

# Editorial: Assessment Mills

William Blake's dark Satanic mills were apparently not the industrial mills of Lancashire and Yorkshire, but the schools of his day, which in his view ground all the spirit out of those who were unfortunate enough to suffer them. The clergy who ran Blake's mills were grinding out deadened souls, not industrial riches.

In the year 2001 in England's green and pleasant land our education has become equally soul-destroying. Nor is the destruction of souls confined to England. Everything, it seems, in education everywhere has to be assessed all the time.

Pupils in state schools in England and Wales are now assessed in public examinations at the ages of 14, 16, 17 and 18, and not only in academic subjects. Their performances in 'key' and 'transferable' skills are also monitored and controlled. Nor do things get any better at university. In most universities every six months undergraduates have to be examined in six modules, until they finally run out with 36 'credits'. And all this is to say nothing of yet more assessment in skills of all sorts, group, key, transferable, and even 'learnacy' or 'learning how to learn'.

The only thing which can be said in mitigation of those of us who administer all these tests is that we have similar régimes imposed on ourselves. Our teaching is 'quality assured' externally and our research assessed nationally every four or five years. Within universities similar exercises are conducted internally. New dons have to join an Institute for Teaching and Learning, where they are doubtless taught to do ever more finely grained monitoring of what they and everyone else is up to.

No one knows what increases in knowledge or wisdom or even wit have been produced by this mania for assessment. They do not know because there has been no evaluation of the assessment procedures in any terms other than those set by the assessors themselves. Knowledge, wisdom and wit are very hard to assess. They certainly do not admit of the sort of mechanistic and piecemeal procedure beloved of assessors and assurers. So the whole of education becomes biased towards the production and monitoring of pointless 'measurable outcomes' and meaningless skills. Pupils and students are denied the most important benefit of formal education: the chance to mature, to deepen their understanding and to explore the world of the mind without continually being subjected to extraneous demands.

To accommodate our new model education we all talk a new form

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of language. The talk is all of aims, objectives, skills, transferability, quality loops and learning outcomes, but few really understand the arcane distinctions and clunking jargon. Some suspect that what we are seeing is no more than the emanation of half-crazed thought forms dreamed up in sinister laboratories run by conventicles of assessment experts. But these negative and wholly unworthy suspicions are dealt with in the easiest way possible by the new priesthood of assessment. They are simply ignored.

Blake might not immediately recognize our dark Satanic mills, but he would certainly ask us how we had allowed humanity and spirit to be so ground out of the education we provide for our children and young people.