether that end is for monetary rather than educational value or simply for better test results which can privilege the needs of educational institution over those of the learner). We want to support Coffield's (2010:13) call to teachers, education leaders and managers to "*challenge them [students] to appreciate the crucial difference between being good at passing tests and developing a love*

and understanding of their subjects".
We support Midgley's optimistic and tentative assertion that,

'The taboo on organic ways of thinking may now be lifting. It may even become possible for our species to admit that it is not some supernatural variety of Lego, but a kind of animal. This ought to make it easier to admit that we are not self-contained and self sufficient either as a species or as individuals but live naturally in deep mutual dependence…We think as whole people, not disembodied minds, not as computers.

(Midgley, M., 1996: 10-12)

What we recommend

In light of our findings and conclusions set out above we have developed a set of recommendations that we hope might help ourselves and others to respond to the shortcomings of current IA practice and provide some insights into how we plan to try to go about initial assessment differently in the context of our own practice.
Here we are reminded of Coffield (2008) in his closing remarks where he urges:

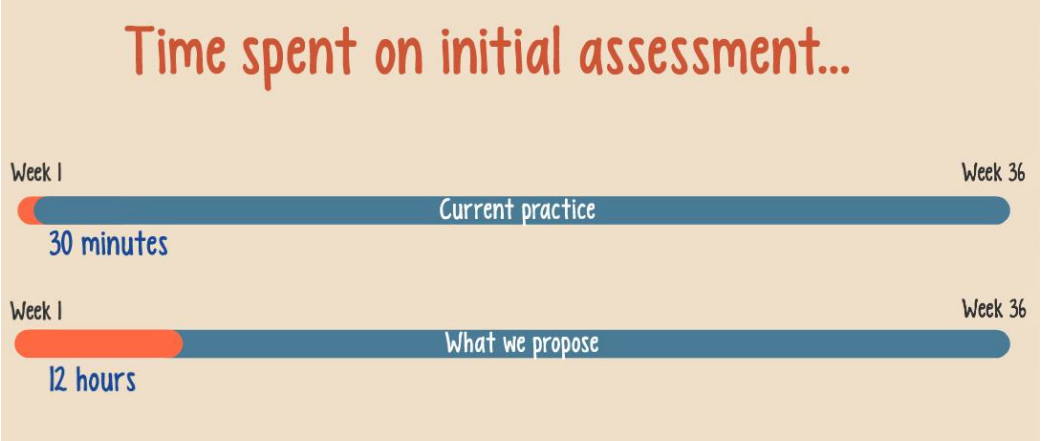
"If we are to improve on the status quo, then we need another vital ingredient of success: a model of change; that is, explicit theories, principles and tried and tested practices, which will enable us to achieve radial and lasting change at the different levels: the classroom, the institute and the system."

(Coffield,2008:54)

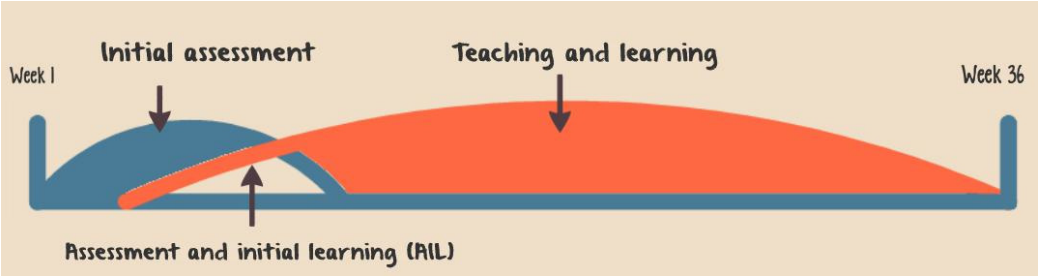
A summary of our recommendations

- The IA process should not treated as another task from the Senior Leadership Team to deal with, but becomes the central organising principle of our students' trajectory of learning.
- Teachers and students engage as human beings and not as disembodied inputs and outputs for processing by a pre-programmed CAT (Midgely, 2006).
- All teachers and students have the same shared values and accept a collective responsibility for IA outcomes (see Fielding, 2006).
- Principled dissent (Shahinpoor & Matt, 2007) should not only tolerated, it should positively encouraged. Colleges, education institutions and most importantly our students can grow by being challenged.
- Teachers have the intellectual and physical space in which to experiment with ideas, techniques and resources together and to make mistakes in the constant search for improvement during the IA process.

- Lengthening of the initial assessment process to 6 weeks - (to fall in line with institutional funding rules).



- A smooth transition between IA and T&L (AIL Assessing Initial Learning) needs to be established and used effectively.



- Establish a culture agreeing with Oakshott (2001:8) where he argues that education *'is not about acquiring habits or being trained to perform tricks or functions: it is acquiring something that you can use because you understand it.'*

The burden of these recommendations, however, is that the very culture and nature of IA needs to change from the overpowering desire to rely on insufficient and misdiagnosing CAT towards an empowering focus on student centred formative approaches to IA, integrated with teacher interaction, which nurture the professional competence of teachers as well improving the achievement and ensuring a comprehensive diagnosis of our students ***'starting point'*** (Ofsted 2012).

As an FE institution we accept, with open arms, the young people of our communities that have lived and breathed blood, sweat and tears to 'get through' school. A harmful consequence of government policy and the Wolf report is that many of our students' lives have been dominated by the preparation for, and taking of, tests; too many GCSE students now move on to FE as highly dependent learners, who expect to be spoon-fed. Coffield's (2009:56) words resound here: *"assessment is viewed as a necessary evil [...] not treated as constructive guidance about how to improve as a learner."* If we construct our pedagogy around the flawed and inaccurate notion of CAT IA results, then the strategies adopted by

our policies, colleges and teachers are *'themselves implicated in creating and maintaining persistent patterns of differential achievement'* (Hart et al, 2004:21)

Recent developments in the job markets have seen employers complain about the fact that school leavers aren't as skilled as they want them to be. One hypothesis to account for this is that the jobs that people need to do these days *"require much higher levels of numeracy, literacy and critical thinking than the jobs that were available 50 years ago".* (Wiliam 2006:1). FE, and more specifically the English departments within our institutions, have a solution that has touted... oversold and underused technology but, as Heinz Wolff once said, the future is further away than you think. Wiliam (2006:2) sees the foreseeable future as *"groups of between 20 and 40 students, with a teacher, and most of the learning is going to be in classrooms that are the size of classrooms".* He doesn't dismiss IT of course, but the quality of the learning he believes will be *"dictated by what's going on in that classroom"*. (2006:2) That is the big idea to which our small-scale research lends support—if we are serious about raising student achievement then we have to change what happens at the initial stages of learning.

The intervention and Model of Change and Improvement

The forthcoming academic year (2014 - 2015) will see us implement a planned intervention to our college's IA processes. This will initially be conducted on a small-scale. We appreciate that change cannot and should not happen overnight. We are also mindful of the intuitive (but in our view, misdirected) appeal of computer based IA on the grounds of the evidence we have presented above.

It is not our intention at any point to impose the approach to IA which we are exploring on anyone in our own or any other organisation. What we do propose is to use a model of change and improvement introduced by Fielding et al (2005) in the schools sector and developed by Gregson et al (2015 forthcoming) for the FAVE sector to discover the possibilities and limitations of a different approach to IA and to make sense of what happens together, with our colleagues and with our students.

Fielding et al (2005) draw attention to the importance of exploring the potential of an innovation in microcosm. That is why we intend to take our work forward on a small scale in the first instance and then if successful use the principles of Joint Practice Development (JPD) (Fielding et al 2005, Gregson et al (2015 forthcoming) to incrementally scale up this approach to assessment and change.

Rather than viewing IA as a snapshot process, we will be conducting a four-week ongoing assessment process in the classroom with a control group of students. These classroom sessions will holistically incorporate all elements of the English curriculum and explore them using topics such as music, storytelling, communication and comedy. We hope that this platform will allow us the opportunity to appropriately induct and engage our students into English at FE level and get to know them as people. Research into how effective this strategy is, and how further revisions can be implemented will be undertaken over the first term of 2014.

We are mindful that, whilst our tentative emerging findings from this small-scale study indicate the need for and point to potentially significant opportunities for improving of our college's IA system this is in the end a small-scale study requiring further research before anything beyond tentative conclusions can be drawn. We are grateful for the space and encouragement we have been given by senior managers and education leaders in our college for the vision, trust and support they have given us in opening up spaces for us where we can begin to understand the issues in our practice more fully. We also appreciate the confidence and they have shown in us in encouraging us to challenge practices that we have until now taken for granted across the college and elsewhere. This has enabled us to identify how we might genuinely improve what we do

in the interests of our students. The considerable far-sightedness and on the part of the our SLT particularly in challenging other (often strident) models of improvement and education management which encourage teachers and education leaders to see themselves as being on different sides is of central importance here. This significance of this shift in perceptions and relationships between senior managers, education leaders and teachers in the sector should not be underestimated. This study has also involved courage on our part of teachers and beginning practitioner-researchers in our first experiences 'speaking truth to power' (Coffield , 1999).

In closing we note that the trend of privileging CAT systems cannot be considered to be ubiquitous across other institutions nationwide. Despite this, the enormous numbers quoted by the CAT software website would suggest that such practices are worryingly prevalent. Unfortunately it seems that the computer based IA parrot, for now has not ceased to exist…but is still functioning!

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