

# MARKiT: the story of a good idea continues...

**Michael Tunks**

In the 2013 Term 2 issue of *Education Today* I wrote about the genesis of a new online markbook application my company has developed with considerable input from schools around Australia. The article triggered many responses from and highlighted the fact that effective assessment tracking and student academic profiling are high priority needs in schools.

In this article I'd like to share with you some of these responses and the thinking that appears to be behind current assessment practices. With a high emphasis in Australian education on academic accountability, schools are seeking efficient and effective ways to compile an ongoing student academic profile. Maintaining such a profile can reduce a teacher's workload and increase teaching time by lessening the need to continually pre-test where students are up to in a discipline.

Access to an academic profile that follows a student from year to year helps to ensure curriculum consistency and continuity within a school, signals student progress or problems, reassures parents that the school is sharing important information between teachers and classes, and acts almost like an academic Global Positioning System, indicating where a student is (i.e. how they are performing) at any point in time.

## Standardised tests

First, the approach to the use of standardised tests from state to state and between schools is quite varied. Driving this is often the honed educational practices of a principal or a group of principals who have identified a distinct set of standardised tests and share with each other their processes and analysis methods. This has led to a structured annual assessment schedule with established protocols for interpreting results leading to informed, data driven curriculum decisions.

The set of tests selected can be quite different in another group of schools to better suit their student population but the overall process is similar. Last year, the South Australian Department of Education and Child Development published an assessment brochure detailing a range of standardised tests recommended for SA schools.

The use of Scale Scores from the standardised results tables is quite pronounced in some states

more than others and between schools the range and number of standardised tests administered vary considerably.

## Progressive assessments

Assessments requiring more complex recording, like the Oxford Sight Word Test or the Phonological Awareness Test, also featured in responses. These tests, often administered individually, require substantial record keeping that often need to be accessed and updated over several years. Usually paper based, we have been able to develop online versions allowing easy administration and record keeping.

## Quasi-standardised tests

An interesting category of tests was brought to our attention when a number of schools requested the ability to record assessments that are not officially standardised but which a school uses longitudinally to track performance. Examples include the Jolly Phonics program or the One Minute tests. Schools have included this type of assessment in a students' ongoing academic profile as they provide specific and pertinent information in areas deemed of value by individual staff.

## National tests

NAPLAN results also featured among responses. Comments ranged from "these are too high level and don't really help in curriculum decisions" to "they are an important component of the assessment spectrum." Incorporating these results in a student's academic profile provides a common baseline now familiar to parents and able to be correlated with performance on other tests.

One interesting enquiry related to a need to be able to record curriculum topics covered for each student. The school often has composite classes for much of a student's career and they needed to be able to track which topics had been covered in the various KLAs from year to year. This requirement highlights the various types of assessment schools wish to record – numeric, alpha-numeric, e.g. grades –A, B+; descriptors – good, excellent; or ranges 30–35) or text entries.

A philosophical contradiction arose when we approached a company (Company A) providing long-standing and well-respected standardised tests. Much teacher time can be

saved by automatically looking up stanines and percentiles from the entry of a raw score. On request from several schools we approached Company A for permission to incorporate their standardised test scores.

After a lengthy discussion the company politely refused our request because they believed a teacher derived a better understanding of student performance by manually going through the process of marking a test, calculating the raw score and looking up the related standardised results in the paper tables they provided. I am not critical of this response at all and only mention it to highlight the difference in approach to Company B which offers an online service for testing, automatic marking and compilation of standardised test results.

This discussion also made me reflect on my own assessment practices when I was a classroom teacher – many moons ago! When marking a students' work I would often get an intuitive "feel" not only for if the answers were correct but for a student's attitude and confidence with the material – was the work completed neatly, are the pages dog-eared, is there evidence of working out that indicates the student's thinking process? How important are these teacher perceptions in assessing a student's academic performance?

Obviously, there is a place for all kinds of assessment to arrive at a well-rounded and well-informed decision on student performance and progress. There is also a need for adequate recording processes to keep this disparate information together throughout a student's academic career. The responses reported here point to an increasing dependence on academic data for school based decision-making and prompted some fairly deep philosophical and educational discussion on assessment and reporting.

ET



**Michael Tunks**

is Director of ImproMation, a software development company with its focus on helping schools. Visit [www.impromotion.com.au](http://www.impromotion.com.au)