

Good assessment design outlined by world-leader in writing assessment

May 08, 2018

Among the essential elements to designing an effective new assessment to replace NAPLAN were factors that would not only enhance student learning but also teachers' professional learning, respected education academic Dr Les Perelman said in a lecture on Friday night.

Dr Perelman's research finds NAPLAN as perhaps the lowest-quality assessment of its type in the English-speaking world and a possible contributing factor to declining performance standards in writing across the nation.

"The lie I hope I exposed in this presentation is the assertion that the NAPLAN writing test can be considered a valid assessment of any reasonable construct of writing ability," Dr Perelman told the audience at NSW Teachers Federation's Conference Centre auditorium.

"The truth I speak, is there are three elements essential to the design and development of any assessment and the execution of educationally effective writing. Such an assessment will support the curriculum and syllabus-based teaching, provide substantial in-service training for teachers and most importantly enhance student learning by testing to the teaching."



Good assessment did not come cheap, he said, pointing to the Analytic Writing Continuum developed in the US by the National Writing Project and now being successfully used in the classroom.

Dr Perelman described it as "an instrument for assessing writing developed by teachers for teachers" that is being used for "formative and summative assessment".

"It's very, very good, the problem, like all good assessments, is it's expensive," he said. "You can't do it on the cheap."

"Good assessment, which also often times has the 'two-for' advantage that it creates great opportunities for professional development, is expensive but it's worth it. You have fewer but better assessments, decentralised development and grading opportunities for professional development."

He said technology had a key role to play, with a knock-on effect for minority communities.

"You can have different tests for different populations scattered all over Australia," he told more than 350 attendees ranging from government officials, principals, teachers and parents from across the sectors.

"You can have [marking] tables in different places connected by the web, we've already done this with other

universities at MIT. So you can have online marking transcending your entire country. The bottom line is you test to the teaching — different tests and testing communities for different approaches and populations.

“Technology-enabled, diverse and linked groups of [markers have the] opportunity to address problems of low-performing minorities, showing students that their writing will be read by a diverse group of readers.

“In the United States, there’s a lot of research that shows low scores by minorities are often correlated with their expectations that they’re going to be read by white males or white females.”

Dr Perelman’s premise for *Towards a new NAPLAN* were the principles of transparency, inclusion and alignment. Transparency around the marking system was paramount, while inclusion in the marking and development of the test meant teachers, principals and government officials.

“I said *at the table, not running things!*” he said of government involvement. “I argue that professional writers should be at the table, because in my work I have found the natural allies are journalists because they know what good writing is.”

NAPLAN was a good example of “non-alignment”.

“You have assessment going in one direction, curriculum going in another direction and syllabus-based teaching trying to navigate between the assessment and the curriculum in another direction; it’s not alignment,” he said.

“Good alignment and good testing is where you have a system that mutually reinforces these. When you have a curriculum that creates syllabus-based teaching that is then assessed, which feeds back into the curriculum, which feeds back into syllabus-based teaching etc. That’s a good model for assessment, for teaching, for learning.”

In introducing Dr Perelman, Federation President Maurie Mulheron hailed the lecture as a “momentous day”, referring to a call by NSW Education Minister Rob Stokes to urgently scrap NAPLAN in its existing form and raising aloft the front page of *The Sydney Morning Herald* and its headline “NSW plea to ditch NAPLAN”.

“This really is a watershed moment that even the fiercest adherents to the current NAPLAN regime will have to at least acknowledge that the status quo will not remain,” Mr Mulheron said. “NAPLAN, in its current form, days are numbered.

“The broad groupings of people represented here tonight really represent a universal consensus across the education community that NAPLAN in its current form is destructive, it’s crude, it encourages teaching to the test, it sits outside the curriculum and it narrows what’s being taught.

“It’s time for an entirely new approach to assessment; one that puts students and quality learning at the centre and one that is driven and managed by the teaching profession.”

Dr Perelman, the former Director in Writing and Assessment at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) was commissioned by Federation to develop an academic paper to contribute to the debate about dismantling the existing NAPLAN assessment regime and replacing it with processes that are beneficial to all students and school communities, and respectful of teachers’ professional judgement.