

Formative assessment in professional development: Realising a pilot portfolio project

Professor George Hoefflin PhD

High Institute of Pedagogy
Cour 33, CP, 1014
Lausanne/Switzerland
Phone ++41 21 316 38 10
Fax ++41 21 316 38 15
george.hoefflin@edu-vd.ch

Abstract

Certified professional development for teaching in the field of special needs requires formative assessment to guarantee a high standard of education for children who are very slow learners or suffer one or more handicaps. The High Institute of Pedagogy (HEP) located in Lausanne, Switzerland, provides additional certified special needs training to schoolteachers and degree level teacher graduates (BA). This training program is specifically designed for learning on a part-time basis, in conjunction with continued special needs teaching. In this context, the training assessment system takes into consideration the teacher's present position and occupational experience.

Professors at HEP have conceptualised an assessment system that takes into account the student teachers' part time professional occupation and their teaching experience.

Three main concepts have been considered in this project:

- *'Problem solving' methods for teaching handicapped children and very slow learners.*
- *Structuring 'case presentations' from the teaching and educational viewpoint to be used in networks related to handicapped children and very slow-learners.*
- *Collaborative professional exchange between teachers and specialists (Speech-therapists, Psychologists etc.)*

A 'portfolio' (Behrens, 1998) has been chosen as the assessment tool to accompany the three-year curriculum. This project was based on the creation of a specific 'portfolio' and an earlier 'case presentation' seminar including participation of student teachers in their ongoing curriculum.

Aims of this portfolio are the following:

- *Teacher student 'self-assessment'*
- *Interactive exchanges between teacher students and professors*
- *Development of critical viewpoint towards instructed models*

This paper will discuss the conception of our assessment model. The project will be analysed and compared in light of some of the literature concerning assessment and teaching in the field of special needs.

Introduction

In Switzerland the dominant practice in assisting children with special needs in public education is 'compensating' pedagogy. This implies that the aim of educating handicapped and slow learning children is to compensate the disability with specific institutions and special classes in the public school system. Teachers wishing to lead special classes must follow a specific curriculum to obtain their federal certification. A 3-year theoretical training program is offered in conjunction with continued part-time teaching in a special class. Eligible special teachers must be former ordinary schoolteachers or degree level graduates (BA) who desire to teach special needs pupils. For the majority of these future special teachers this specialist option is considered professional development. The challenge for professors teaching specialist training is to consider the knowledge already acquired through the 'students' teaching experience while ensuring that concepts in the professors' fields of experience are firmly understood. This project model tries to integrate new theoretical approaches to subjects like French and mathematics with the teacher's acquired "know-how" (Hoefflin & Frauenfelder, 2000). Professional development arising from this project should inject *added value* to the teachers experience and improve *soft skills* like professional competencies.

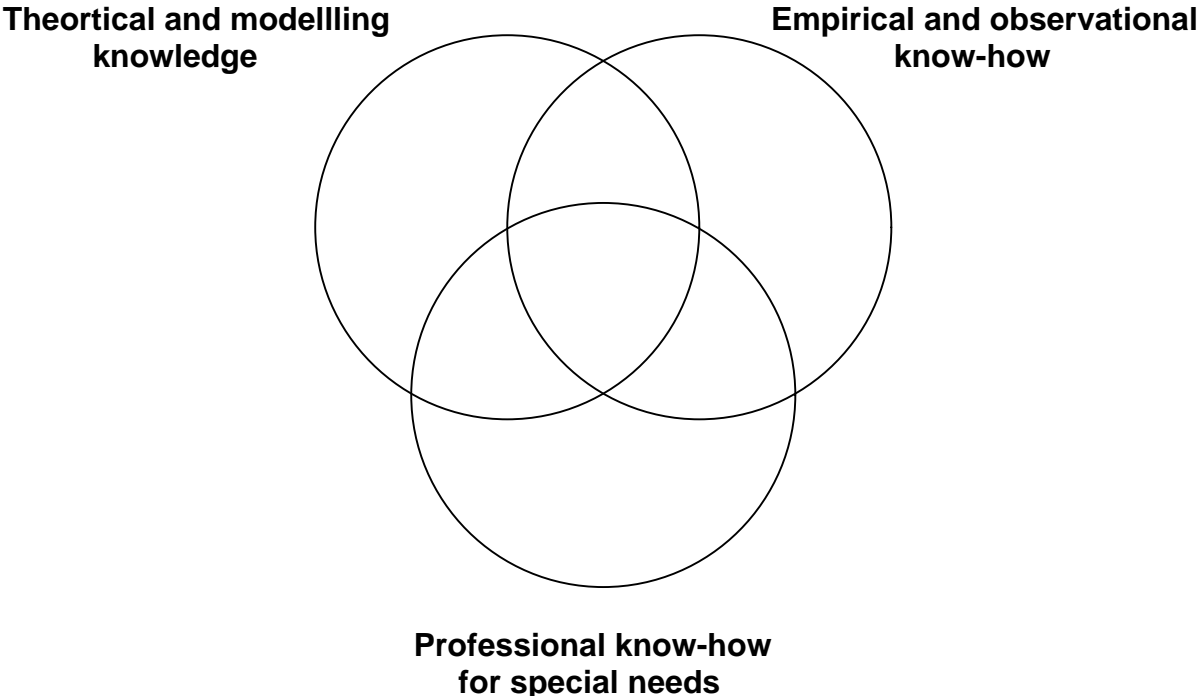
Skills that need to be acquired in the field of special needs must be assessed with an efficient evaluation system that respects acquired experience and knowledge. In light of this requirement self-assessment must be considered one of the most important components of the overall evaluation. For such evaluation the portfolio method (Behrens, 1998) seemed to be the best-adaptable tool for assessing these specific skills. Three professors from HEP teaching mathematics, French and speech acquisition difficulties used these common pedagogic elements to build a portfolio project consisting of three obligatory courses and two problem solving experiences. The latter experiences revolve around French and mathematics. These two experiences require co-operation between two teacher-students to solve given problems with young pupils. Solving problems in language acquisition, language difficulties and mathematics are considered to be the main objectives of the training program in this specific field, but comprehension of theoretical and studied models are also part of the final goal. It must be pointed out that portfolio self-assessment is an experimental project on several of the many subjects relevant to the three-year curriculum of special needs teaching. Interaction between professor and teacher students occurs not only through the process of portfolio assessment but also through individual and collective discussion.

Conceptualisation of the project

The project curriculum combines the three dimensions of basic training in the field of special needs teaching. These related dimensions are theory, practice and research. Flexibility is required by the project model to account for the specialised knowledge already acquired by the teacher-students in subject matters like French literacy, language acquisition and mathematics. Theoretical knowledge of the development

difficulties faced by pupils in these subjects and their experience in resolving these problems also represent an important dimension of the curriculum model. Table 1 illustrates the integrated nature of the different components, which are relevant for developing the desired skills.

Table 1: Interactive model for professional knowledge and know-how development



Theoretical and modelling knowledge refers to course substance offered to the teacher student. Empirical and observational 'know-how' refers to the teacher's professional experience and pedagogic relationship with pupils. Finally, professional know-how for special needs results from the interaction between the other components. This additional professional development improves the teacher's relationship with the pupil's requiring special education and professional co-operation with other parties concerned with the child's welfare. This greater interaction may include a child's family and other professionals like speech therapists or counsellors.

To complete this first model we will refer to an evaluation model (Allal, 1999) that includes self-assessment for the student teachers. Classic assessment usually considers a unilateral assessment going from the evaluator to learner; new models suggest a higher implication for students in the assessment process.

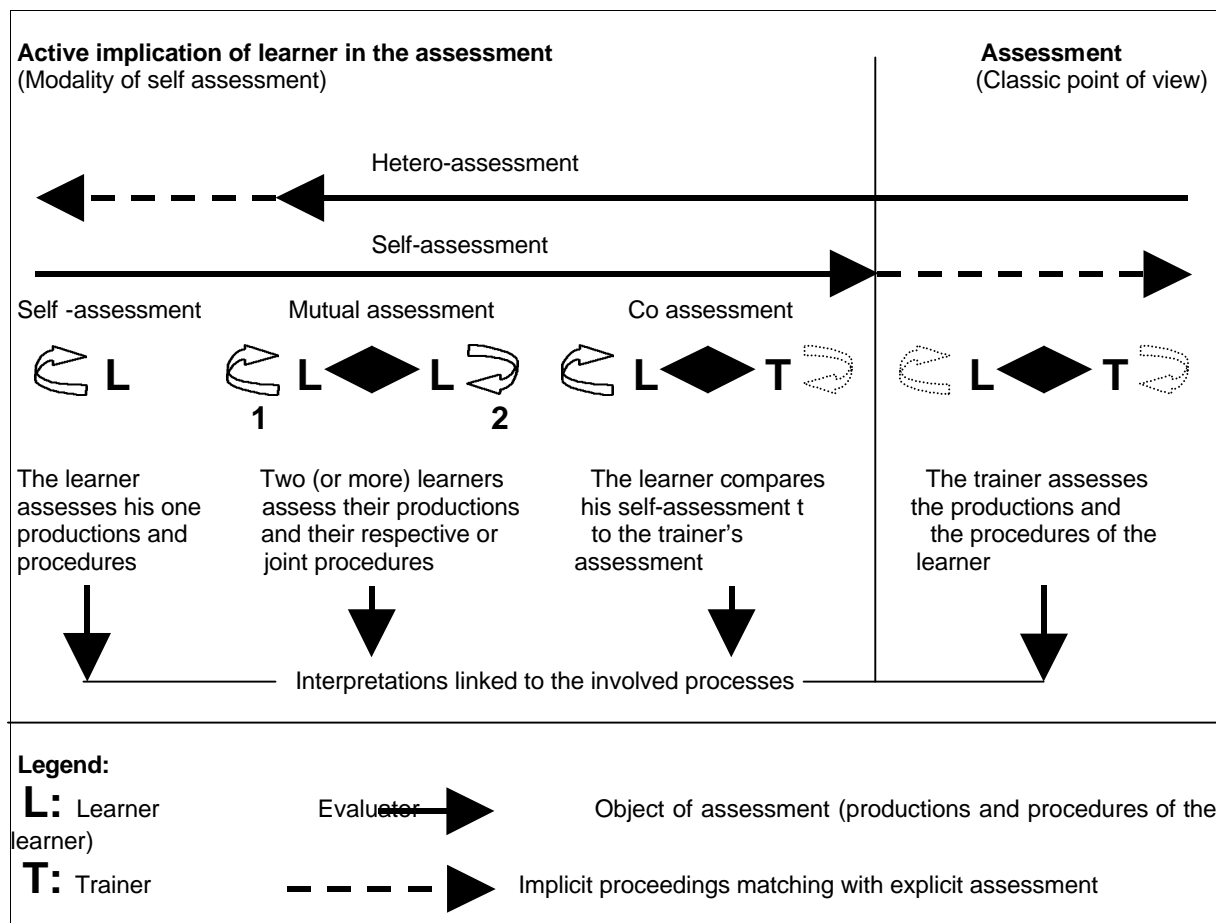


Figure 1: Implication Modalities of the Learner In the Assessment Process (Allal, 1999)

This new assessment model (Fig. 1) complements evaluation tools like those of Bloom (1991), essentially considering regulations for formative and summative assessment at a learning process level. Allal's model offers a broader approach including the different learning contexts and takes in to account the actors of the assessment process.

This portfolio project can certainly benefit from this dynamic and interactive model. Self-assessment was considered a suitable evaluation concept especially because teacher students have already acquired knowledge from their former academic training in teacher school and through their professional experience.

Portfolio as an assessment 'tool' for the project

As previously mentioned a portfolio has been chosen to assess the professional skills to be developed. The portfolio is structured into two main parts. The first section gives the teacher-student the opportunity to construct a reflective point of view on the theories, models and methods that are discussed in the three courses. A critical viewpoint on the taught models is also expected from the student. The portfolio will be analysed by the relevant professor who will consign comments to the teacher-students self-analysis of the learned concepts. The second stage of the portfolio is devoted to 'problem solving' approaches in French and mathematic class situations.

Again, constructive interactivity is a requisite. After presenting a concrete class situation in the portfolio, involving one or more pupils, the teacher-students must analyse and communicate the pupil's progression and methodology in confronting problems associated with French language and mathematics. At this point two teacher-students are partnered to collaborate in simulating intra-professional co-operation. The same interaction between professors and teacher students is required through the portfolio and these projects concerning problem solving can be discussed directly with the relevant professor. For the three-year duration of the curriculum the portfolio is in the teacher student possession. This portfolio is also accessible on the institute's intranet where comments can be inputted electronically.

Formative assessment is used during the interactive steps of the process. The teacher student can adjust his/her point of view or improve the structure of the 'problem solving' presentations, for example. Summative assessment finalises the process. In case of an insufficient result, a tripartite meeting is organised with the teacher student and two professors (the subject professor concerned with the 'problem solving' training and one other). After discussion a remediation is negotiated with the teacher student (or the two teacher students in the case of the 'problem solving' training).

This global assessment project has been presented for the first time to the teacher students and will be put in practice during the winter semester of 2003. In fact this initiative corresponds to the new instructions from the European Union of the so-called 'Bologna' process regarding BA and MA curriculum. For BA tracks like this European harmonization project requires not only that the same number of units must be offered but also that summative assessment occurs at the conclusion of each unit.

Aware of the rather constraining system (portfolio and high interactivity) that is proposed to our teacher-students, we will now discuss the limits that can be anticipated for this specific assessment project.

Discussion

This project needs practice until efficiency can be ascertained. Firstly it has been shown that it is time consuming to bring professors together to agree upon an assessment project that satisfies all parties. Secondly, formalising the portfolio is also time consuming for the trainers. Monitoring this assessment project requires some anticipation of some of the benefits and difficulties that may be encountered. Allal (1999) has discussed the self-assessment option in terms of its advantages and traps.

Figure 2 illustrates the author's list of different positive and negative points.

<p>Advantages of self-assessment Development of independence in the frame work of social interactions Co-operative management of a differentiated pedagogy Professional commitment and mobility</p> <p>Traps of self-assessment Confusion between the different parties (trainers and learners) Confusion between means and goals Affecting inter-personal blackmail Increasing inequality Complexity of the framework:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Changing rules• Relationship between trainers• Relation between family and school

Figure 2. Advantages and Traps of Self-assessment (Allal, 1999)

This general model is not built specifically for teacher students who have former academic knowledge and professional 'know-how', but the following discusses if some of Allal's points are relevant for the project's purpose.

What are the advantages of self-assessment?

Development of independence in the framework of social interaction

Social interactions are relevant for high level exchanges with families, medical professions, psychologists, speech therapist etc. In these exchanges, the ability of teachers in special needs to negotiate is quite important. Constant self-assessment is required to keep an efficient inter- and intra-professional relationship, especially when tensions are rising. Developing an independent professional point of view is essential but cannot be unilateral, in particular when the pupil has to be considered equally as a child and a learner. The quality of self-assessment of the teacher is a result of his or here capacity to communicate with colleagues; in this framework professional independence makes dynamic sense.

Cooperative management of a differentiated pedagogy

This point is not directly linked to a multidisciplinary professional situation but more to differentiated pedagogy offered to young learners. However, co-operative management is essential when various professionals share different responsibilities for the same child. If some hierarchy is always existent in these responsibilities and the main responsible professional is not always in a situation to solve problems, it can be that cooperation between involved personnel is rapidly needed. In this case qualitative self-assessment is very important because it helps to form mutual management of complex situations. Furthermore, it also offers insight to the professional who has the main responsibility, particularly when options have to be

taken (e.g. when a handicapped child must leave or integrate into an institution for special needs).

Professional commitment and mobility

Modern professional relationships are increasingly based on capacity for self-assessment. The added value generated by ongoing assessment in the professional process is necessary for an adaptive professional development. There is an increasing tendency for using self-assessment portfolios in a larger number of professions (Campbell, Cignetti, Melenyzer, Nettles & Wyman, 1997). This new 'culture' is amplified by the fact that professional mobility is required when unemployment or professional reinsertion is needed. Being able to present your own curriculum, having awareness of your professional strengths and weaknesses, being able to present a professional project has no longer become a necessity.

What are the traps of self-assessment?

Confusion between the different parties

The fact that trainers are interacting (i.e. dialogue and negotiation) and that the teacher student is highly committed does not mean that no further differences exist between the trainer and the learner. Some basic discrepancies are still efficient like differences:

- Between expert and probationer on the concerned knowledge.
- Between the person responsible for certification and the teacher student.

Allal (1999) reports some paradoxes like: "be responsible, but we decide" which can induce a conflict between trainer and learner.

Confusion between means and goals

Progressively, self-assessment becomes itself a conceptual objective to reach as the learner is progressing in his training. In other words the means of assessment can become themselves professional skills to reach. It can occur that in this type of process the learner has to show some weaknesses that they would have preferred to put out of the trainer's sight. If the trainer judges only the final results reached by the learner he could feel trapped by the process.

Affecting blackmail

During the learning process, the learner can be looking for recognition from the trainer but the other possibility is that the learner will oppose the trainer. In both cases there is a risk of affecting blackmail that can hinder the self-assessment process. Furthermore, self-assessment can become 'conformist' and distant from the human qualities that self-evaluation should promote.

Increasing inequality

Research has shown that learners who possess high cognitive skills in the concerned subject are those who can more easily reason their own functioning. Some researchers (Perrenoud, 1995) raise the danger of creating an 'elite' trained to systematically reason his or her own functioning.

Complexity of the framework

Discourse on self-assessment is usually limited in the framework of the interaction between the trainer and the learner. Allal (1999) underlines the fact that the process operates in a much larger context that is therefore more complex. Self-assessment can be operated in different ways by different trainers. That means that rules can change from one situation to another. This fact can disturb the learner and push him/her into a defensive position. The implications for learning may then diminish. It can be that the trainers have different assessment practices and come into conflict with each other. These conflicts can hinder a coherent approach to the self-assessment that the learner tries to build. Finally, self-assessment values are not always recognised in the professional context where the learner is operating (e.g. professional internship).

Conclusion

In presenting our portfolio project, we have raised some critical points regarding self-assessment. Practice should help to regulate this new assessment challenge. It may be that this model is time consuming for both parties (learners and trainers) but there is some confidence in the fact that a concrete portfolio can be guidance for improving professional skills in the domain of special needs. As the professors ask teacher students to use self-assessment, the trainers will have to put into practice the same self-assessment during this new process that is taking place in HEP. Problems that require solving will be shared with the teacher students while the process is developing.

References

- Allal, L. (1999). Impliquer l'apprenant dans le processus d'évaluation: promesses et pièges de l'autoévaluation. In Ch. Depover, B. Noël (Eds.), *L'évaluation des compétences et des processus cognitifs: modèles, pratiques et contextes* (pp. 35-56). Paris: DeBoeck.
- Beherens, M. (1999). *Le portfolio, un moyen d'améliorer le dialogue entre formateur et apprenant*. Luanne: Institut suisse de pédagogie pour la formation professionnelle.
- Bloom, B.S., Hastings, J.T. (1991). *Handbook on formative and summative evaluation of student learning*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Campbell, D.M., Cignetti, P.B., Melenzyer, B.J., Nettles, D.H. & Wyman, R.M. (1997). *How to develop a professional portfolio: A manual for teachers*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Hoefflin, G., Frauenfelder, U.H. (2000). Exchanging know-how for knowledge in lifelong learning: An interface approach. In P. Alheit, J. Beck, E. Kammler, R. Taylor & H. Salling Olesen (Eds.), *Lifelong learning inside and outside schools*. (Pp. 102-113). Roskilde: Roskilde University, Universität Bremen and Leeds University.
- Perrenoud, P. (1995). *La pédagogie à l'école des différences*. Paris: ESF.
- Scallon, G. (2000). *L'évaluation formative*. Bruxelles: De Boeck Université.

