

***Assessment of Personalised Learning: Beyond Stultifying Testing to the Celebration of Learning.* PEN Annual Conference October 2004**

- Linda Fryer and Carl Wilson

Linda and Carl recount the conference and take us well beyond current narrow conceptions of assessment

Marking the Moment Mandala

When we got back from Toddington Conference in 2003, having undertaken to facilitate the following year's annual meeting we knew we had agreed that our theme would focus on how we as a very loose knit affiliation of *educators* tackled the realm of *assessment* in our work with children and youths; we weren't even sure everyone in *PEN* referred to themselves as *educators* and we soon began to doubt whether *assessment* was included in their vocabulary! Then there was the problem of the title, *Assessment of Personalised Learning: Beyond Stultifying Testing to the Celebration of Learning*. Whilst it helped to suggest the extent of the territory, it offered no clues whatsoever on how we might go about mapping it. In fact it served as a constant reminder of the danger of drawing up battle lines before the territory had even been explored! At that point we struggled for our own working subtitle that would suspend endless semantic debate. 'Marking the Moment' enabled us to look at the scope of the issues.

Whenever we attempted any kind of chart then the challenge re-emerged – an implicit linear format that suggested a necessary progression out of something bad into something really chic. At this juncture we were agreed on one thing only: that whatever happened later we wanted the first part of the conference to be of truly universal appeal. No alienation here please! To do this it had to reflect every known aspect of learning – or at least, known to the assembled group, which in itself is a pretty tall order. Only then could we hope to look objectively at the whole of the picture – battling as to progressions, good, bad or ugly could come later.

I have found that the right mandala can provide crucial insights into 'the whole picture'. Mandala in Sanskrit means a magic circle, a circle of power, or a dynamic map, one that is in movement rather than stasis. Mandalas have been created and used by human beings from time out of mind either to celebrate and deepen connection to or embedment in the universe, or when this stance is lost, as in madness or illness, then as a healing device to effect reconnection. They range from the most enduring, like Stonehenge, to the most transitory: the sand circles of Tibetan Buddhists and Navaho Indians.

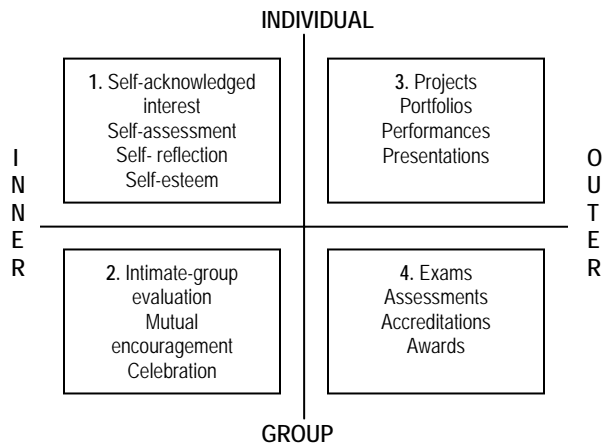
Concentration is the first stage in their creation. Imagining concentric circles reducing to a point can literally focus the mind. Once mental focus has been achieved the next step is orientation. The circle is the most usual template for a mandala – the dilemma being how to plot all the elements of 'the whole' that one wishes to understand onto that frame.

With this particular *PEN* dialogue in mind we knew that our coordinates would need to be: *the individual* on one side of the circle and *the group* or society on the other. Describing how the final pair of reference points emerged is now impossible for they came in a flash — *inner* and *outer*. Suddenly with these 4 orientation points we were certain we had the basis of an all-embracing, objective map of marking the moment! The test was whether all the elements would fit. They did!

Linda Fryer has been a Steiner teacher for 10 years. She co-founded and jointly ran Venture, an independent educational centre for and with youths for 4 years. She also co-founded The Stables Project, an independent arts and education centre 5 years ago. Linda has written various articles in *Jedermensch* and *Erziehungskunst*; both German educational magazines and has written a book about Venture, yet to be published.

The theme of the conference, in Professor Roland Meighan's inimitable words, was: "*Assessment of Personalised Learning: Beyond Stultifying Testing to the Celebration of Learning*". I looked up "*Stultifying*", the dictionary said 'reducing to foolishness' and this did seem an amazingly apt adjective for the testing end of the spectrum. However, in preparing for the conference, the linear pathway from assessment to celebration appeared, rather than circular so the mandala arose. The mandala (we hoped) was to be a mirror in which those belonging to the *PEN* circle would see the reflection of their work and which if it were a true mandala, would have a dynamic of its own. The dynamic of the conference swept us away, and the celebration of the participants' collective understanding of the issue really was the weekend.

The mandala presented itself as a circle, with four quadrants, positioned between vertical and horizontal polar axes. The axes spanned the individual and group, the inner and the outer. The question of the nature of the quadrants, the links between them and, crucially, who or what was placed at the centre of the mandala, was the focus of the conference.



The conference was overwhelmingly clear that the State had missed the point about assessment – that it was for the children (or any learner) and not parents or others. There was general agreement and assessment had been made a product and that it wasn't a product. Education, it was said had been 'businessified' by the state and that had led to misidentification with what it was dealing. The enhanced confidence of the learner is what assessment is really about ... self-esteem that's socially valid. Self-praise, it is clear, is not valued by our society but self recognition is regarded as crucial.

After these initial assertions participants were then asked to make individual comments arising from experience of their own initiatives and endeavours. A rich vein was mined; the following is a summary of quotes. I begin with those that say something generally about what assessment is:

- *"Assessment is the right question in the right context"*
- *"Assessment is plan, do and review. It can be undertaken by all learners in all contexts."*
- *"The assessment of learning should be a co-production between learner and teacher."*
- *"Assessment requires constant questioning between learner and teacher. No child should be an underachiever, no teacher an overexpector."*

Next come quotes that describe beautifully the polar axes of our mandala, unsolicited, of course:

- *"A balance of self and other in assessment is what is needed. Appropriate assessment in the right context, at the right time and without baggage."(The Vertical Axis).*
- *"It is asserted that exams measure a person's quality of mind. This assertion is based upon the idea that a person's quality of mind can be measured according to their ability to match up to certain external criteria. Whether or not certain criteria match up to a person's abilities is clearly a more important aspect of assessment. Assessment is about the individual, not the criteria." (The Horizontal Axis).*

The majority of quotes I have grouped, loosely, according to the quadrant to which I feel they most belong.

Quadrant 1 (top left)

- *"Good assessment should teach you to assess yourself better."*
- *"Who controls assessment is the central question. It should be the learner."*
- *"The kind of self-goals you set yourself depends upon the period ahead you are looking at."*
- *"Many sixth forms are operating full university-style approaches to learning i.e. lectures, tutorials, seminars. At 16+ the university has recognised the importance of the individual learner."*
- *"What is important in assessment is what an individual thinks about his or her own quality of mind."*
- *"Is personalised assessment absolutely synonymous with personalised learning and the move to creativity?"*
- *"Knowing your own best style of learning reflects and promotes the multiple-intelligences."*
- *"Conferences for learners about their learning are a must."*

Quadrant 2 (bottom left)

- *"Expectation is crucial in assessment. If you build up too much expectation, you let yourself down. Learn right expectation"*
- *"Self-assessment can be learnt via group learning experience. Older groups can facilitate this for younger groups."*
- *"Ground rules amongst peers for peer based assessment can be laid down."*
- *"Peer oral assessment schemes have been developed."*

Quadrant 3 (top right)

- *"Formal accreditation is breaking down. Thirty-seven out of forty universities asked about success criteria said that they would accept portfolios."*
- *"The communication of what we have learned is as important as the assessment of it."*
- *"The performance, the presentation of learning is becoming more important than the external examination of it."*
- *"Portfolios are the new tangible."*
- *"Family portfolios and collaborative portfolios can be paper or digitally based."*

Quadrant 4 (bottom right)

- *"Assessment should not be about a ticket to something else."*
- *"Learning targets constrain creativity."*
- *"Measurement in testing has the difficulty that the measurement itself affects the test. An extrinsic dimension affects an intrinsic one. Home-based educators need to know this too."*
- *"Exams aren't measures of your ability just measures of your ability to pass exams."*
- *"Assessment tools generally have a range of impact from low to high. Observation and conversation constitutes high intervention and has a high impact. Exams lead to the tangible benefits of assessment but miss out wholesale on the intangible benefits."*
- *"Real ability is only truly reflected by the individualised aspects of external assessment."*
- *"The mainstream system constantly reinforces failure. It always gives you more of what you're weak at. The solution to this i.e. more of what you are good at, is politically untenable."*
- *"Exams are obstacles heaped up in front of you with bruising capabilities. They are like a sieve set up for, and by, superiority."*
- *"Why are outwardly recognised assessments mostly concentrated in the teenage years? Why couldn't such things be spread out over a time and say taken at 12, 16, 25, 45, and 80 years of age?"*

Final thoughts (one very final!) on the Saturday were:

- *"There needs to be a move away from specific measurement in assessment, which promotes no quality of mind, to a course which promotes multiple intelligence, which calls for creativity. We live in a society that needs intelligences of all kinds, even if some are less well remunerated than others."*
- *"We live in an age of assessment fatigue. Let's have some living proof instead."*
- *"The only real place for assessment is on your deathbed."*

After a good night's sleep (an England football game notwithstanding!) participants returned to the fray on Sunday, undaunted. Indeed the comments seemed to have become deeper and broader overnight. Although we asked for summary comments the dynamic of the mandala in its toing and froing definitely seemed undimmed. The following is my attempt to track its movements.

It was said that the external assessment of children was still expected by parents because it had been so much part of their own education. Furthermore, parents recognised that society took the view that that assessment reflected on the parents themselves, very particularly so in the case of home educators. Research shows that home-based educators often go through a period of angst after between two and five years of home-based educating their children, feeling society will condemn them for their extraordinary step and blame them if anything is less than perfect. With schools, others can be blamed. The question as to whose responsibility education is always looms large in our society. Parents often tread cautiously because they believe that education is a one-shot phenomenon. But it is not. Learning *is* a life-long activity and most young people are going to have a number of careers. The one-shot is now many. If students were released from constant supervision by teachers many more courses could be offered to them. Sixth forms could be closed down. What we need are facilitators of learning not teachers. Home education with its ample opportunity for

self-reflection can be a strong progenitor for self-acknowledged interest that can be easily pursued without a teacher. The natural value of learning that the mandala indicates (the self and intimate areas) ought to be flagged up to home educators so that they realise it is a strong part of objective assessment.

A warning was sounded about the top left-hand quadrant of the mandala. Self-assessment could be too individualistic. Exams are outer rites of passage into society. Group evaluation, encouragement and celebration (bottom left quadrant) are inner rites of passage. The balance lies between the two. The mandala *must* convey movement.

It was then said that the whole mandala was about *review*, not assessment, noting that both were about bringing objectivity into learning. To *re-view* is a process that looks for a need to change. That need may or may not be found. A review can be positive or negative but can always be learnt from.

Looking to the centre of the mandala it is clear that in school a learner is not in control, is not at the centre; external authority is. But this centre cannot hold, this is what the twentieth century teaches us.

Who or what should go at the centre? The individual learner? The school itself? The purpose of *any* activity?! With respect to this question, the mandala could not help us. This was referred to as the 'magic edge of uncertainty.' The mandala it was said could be considered an isomorph, a natural form capable of replication. Who might replicate it and for what purpose was an open question. As one participant bluntly put it 'the assumption that all users would use it the way we would would be a mother of all failure.' The mandala, we concluded, had best dissolve with the conference.

School, we know, breeds dependency, home-based education, independence, what the mandala might point to is inter-dependency, surely this is what we must explore? If society at the centre is not holding then can the individual placed at the centre hold either? But the individual strengthened by a proper recognition of his or her interdependence on others might i.e. INDIVIDUAL ↔ ALL, ALL ↔ INDIVIDUAL.

Assessment should be an instant review; the rest should be trusting to the future. We don't have to have arrived; we simply need to be on our way. GCSEs are regarded as permanent markers but most people see that they are not. We too easily think we perceive perfection and all we call that perception a standard. But all our perceptions are imperfect. There are no standards. Nothing must become a standard. *All* must be unfinished. In this respect, the bottom right quadrant is like the emperor's new clothes – apparent to all for what it *isn't*.

The mandala focuses on the question of authorisation, on permissibility rather than on any list of criteria. This is because any list of criteria ought to be infinite, ought to represent creativity itself. What if those criteria aren't good enough, says society, but we in PEN celebrate them anyway. It is the lack of criteria that makes the mandala humanistic. The mandala points to the whole. Celebrate celebration!

Re-viewing, assessing, is not a linear process, it does not build up over time. Rather, you have to reapply the whole phenomenon each time you re-view. A whole new world must arise each time you look. The moment of re-view itself authorises both your looking and what you see. In that re-view must also be the enjoyment of re-viewing itself. *Here* lies the true vale of assessment, in the enjoyment of looking. Happy Reviewing!

Carl has taught in the state and independent sectors for 25 years. As a Steiner teacher he was chair of the teachers' group a number of times and frequently held the position of teachers' representative to the management body of the school. He lectured on the North of England Steiner Teachers' training course. Carl works with the Stables Project in York, an independent, post-14 education and community arts initiative and is part of the management team. His interest is non state, non-school based educational practice.