

Evaluation: Is it the Cane that Guides or the Dog that Guards?¹

Geetha Durairajan

Nature of teaching, learning and evaluation outside education

All of us as living beings teach someone something at some time in our lives. Caregivers and parents do this much more than others. They teach children to tie shoelaces, plait hair, tie ribbons, make tea/coffee, answer the door bell, eat without spilling, etc.; an adult may teach another adult how to cook, sew, knit, or drive a car. The list is endless. This, as Gardner (1999) beautifully described it, is an education that took place long before there were formal institutions called schools. If we think about the nature of such teaching, we realize that there are no lesson plans or lectures. Teaching is implicit, either by example, or a simple “Come, I will show you what to do”. Examples are provided, but the example (and by implication the teaching) differs from person to person; teaching is fine-tuned, calibrated and individualized. This ‘individualization’, needs an implicit ‘evaluation’.

As an illustration, I am going to use the example of a concept I had to teach to both a three-year-old child, and an adult. The concept was the story behind the well known painting from the Bhagavad Gita² (in which Krishna is a charioteer and Arjuna—one of the five Pandava brothers—is depicted as dejected and visibly upset), and its significance. A young child asked me in his first language, Tamil, “ithu ennathu?” (what is this?). I simply told him the story of the Gita in a simplified form; about uncles and cousins who took what belonged to one set of brothers, and how this one brother (Arjuna) did not want to fight with his relatives, and how

Krishna told him that when someone does something wrong, others, even if they are younger than him, have the right to make that ‘wrong’ known. A British friend (with an interest in Hindu mythology) asked me a similar question, “Can you tell me something about this famous picture and what it represents?” In response I gave her a small but quick ‘lecture’ on how the horses represent the five senses, the chariot the body, the charioteer the soul, Arjuna the mind, etc. The stimulus behind the question was the same picture, but the two listeners or learners heard different versions of the answer, one a simplified tale, and the other a symbolic interpretation.

The most important role of evaluation within education is not to do the job of gatekeeping, weeding out the ‘have-nots’ from the ‘haves’. Evaluation of this nature is like a dog that barks at those outside the gates to guard and protect its own territory; some are allowed to enter, others are not. The gatekeeping exercise has its own merits (in entrance examinations), but not within the context of teaching and learning.

The tale and the interpretation were both ‘honest’ teachings, which were genuinely learner-centred. Although this ‘learner-centredness’ happens all the time, it is not possible without an inbuilt evaluation. The nature of teaching (what to teach, and how) is based on an assessment of learner needs; the evaluation is, however, minus any grading or

marking. The judgment is not a 'look at you, you don't even know'. It is a convivial evaluation (Durairajan, 2003) (with care and tolerance, whose only purpose is to help someone learn) that enables individualized learning to happen. It is like the two hands that go around a small candle flame and help it to continue burning and not go out, like the two hands in the logo of the Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC).

Teaching, learning and evaluation within education

A lot of teaching and learning takes place in classrooms, and for this a range of tasks and activities are used. What different children or students take away from a particular task need not be the same. Teaching may be whole class oriented, but learning is individualized. We acknowledge the fact that teacher input and student intake may be different, and that individual abilities may vary, but this variation is rarely echoed in the testing that happens in classrooms. At the end of the fifth or the eighth unit of teaching, a test is administered (or a quarterly or half-yearly examination conducted) to all students on the same day, at the same time; they are tested for the same information, and evaluated using the same criteria/scoring key. Marks or grades are given, added up, and as part of internal assessment, these 'measurements' feature in some form in the final summative evaluation for certification. When deciding what, when and how to teach, the teacher is perceived as empowered, as having a 'sense of plausibility' (Prabhu, 1987). But this ability to select, modify, adopt or adapt materials is rarely evoked in classroom testing. The freedom to extend the duration of the test, or conduct the test separately on a different day is not made available to the teacher. Formative evaluation that should serve an educational purpose becomes an administrative and disciplinary exercise meant to either ensure attendance in class, or show marks registers as filled, or worse still, pass or retain students. We

'discipline and punish' (Foucault, 1978/1991) through examinations: The teacher's knowledge of her students is continuous and comprehensive, but that does not get recognised, let alone valued.

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Evaluation in education is a very different kind of a dog; it is the 'seeing eye dog', that serves as a guide dog for the blind. Instead of using this image, which is a little alien to us in India, I have chosen to alternate it with the white cane used by a visually-impaired person that provides mobility, enables movement, and aids navigation.

Genuine formative evaluation has to fulfil a pedagogic role. Evaluation that is marked or graded, that is entered in report cards, is stressful and creates tension; it simply fulfils an administrative, certification-oriented purpose. In the context of public education, such a certification is unavoidable, but it should not become the predominant motivation behind all testing. The two kinds of evaluation can be differentiated; one is development-oriented and academic-purposed, the other administrative and judgmental.

Academic-purposed evaluation aims to capture the indicators of development in the child. But such a development (an integral part of learning) is traumatic for every individual. To understand the nature of this 'individualized trauma', let us examine classroom teaching and learning a little more closely. At some point in our educational career, we have studied that 'learning' is change in behaviour (Bloom, Hastings & Maduas, 1971). 'Learning' here, is not reduced to a behaviouristic change to be reinforced positively

or negatively. Instead, the focus is on the individual change in perceptions, actions, and even beliefs. But it is neither instant nor immediate. It is not like the switching on of a bulb! Learning is painful and time-consuming! We only need to contemplate on the time and effort it takes for a child to learn to eat food without spilling, or tie shoelaces. Also, learning never happens at the same time on the same day for the whole class. It happens incrementally, individually, and very slowly. A single test cannot capture this individualized learning.

As an example, let us think of language classrooms where large quantum of learning happens. Students have to learn what to say, when to say it, why and to whom, (rules of appropriateness). They also need to learn when to use 'since' and 'for' (rules of grammar), how to use words correctly, how to write with coherence, or read and comprehend a text. None of this happens overnight! If it did, we would not be teaching the use of discourse markers, word-meaning, and even the use of articles and tenses at the college level. In spite of this, even at the school level, in every test, we deduct marks for 'mistakes'.

Language learning is described as developmental, incremental and on going, but we expect perfection at every stage of language performance.

When we teach a child something outside of education, every single milestone is celebrated: The first step, the first word, the first plate of food eaten without assistance, etc. This celebration has to become a part of educational academic evaluation. It will then be continuous and comprehensive, and at the same time, academic in its orientation.

This kind of 'individualized' evaluation, however, does not make life easy for a teacher: there are 40 or more students in a class, a vast syllabus to cover, 'portions' to finish. However, if any

teacher is asked to think for just 5 minutes, and identify the 8 children who need help, or the 8 children who are 'good', there is no hesitation. Every teacher knows his/her students. This 'knowing' is 'academic' evaluation; it captures the little things that a learner achieves. For a child, learning how to read, distinguishing the cover page of a book from the text inside, or pointing to the first and the last word on a page is a big achievement (Mariotti & Homan, 2005). Over two weeks, a child may learn to use a word with a lot more confidence; these 'small gains' (Tharu, 1981) are difficult to capture in a test, but are recorded in the mind of the teacher, and documented if required, in a teacher's diary.

Alternative evaluative possibilities

There are many kinds of teacher observations that can provide evaluative knowledge. First and foremost is the natural observation that happens in the look of an eye, or body language. Then there is informal question-answer sessions in which a teacher may note things such as "Sharanya is trying to answer, and although Karthik is silent, he is nodding". A third level consists of the small tests given by the teacher, and finally there are the slotted, inevitable, promotion/certification examinations.

The summative examination paper can also be used for academic or educational purposes, as a guiding cane. The whole class/group/individual can be given a feedback; but what we do with the answer papers after we enter the marks is crucial. As teachers, we can use it to improve our teaching, or tell students what their strengths and weaknesses are.

Class test papers can be used to provide both teacher and peer feedback. With training, self-evaluation is also a possibility. If evaluation criteria are made known, then the evaluation itself becomes a teaching exercise for students to not only learn but also observe and evaluate themselves.

All classroom experiences are instances where developmental evaluation can and does happen. This is particularly true of multiple-choice or short answer type questions. A discussion of the possible answers and explanations enables individualized learning to happen, and also provides the teacher with insights into the workings of her students' minds. Teachers only need to ask, "so why did you choose this answer?" (without giving away the right answer), and listen to the explanations to later enable a 'change in behaviour.' Academic evaluation can be used as a thinking tool, "why did I answer this, why is X not the answer?" An additional point is that in multilingual contexts such as India, this thinking tool need not be monolingual (Durairajan, 2009, Mathew, 2008). The guard dog or cane image, with reference to English in India, applies also to the language used. In classrooms where L1 is predominant or more enabled, language is often perceived as a 'problem'. It can instead be used as a resource to help children go 'meta' in that language; it can also become the language of discussion to enable thinking and reflection.

The language of thinking and reflection in India is often, for many students, their first language; we, with our baggage of 'colonialism', guard against the use of that language; instead, it can be used as a prop, as a guide, to help children. In the twenty-first century India, with the implementation of the Right to Education Act and the need for inclusive education, this becomes even more crucial. A teacher cannot afford to evaluate the mere presence or absence of a capability; evaluation needs to function as an enabling and empowering tool.

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1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 'Opportunities, Options and Challenges in English Language Education' Seminar at RIESI Bangalore in February 2011.

2. This reference is to a part of the Indian epic, the Mahabharata, that deals with the war between two clans, the Kauravas and the Pandavas, who were also cousins. In the tale, the Pandavas have to fight the Kauravas for what was rightfully seen as their property; Arjuna (one of the Pandavas) is dejected and upset at the beginning of the war at the idea of having to fight with his own uncles, cousins, and other relatives. As his charioteer, Krishna advises him and that 'advice' comprises the Bhagavad-Gita.

Geetha Durairajan is Professor and Head of the Department of Testing and Evaluation, at the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad. Her areas of interest include pedagogic evaluation and language education in multilingual contexts.

gdurairajan@gmail.com