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Discussion paper 5:

Ethical issues in technology enhanced assessment

Q: Does technology enhanced assessment (TEA) lead to new social and educational divides?

Q: How far should we be worried about the proliferation of digitised assessment data?

This paper considers the emerging ethical issues in three areas of technology-enhanced assessment:

- The ethics of ‘big data’
- The ethics of using social software for assessment
- The ethics of assessing young people’s informal learning

Key recommendations

Policy makers need to recognise and debate the ethical issues linked to the rapidly increasing amounts of educational data being collected and stored. This should include consultation with parents and young people and centre around issues of young people’s rights to access and control their own data.

Educators should ensure that all young people have the skills to manage personal data profiles and online social identities.

Young people should be involved alongside researchers, practitioners and industry members in designing assessment practices that support them to participate in the creation of their own futures.
Widening access to assessment

The use of digital technologies has the potential to widen access to both learning and assessment by facilitating new sorts of assessment interactions, opening up innovative opportunities for participation, expression and collaboration and providing opportunities for the assessment of new skills. Therefore, it is important to consider how the nature of data gathered about student performance in education.

Developments in technology-enhanced assessment are significantly increasing the volume of data on student performance.

The ethics of using social software for assessment

In line with current innovations which acknowledge learners as active participants in their learning, some practitioners have begun to develop technology-enhanced assessment practices that aim to increase learner involvement in assessment, through the use of social software. Web 2.0 technologies offer new opportunities for active participation in content creation, media authoring, information sharing, communication and collaboration. Tools such as wikis, for example, can give learners the opportunity to undertake self and peer assessment or to collaboratively revise a piece of work.

However, whilst Web 2.0 technologies can offer more in terms of student participation than traditional assessment practices, online, participative assessment practices are not necessarily transformative and can exacerbate existing social and educational divides. There is an acknowledged ‘participation gap’ in relation to the levels of young people’s engagement in social, online cultures. Not all young people benefit in equal ways from such practices. The use of social networking tools, for example, requires young people to participate in communities that involve complex social identity issues and young people’s use of online networks often replicate the types of social divides and educational connections that they have offline.

Students also need to trust in learning spaces, their peers and their teachers in order to feel safe enough to learn from failure without being overly concerned with the consequences. Online spaces, such as wikis, do not always provide these possibilities and can be exposed in places in which to make errors.

The ethics of assessing young people’s informal learning

Increasing numbers of young people are involved in online ‘participatory media cultures’ in which they are creators and publishers of digital media in highly social and networked environments. This raises significant ethical considerations associated with ascribing to young people informal learning. The variability in learners’ motivations is also a consideration with the possibility of a badge system being biased towards those young people who are already comfortable with gaining external recognition and the associated values that badge systems often replicate.

However reflection is needed on key issues such as whether adopting badges into education systems will automatically introduce hierarchies to the practice and the ethical considerations associated with ascribing to young people informal learning. The variability in learners’ motivations is also a consideration with the possibility of a badge system being biased towards those young people who are already comfortable with gaining external recognition and the associated values that badge systems often replicate.

Use of online networks often replicate the types of social divides and educational connections that exist offline.

5. Ethical issues in technology enhanced assessment

Assessment is universally recognised as one of the most important – and powerful – elements of an educational experience. It is also seen as one of the hardest to reform. However, there is an increasingly accepted need for rethinking assessment if it is to keep up with current theoretical, cultural and technological developments affecting teaching and learning.

Digital technologies open up new possibilities for more personalised, immediate and engaging assessment experiences. However, the use of digital technologies for assessment (referred to as ‘technology-enhanced assessment’) has yet to be ‘transformative’, with current practices either replicating traditional assessment methods or manifesting in pockets of innovation that are not widespread.

How the potential of digital technologies can best support improved assessment practices and preferred educational outcomes is becoming an issue of increasing importance. An acknowledgement of the potential that digital technologies offer should recognise the complexity of the task, the many factors affecting successful educational change, and the significant ethical questions raised by the use of digital technologies in assessment.

This series of discussion papers draw on a substantial review of literature which aimed to identify the different ways in which technology currently impacts on educational assessment practices and how it could contribute to a new vision for assessment.

The review of literature is available at: bristol.ac.uk/education/research/sites/tea

The following discussion papers have been produced in order to highlight key issues and questions identified by the review of literature:

- **Paper 1**: Transforming education through technology enhanced assessment
- **Paper 2**: Integrating the formative and summative through technology enhanced assessment
- **Paper 3**: Exploiting the collaborative potential of technology enhanced assessment in Higher Education
- **Paper 4**: Learning analytics and technology enhanced assessment
- **Paper 5**: Ethical issues in technology enhanced assessment
- **Paper 6**: National standards and technology enhanced assessment

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