3. The place of assessment in evaluation

The following extract from the *Handbook for Learning-centred Evaluation of Computer-facilitated Learning Projects in Higher Education* makes two points clear:

1. (a) *Analysis of assessment data should be an integral part of evaluation.*
   (b) However, analysis of assessment data is but one aspect of evaluation.
   (c) There can be problems in issuing assessment data, and these need to be recognised.

2. The interpretation of such data needs to be undertaken with caution, particularly in the context of comparing 'before and after' performances.

> We need to be clear about the difference between assessment and evaluation. We are using evaluation in terms of looking at a broad range of evidence in order to gauge the effectiveness of a computer-facilitated learning project. Assessment is the process whereby teachers set specific tasks related to the learning outcomes which students undertake to do. Students all undertake formal and informal assessment tasks in the subjects they are studying and so we always have assessment data to use in evaluation. Their success in these tasks provides evidence of how effective their learning has been. But assessment results make up only one set of measures and these need to be considered alongside other pieces of evidence. While all evaluation plans should contain assessment data, that is just one aspect of evaluation.
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> Bear in mind also that there can be problems with using assessment data in evaluations. These need to be considered carefully. The *Flashlight Evaluation Handbook* (Ehrmann, 1999b) identifies a range of problems in basing evaluations solely on assessment measures, including problems deriving from the assessments themselves and from using them in before and after comparisons:
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> - Few academics have been trained in the design of effective assessments;
> - It is difficult to know if another marker would come to the same conclusion about a student's work;
> - Some academics grade 'on the curve' so that one year's results cannot be compared to another's;
> - Educational innovations often result in changes in teaching and learning practices and objectives, so that assessment results cannot be reliably compared before and after the innovation.
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> From Phillips et al. (2000). *Handbook for Learning-centred Evaluation of Computer-facilitated Learning Projects in Higher Education*, page 1.7-1.8.

With regard to the last bullet point, educational projects will generally have changes in teaching and learning practices and/or objectives as desired outcomes. The overarching point is that assessment results are shaped by a multiplicity of factors, some often quite subtle, making simple 'cause and effect' conclusions difficult, if not invalid.

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