

SCHOOL ASSESSMENT AND THE EDUCATIONAL ACT IN THE TEACHING PROFESSION

LA VALUTAZIONE SCOLASTICA E L'AGIRE EDUCATIVO NELLA PROFESSIONALITÀ DOCENTE

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ABSTRACT

In debates on didactics and, more generally, in the world of education, assessment of learning is one of the most important pedagogical topics.

Assessment is the cornerstone of scientific research as it assumes a new centrality in the human and social sciences.

This paper highlights the crucial role of assessment in learning contexts and how the pedagogical actions of the teacher can be seen as central to developing students' cognitive processes.

Il tema della valutazione degli apprendimenti è uno degli argomenti pedagogici più importanti affrontati nei dibattiti che riguardano la didattica e, più in generale, il mondo della scuola.

La valutazione rappresenta la pietra fondamentale della ricerca scientifica in quanto assume una nuova centralità nelle scienze umane e sociali.

Il presente contributo pone in evidenza il ruolo cruciale della valutazione nei contesti di apprendimento e il come l'agire educativo del docente può essere considerato centrale per lo sviluppo dei processi cognitivi degli studenti.

KEYWORDS

assessment, learning, teaching, educational act, students

Valutazione, apprendimento, insegnamento, agire educativo, studenti.

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Introduction

The subject of educational evaluation is a rather complex field of research, in constant evolution, with a robust and articulated tradition of research behind it. It is a process and a tool for the production of information describing the correspondence between the characteristics of the educational options, individual and contextual needs and the social objectives of education. Since the end of the 1960s, the debate on evaluation has increasingly focused on reference systems, programs, materials and, in general, on the occasions in which teaching-learning processes take place. The assessment process is thus configured as a pedagogical action that requires teachers to make conscious choices within specific educational and training projects.

According to Galliani (2009 and 2015), evaluation is "a discipline that aims to give judgements on training and teaching actions that are intentionally designed or carried out to guide and develop learning in the recipients, with implications for the educational, economic and social system, based on the use of methods and tools appropriate to empirical and experimental research in education". This pedagogical vision, together with design and communication, represents a very important educational experience. It is identified both as a didactic transmission of disciplinary/professional knowledge and as a relational transaction between people, through which the actions of designing, communicating, and evaluating are the responsibility, although in different ways, of the same subjects involved, first and foremost teachers and students.

Since the 1990s, in parallel with the emergence of new theories on learning processes, the subject of assessment has been subjected to profound reflection on its forms, functions and meaning. Theoretical models and evaluation practices have followed the evolution of the different theoretical paradigms (positivist, pragmatist, constructivist) that characterize the teaching-learning experience tout court.

During evaluation, an attempt is made to answer some fundamental questions about educational facts: what to evaluate, why to evaluate, when to evaluate, how to evaluate, questions that help us to circumscribe some dimensions of evaluation (Notti, 2010). In order to evaluate, it is important to identify the object that needs to be evaluated: learning / learning products, processes, systems. With regard to the dimension of when to evaluate, the evaluation accompanies the project as it develops, right from the beginning, as it is necessary to gather information about the needs of those involved.

Throughout the project, it is necessary to evaluate in order to redefine the organization and the intervention strategies to be implemented. At the final stage,

the aim of evaluation is to gather the necessary elements in order to be able to determine the effectiveness of what has been achieved and to guide the choices to be made in the future. From this point of view, evaluation is a complex phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a single activity. It accompanies the entire training process and is an essential part of it (Falcinelli, 2014).

1. The role of assessment

The objects of assessment are the learning process, the behaviour and the overall academic performance of the students. Through its formative purpose and the identification of each pupil's potential and shortcomings, it contributes to the pupil's self-evaluation processes, to the improvement of knowledge levels and to educational success, also in line with the objective of lifelong learning. In its Recommendation of 23 and 24 March 2000, the European Council identified a number of priorities in the field of education and training, stressing in particular the fundamental role of education and training in the development of the individual so that he or she can realize his or her full potential and lead a good life in society. (<https://ec.europa.eu>).

The assessment process has significant consequences for the individual's educational journey: The outcome of an assessment, whether positive or negative, implies a reallocation of cognitive and emotional resources on the part of the student: he or she may feel encouraged or, conversely, discouraged by the judgement received to such an extent that it may change his or her ability to relate to peers and/or teachers, as well as to approach learning in a different way.

Recent developments in the pedagogical-didactic field support new "ways of understanding and practising assessment", transforming traditional assessment into so-called new forms of assessment such as alternative assessment (Worthen et al. 1999; Hart, 1994), performance assessment (Goldberg, Rosewell, 2000), authentic assessment (Wolf 1989; Wiggins, 1993) and dynamic assessment (Wiliam 2011; Feuerstein, Garb, 2002).

The former is based on an alternative view of learning and competence that considers knowledge as a function of the context in which it is learned and used. This type of assessment changes the task, which is no longer artificial and static, but authentic, and the object of assessment, emphasizing not the product but the cognitive process and the meaning of the assessment. Authentic or real learning tasks are central to this process of assessing.

Performance assessments are a useful tool for assessing a student's understanding of a subject and whether they're able to apply what they've learnt

to specific situations. Educators often use performance assessments to determine how best to teach students and to support them throughout their learning process in a course. A performance assessment involves the application and demonstration of skills and knowledge through various performance tasks. The purpose of performance assessment is to improve student learning and to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching plans. These assessments don't measure whether a student can recall knowledge, but rather how well a student can apply the knowledge they have learned. Performance assessments often use the following components:

1. Developmental checklists
2. Portfolios of student work
3. Progress reports

Authentic assessment is based on a more extended assessment of learning, capable of truly 'testing' critical thinking, problem solving, metacognition, test taking efficiency, teamwork, reasoning and lifelong learning (Arter, Bond, 1996).

Through the assessment of what the learner knows, the 'reproduction' but not the 'construction' and 'development' of knowledge is checked and verified, and not even the 'capacity for real application of the knowledge possessed' (Comoglio, 2002, p. 112).

It is based on the assumption that learning is fostered when it is promoted in concrete situations. Similarly, it is more authentically assessed when control is 'linked' to the type of work people do (Wiggins, 1998).

Performing a given task allows students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in a way that makes it as close as possible to real life (Pastor, 2013, McTighe 1996). The last, dynamic assessment, refers to an assessment of thinking, perception, learning and problem solving with the aim of modifying cognitive functioning and is based on the theory of structural cognitive modifiability and mediated learning experience.

The tasks are designed to be sensitive to changes in the subject's performance, cognitive functioning and cognitive vicarious activation. To achieve this, the tasks must be particularly challenging and motivating. Assessment is defined as dynamic because it is during the execution of the tasks that the teacher has an understanding of what the development potential of his or her student is, what the strengths and areas for improvement of each student are in relation to his or her own intellectual functioning. In contrast to static tasks or tests, dynamic assessment pays particular attention to the process, to the way in which a task is solved, rather than to the result. In addition to the strictly cognitive aspects, it takes

into account those factors related to motivation and emotions that intervene throughout the learning process.

2. The functions of evaluation in the learning process

In order to provide quality education, it is necessary for teachers to have the tools and resources to make the most appropriate and relevant decisions when choosing the teaching-learning pathway. The need for meaningful learning for all students has been put to the test by the Covid-19 health emergency. Schools of all types and levels have had to come to terms with a real transformation, which in particular has involved the teaching-assessment moment.

From Galliani's perspective (2009; 2012), assessment is an ontological and methodological component of didactic science, aimed at making judgments on training and teaching actions consciously planned or carried out to guide and develop the learning of the recipients.

According to Perla (2016), an evaluative approach represents a theoretical common denominator for classifying different ways of conceiving and acting on evaluation.

At this stage a measurement consists of the collection of organized information about certain parameters. It is considered valid and reliable if it corresponds to what is being measured and can be verified without providing contradictory data. When we speak of evaluation, we are referring to two closely related operations or moments: measurement and evaluation. The former favors a quantitative approach and consists in the acquisition of data according to criteria of certainty; subsequently, there is the interpretation and qualitative description of the acquired data according to criteria made explicit (Notti, 2010). The assessment uses the data provided by the measurement and the set of analysis and verification procedures to precisely define the object of detection provides for a measurement procedure and the use of an instrument with the function of stimulating/recording behaviour and evaluating the results, taking into account the subject's performance at entry and exit within a predetermined range.

Indeed, from a conceptual point of view, it is not correct to consider measurement and evaluation as two synonymous terms: verification precedes evaluation in that its priority is the detection of objective elements; evaluation, on the other hand, is based on criteria that are autonomous in terms of the methods and instruments used in measurement, which is based on predetermined objectives, the achievement of which allows the teacher to clearly identify the content acquired by the student and to recognize the processes that have taken place. (Coggi and Notti, 2002, p. 23).

The evaluative act can be considered as a procedure that aims at "attributing value to facts, events and the like, in order to reward or discourage, promote or inhibit them, in relation to the main reasons for which the evaluative act is carried out, but above all in relation to the purposes that the evaluator (or whoever on his behalf) actually wants to pursue" (Domenici, 2014, p. 24).

The functions of assessment need to be redefined in terms of diagnostic, formative and summative assessment in order to optimize the teaching/learning process, individualize teaching and improve the quality of education. The first one, the *diagnostic assessment*, is to identify the cognitive and affective-motivational prerequisites of each and every pupil in the class group.

Assessment is not an operation. It is a process. It is immanent to the learning/teaching process and constitutes its "intelligent" moment. The learning/teaching process begins with an evaluative act: "What do our learners already have knowledge of? What do they need to relearn? What knowledge and skills are useful for new learning? This step is called "initial assessment" and it is extremely important because it serves to contextualize the general curriculum in relation to the needs of the students in a particular class (Da Re, 2013, p.103).

At the beginning of the educational pathway, before the design and planning of the teaching activities, it is fundamental that the classroom council reviews the prerequisites of the pupils, in order to be able to calibrate the design of the interventions to the real needs of each one. At this first stage, the assessment can be considered diagnostic, provided that the basic conditions are met: clarity and transparency of the objectives set by the teacher and deliberately communicated to the class, and plenary correction of the tests carried out.

Secondly, *formative assessment*, makes it possible to identify the learning and shortcomings of individuals and the weaknesses or strengths of the teaching approach adopted. Its main purpose is to monitor student learning. This type of assessment helps both students and teachers to improve the learning-teaching process as it happens. Formative assessment provides feedback to students, although assessment usually gives students a grade or score. This helps students to identify their strengths and weaknesses and helps teachers to evaluate their teaching methods. Formative assessment also takes into account different starting points and individual progress of learners. It aims to "recalibrate" and adapt educational planning and action to actual starting points, individual needs and learning styles by acting as a feedback procedure for learning.

According to Black and William (2009), there are a number of strategies that can be used by teachers and students. These include:

1. making the learning objectives and criteria for educational success clear;

2. knowing the student's level of understanding through specific tasks and discussions;

3. providing feedback that can stimulate students to continue their efforts;

4. provide self-assessment and peer feedback activities to activate students as specific teaching resources.

5. encourage students to actively construct their own learning. Formative assessment represents the moment when teaching and learning interact most closely, it should be the “climax” of school activities.

Thirdly, *summative assessment*, has the function of a final balance, with reference to the conceptual nodes of the subject areas, the school activity and the learning it has promoted in the learners. It leads to a final report of the learning promoted by the school organization and the educational activity, through which the level of performance of the pupils can be measured in relation to all the resources used and the results achieved.

Assessing and evaluating learning fulfils the permanent function of regulating teaching activities for structuring decisions (Domenici).

3. How the teacher's pedagogical actions solve the problem of traditional assessment methods.

There has been a debate on the subjectivity of assessment and the results seem to confirm that the instruments used for the assessment of learning do not express in a valid and objective way the skills acquired by the students.

Moreover, this does not only happen at national level but also within the school itself. For example in the school board meeting, there is widespread debate among teachers about the practice of assessment. This lack of reciprocity of formative intentions depends on a set of variables. These variables relate to qualitative processes that are almost exclusively subjective.

Traditional evaluation methods are limited to checking the simplest cognitive processes that correspond to the characteristics of a given test. This implies a more knowledge-oriented training action or the development of mechanical learning, to the detriment of the implementation of strategies. Educational action is thus very much oriented towards reproductive knowledge or mechanical learning, to the detriment of the ability to revise and metacognition. School knowledge tends to remain inactive, attached to the school environment and distant from reality.

Traditional assessment tends to be used almost exclusively for individual tests. These are in line with the content presented by the teacher during the lesson. On the other hand, little importance is attached to group tests. Instead, they

require more elaboration of the content and more collaborative effort. For this reason, apart from intentions such as competence goals, the dominant function of school assessment remains that of classifying students according to the quality of their performance (Castoldi, 2010, pp.122-123).

Modern assessment science, on the other hand, converges on the notion of an intrinsic correlation between the quality of training and the quality of assessment, since each process of validation of learning outcomes affects the training process in various ways, such as positive and negative reinforcement, information about teachers' teaching, the effectiveness and efficiency of the school system (Baldassarre, 2016).

The evaluation of students has always been a challenging activity that requires a relevant methodological background, consistency with the framework on which the legislation is based, the use of tools available to schools and a strong alliance between the teachers of the institution. It is therefore a difficult subject, full of many meanings and just as many interferences. It is also a difficult activity when, in evaluating the pupil, the teacher exposes himself or herself, both because he/she highlights the criteria he/she refers to, revealing the didactic "model" he/she has adopted, and because, in evaluating his/her students, he/she seems like evaluating his/her own work.

This discomfort is intensified by the growing value attached to the act of evaluation: the emergence of the subject of competence exposes the educational institution to judgements about the student's preparation, but also about the mastery of what they have learned, that is, the ability to use what they know to complete tasks and solve problems (Capperucci 2012).

Finally, the assessment of learning should be able to make the student express what he or she would be able to do if he or she were in the real world with the knowledge he or she has learnt. At present, our students develop a remarkable level of knowledge. However, they do not express the same level of ability in critical thinking, transfer or creative thinking. In fact, traditional assessment rewards those who have a good memory, good reading and writing skills, and more than adequate reproductive skills; while possessing all these qualities, the student is unable to rework the knowledge in a personal way, or to develop knowledge other than that which has been predetermined. Assessment, especially assessment for learning development, is a process and a tool of great value and educational potential: The way it is carried out should encourage a process of self-assessment.

At the heart of the debate on assessment are some questions that need to be answered: What is the problem with sharing the evaluation with others? The issue is numerous and also heterogeneous: grades, shortcomings, clarity, etc. What

is the problem with sharing evaluation? The need for debate in schools is high: for and against of teachers, for and against of parents. As part of an educational process, evaluation accompanies the whole learning process and coincides with "interpreting data, attributing meaning and value to the data examined, making judgements, taking decisions" (Notti, 2010). For these reasons, the evaluation of learning is a 'sensitive' issue. There are many reasons for dissatisfaction among those involved. In particular, many teachers still see assessment as a final check rather than a process of learning and developing skills.

Comoglio (2004), in summarizing the main criticisms of traditional assessment, highlights how the assessment methods used tend to strongly condition the modes and contents of learning, since the teaching process is inevitably "bent" towards the performances and activities required by the assessment (teach to test). Consequently, an understanding of assessment that focuses predominantly on mnemonic performances and the application of concepts and principles tends to favour a learning action centred on these characteristics rather than on active and collaborative processes. (Castoldi, 2010, pp.122-123).

Assessment is a tool that can have innumerable valences and uses: A good assessment can be perceived as a sign of ability and competence, as a tangible recognition of what has been learned, it can manifest a disciplinary orientation, increase motivation and a sense of self-efficacy with regard to studying and learning. Conversely, a failing grade may have psychological and emotional effects on self-efficacy, self-esteem and attributional styles, and may require greater commitment and attention, greater accuracy and precision in completing the task. Evaluation can be used to select, to check the understanding achieved, to determine the effectiveness of a teaching method, to verify learning, to certify a skill or competence, to maintain a constant commitment (Comoglio, 2004).

Students also learn how to apply their knowledge and skills in different tasks and contexts by assessing their skills and knowledge in a 'real world' context.

Assessment in this case becomes meaningful when students understand the assessment procedures, invest time and energy in evaluating their learning processes, take responsibility for evaluating the quality and quantity of their own work, want to show their contributions and talk about them with others. It gives direction to learning when it allows them to understand and correct any mistakes, to close the gaps in their learning and to move on to the next level of knowledge and skills.

Conclusions

Evaluation is a complex process of synthesis. It focuses on observing and interpreting the quality of learning and teaching. For this reason, it represents a very important moment for the teacher. In the educational context it is the tool for regulating the teaching interventions in relation to the objectives that the teacher and the educational institution have set themselves in order to achieve. Contrary to the common idea that assessment is not only at the end of training, it is present throughout the educational processes.

It is complex and requires the use of different methodologies, actors, hypotheses, in which sharing is fundamental, through the collegiality of the assessment, which allows a more articulated Knowledge of the student, his potential and his areas of improvement, from which future choices of educational planning follow, in order to be able to agree on the most appropriate forms of support to help him overcome specific difficulties.

It is therefore a fundamental moment of educational action and is a learning support tool, thanks to which students have the opportunity to be able to analyse and understand the cognitive processes in which they are involved. In this direction, assessment is identified as an important teaching-learning encounter moment in formative assessment perspective (Trinchero, 2018).

Therefore, in order to avoid inequalities in assessment within the same institution and to guarantee the cognitive growth of all students, it becomes a duty to define, both with College of teachers and school board meeting, the operative lines to be followed.

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