
Preface

This book attempts to present the range of paradigms, perspectives, designs, purposes, methods, analyses and approaches to validity and ethics that currently define language assessment and programme evaluation. In order to navigate through these topics, the reader needs to be aware of the guiding structure. I begin with the topic of paradigms and purposes for doing both assessment and evaluation. This, I believe, is a necessary starting point, but one that is the most complex of all topics handled in the book. The understandings developed for paradigms and purposes continue to be discussed and elaborated in the following chapters, however. Chapter 2 demonstrates how a consideration of paradigm, purpose, audiences, goals and context can lead to the design of an assessment procedure or programme evaluation: a design, in this case, being the means for organising the data-gathering and analysis that will serve the assessment and evaluation goals and purposes. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on quantitative methods for gathering and analysing assessment and evaluation data; Chapters 5 and 6 focus on qualitative methodology. The final chapter considers the fundamental issues of validity and ethics, and their interrelationship, in the practice of assessment and evaluation, and how these differ between the two major paradigms presented in Chapter 1. Each chapter ends with a set of exercises designed to have the reader think through the content in more detail, and to apply it, where appropriate, to familiar contexts. There is also a set of suggested readings for further exploration of each chapter's main topics.

It perhaps would have been wiser to stake out one paradigmatic perspective and focus on the issues, techniques and guidance that it could give us concerning the difficult problems of assessment and evaluation. I hope that my decision to present a fuller range of options will provide benefits that outweigh the potential for being overwhelmed. I recall a criticism of one of my first published articles on evaluation: it was said that so many methods were presented, it made it difficult to see the forest for the trees. My goal here was to allow you to see both the forest and the trees. Of course, in choosing to present paradigm differences as important first points of departure, the problem is complicated further. There is no one forest to be seen.

My choice to present the paradigm issue in dichotomous terms – ‘positivism’ versus ‘interpretivism’ – was made for the sake of focusing on what I see as the major differences between groups of approaches that cluster around either label. This made

my job of portraying different approaches to design, information collection and analysis easier, but ran the risk of oversimplifying the nature of both clusters, as well as losing certain differences within clusters. For example, there are important distinctions that can be made between critical theory, critical applied linguistics and constructivism. Focusing on these distinctions did not seem to further the goal of presenting alternatives for a coherent practice of assessment and evaluation. So, I use the positivist–interpretivist distinction to help provide some coherence, but I have also attempted to provide reference to different perspectives within these paradigm clusters (such as the critical-testing perspective within interpretivism, and the critical-realist perspective within positivism).

Although my training was grounded in the positivist paradigm, I have come to appreciate and use interpretivism more and more during the last ten years of my professional life. Part of what I find attractive and useful about the interpretivist perspective is that it makes sense in terms of my worldview as it extends beyond my professional life as well. Since reading John K. Smith's (1988) article titled 'The evaluator/researcher as person vs. the person as evaluator/researcher', I have been intrigued by the idea that our professional views of the world can, or perhaps should, be integral with our personal views of the world. If we believe that our personal relationships are co-constructed, if we believe that our experience of the world is relative to our particular time, place, history and culture, rather than these things being independently existing truths, then why would we opt for a different paradigmatic perspective when approaching our professional work? Some will answer this question by citing the need to keep the professional and the personal (or individual) separate. In the words of a dear friend and colleague, 'I hope I do my professional work better than I manage my personal life!' There is also a clear and understandable need for certainty. In the past, more of us were able to find that certainty in religion or other socio-cultural institutions, perhaps. With the advent of the postmodern world, these traditional sources of certainty are in doubt for many. So, it is not surprising that we turn to our professional lives to find some semblance of order, of truth, of ethical coherence.

At the Language Assessment Ethics Conference, organised by Antony Kunnan and the Charter College of Education, California State University, Los Angeles, in May 2002, the task of creating a code of practice for the International Language Testing Association (ILTA) was central to many of the discussions. By the end of the conference, the general mood was that this may be an impossible task, given the international nature of the association. The principles articulated in the Code of Ethics (ILTA 2000) seemed reasonable, but necessarily too general to translate easily into a code of practice that would be relevant and acceptable to all cultures, countries and language-assessment contexts represented by ILTA. In fact, some participants wondered if the most ethical response to the problem might not be to abandon these somewhat philosophical discussions and concentrate our efforts on the problems of designing better tests.

I would like to suggest that we consider the time and effort spent on discussing the ethics of language assessment and programme evaluation are directly relevant to

making better forms of assessment and better approaches to evaluation. The time and effort spent by the participants of the Los Angeles conference on ethics in assessment brought a connection between our profession and our humanity. It suggested to me that, although we need to be cautious about codifying such things as ethics, we should perhaps strive to let our personal and professional worldviews achieve a coherence that can guide ethical decisions. Language assessment and programme evaluation are inherently social and political activities. Our professional codes need to recognise this, rather than attempting to portray a false sense of neutrality and objectivity. This may argue against having universal codes for the profession, or it may argue for articulating codes as dynamic sites of struggle, where the central issues of validity and ethics, of selecting designs and methods of analysis for our practice, are presented not as rules or principles, but as activities in need of constant debate and reconstruction.