**If you can measure it, …**

**(Phil Race)**

What’s assessment about? Measurement? Making judgements? Classifying fellow-humans? Making league tables? Pigeon-holing achievement? Or should we think of it as a process of learning by attempting to make judgements? If you’ve read my writing on assessment, you probably know where I’m coming from, and where I may be heading. My thinking today on this has been enriched by a Peter Bradshaw ‘Guardian’ piece on ‘times tables’, and a Twitter multilogue on the importance – of lack of it – of handwriting. (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/feb/16/times-tables-multiplication-learning-by-rote> )

Thinking back to schooldays (long ago), times tables and handwriting were deemed to be important, and both were tested regularly, and I got plenty of feedback on my efforts at both. The former I had no trouble with – the latter was deemed bad. Some teachers would give me far more comment on the lousy quality of my handwriting than on my grasp of their subjects. Maths and science teachers did not complain about my handwriting, so I became a scientist. I did, of course, get a lot of practice in handwriting, and got a degree in science. I went on to get a doctorate in science, but this time with the aid of a typewriter.

My dad bought me a typewriter shortly before I started university, and I taught myself to touch-type with the aid of a little booklet which came with the machine, and plastic caps to hide the keys till my fingers knew which was which. So by the time I wrote up my PhD thesis, I typed the draft copy, rather than hand-wrote it. Admittedly, the actual final version (top copy and four carbons – that was how it things were done in 1968) was prepared by an expert typist, and was far better than I could have made, but she didn’t have to labour through any terrible handwriting of mine.

I never had any trouble with times tables. I liked numbers, and was quite proud that my success with them had been praised at school, but until reading Peter Bradshaw’s piece I’d never thought about whether or not it was (for example) important or even useful to remember instantly on demand that 9 x 7 = 63. Meanwhile my typing skills had developed so that I could touch type faster than I could hand-write, so I worried no more about handwriting. Mine was adequate for all the things I needed pen and paper for, and (mostly) I could read it when I needed to.

During the decades that followed, I got more interested in learning, teaching and assessment than in science, and gently morphed into an educationalist (admittedly, one with an approach informed by at least some science). I continued to write a lot (typing of course) and got better at talking about things. So today’s stimuli about primary kids being tested on times tables, and the importance seemingly still attributed to handwriting have got me thinking about what is worth testing, and what can be missed by assessment as we know it.

I’m coming round to thinking that time is of the essence in our quest to help fellow humans to gain the skills which they need to thrive in the 21st century. These certainly include being able to communicate with the world around us by reading and writing, but not particularly handwriting. Even typing could be waning in importance, as voice recognition software is becoming better by the day at turning our speech into printed or on-screen words now, and rather more quickly than can be done by fingers on keyboards (albeit with ever-present ‘voicos’ – my word for the modern equivalent of ‘typos’). When I say ‘time is of the essence’ I’m trying to say that I worry about anything that takes too much valuable time for what it’s worth, taking me back to handwriting and times tables. There are so many things that are much more important to learn. And therefore, more important things by far to try to measure, or assess.