

Alice in Assessment Land

Some basic principles of assessment



"May I join your party" asked Alice coyly. "Of course" said the rabbit, "... but first you must get into the party club". "Do this" said the mad hatter startling Alice by rudely thrusting a small blackboard at her.

Alice looked long and hard at the sum scribbled hastily in chalk on the blackboard (39x273) and then slowly raised her eyes to meet the hatter's. "Er ... precisely why am I doing this?" asked Alice, with a puzzled expression.

"So I can tell if you're *fit* join the party club" replied the hatter. "Fit" repeated the queen slowly, looking sternly at Alice "we only want *quality* guests ... now get on with it child". Alice, ignoring the queen's rude manner, looked blankly at the sum and then back at the hatter before exclaiming "but that's silly, your test is not **valid**".

The hatter snorted and testily snatched back the blackboard. "what do you mean child, not **valued**" he snapped, clearly embarrassed by his ignorance in front of the queen. "Not val...id" she corrected,

"For a start, it has no **predictive validity**. How, pray tell, does my ability to do sums allow you to predict how well I might fit in at one of your parties?" Alice asked earnestly. "I could perfectly well be a credit to your silly party" she went on "without *any* skill at sums .. or equally I could pass your senseless test easily and be a perfectly beastly party guest. Why it would be like testing , say, a doctor, solely on how good was his memory for random facts - some irrelevant - rather than on practical things, or whether she made people well again! All your silly test measures is *one* quality, of dubious significance - the ability to do sums". The table fell silent.

"Neither" she went on (as young girls and educationalists tend to) "does it have any **content validity**". "A good test must measure *all* of the important qualities that make people fit to attend a party not just a few. "Perhaps" she went on "if you tested people's conversational ability, or, or liking for tea and scones, or table manners, or likeability, or politeness, you might have a 'party' test with some *content* validity.

Never having been challenged in this way, the hatter was distinctly miffed. He screwed up his nose and sniffed. Having once been an examiner for the Royal College of Hatters, he wasn't used to being crossed by upstarts in this way. He couldn't quite see Alice was being so quarrelsome.

Coincidentally, a doctor (actually a psychiatrist, one of whom the hatter *always* liked to have at his parties) was attending the gathering at the time and backed Alice up. "Actually" the psychiatrist said "she's right, we're seeing less and less of the old type test such as MCQ's and more and more things like OSCE's, SSA's and competence

based assessments". The other guests looked open-jawed at the doctor, none of them, not even Alice, understanding a word of what he'd said.

"Well that's as maybe" said the hatter, less than impressed by his guest's support for Alice.

Alice, meanwhile, had lost interest in attending the party and turned on her heels. She had gone a few paces when the queen called her back. The queen had clearly grasped what the hatter hadn't. "Very well" said the queen, "we'll try again this time I'll set you a **valid** test you have one minute in which to impress us with your conversational ability, table manners, likeability, and politeness; all qualities we like to see in our guests!"

Alice's patience was being sorely tried. She sighed heavily. "But that's impossible", she said "that test is little better than the sums, it has content validity, and much better predictive validity, but a good test needs **feasibility**. It would be unfeasible to do your test in one minute - it would take much longer than one minute to assess me!"

"Popcock" muttered the queen, looking on disapprovingly, but the hatter motioned the queen to be quiet. He closed in on Alice, looked at her in his curious cross-eyed way and sighed. His quantity of wit allowed him to sense *some* reason in her arguments, but his quality of wit, long since dulled by repeated exposure to toxic mercury, allowed him only dimly to grasp her points.

He pushed his hat jauntily to one side and scratched his brow. "But how on earth would we test all of those, those ... party things" he shrugged "at least our blackboard test is **feasible**" "Ah ... Well ..." said Alice knowingly "Just because its feasible doesn't make it a good test - the art of setting a good test is that we must take what's important and make it measurable, *not* simply take what's measurable and make it important"

"I see" said the hatter brusquely (not properly seeing at all). "Very well then" he retorted, wiping the blackboard with his sleeve, "here's a better test". Concentrating hard he scribbled vigorously on the board and thrust it at Alice. Alice looked at the blackboard on which was written another silly, but this time much easier, sum (10x3) she glared at the hatter... but before she could open her mouth the Hatter interrupted "... but next time you want to come to one of my parties, it'll be a much harder sum". "Yes", chortled the rabbit, "much *much* harder".

Alice looked exasperated. "I can see I'm going to have to teach you lot a thing or two about tests she sighed. "A good test", she began smugly, "should not only, as I've tried to explain, be **valid** and **feasible** it should be **reliable**". "Oooh! aint *she* a clever-clogs ... swallowed a diction'ry 'ave we?" mocked the rabbit (little did he know that Alice had a Sheffield masters degree in education). Alice gave him one of her withering looks and carried on "A reliable test will *always* give a constant score from one occasion to the next for the same individual irrespective of who marks it". "If, sometimes, I could do your test in my head and pass easily, but another time it might be so complicated that I needed a pencil and paper to do it and would almost certainly fail, it would be ...". "Unreliable?" quizzed the hatter. "Quite" said Alice.

Despite his new-found insight, all these dimly-grasped arguments were becoming wearisome the hatter, and he sat down deliberately, removed his hat and wiped his brow with his red spotty handkerchief, clearly exasperated. "Right" he said, "right ... this time I've got it!" Once again he scribbled out a test and tossed the blackboard to Alice. She deftly caught the board and turned it the right way up. Her eyes grew as big as saucers. On the blackboard was *yet* another sum (2379x63).

By now it was a quarter past three. Alice was sorely in need of some refreshment, and her good intentions to impart educational principles were beginning to wane; not helped

by the smell of freshly brewed tea and the sight of jam tarts and scones. "Oh very well, I'll do it, though I don't much care for your tests" she said petulantly, and sat down with the blackboard. Here's what she wrote

$$\begin{array}{r} 2379 \\ 63 \\ \hline 7137 \\ 142740 \\ \hline 149877 \end{array}$$

She passed the blackboard back to the Hatter. The white rabbit looked over his shoulder and they looked at each other theatrically first snickering rudely at what Alice had written and then guffawing aloud before announcing mockingly "You got 60% .. the passmark's 65%". The queen was laughing so much she fell backwards from her chair, causing the dormouse to wake with a start. The rabbit farted loudly.

Alice was getting cross, not to mention hungry, and reached across nonchalantly for a tart. The hatter slapped her hand away and she recoiled. "No test .. no tarts" quipped the dormouse during his brief, uncharacteristic period of consciousness.

But *why* have I failed asked Alice, genuinely puzzled. "Ah, said the hatter from behind a smug expression, that's for *us* to know". "Yes" chided the rabbit "all you needs t' know is that you sh'll 'ave to take the test agin". "But how does that help me learn?" said Alice quizzically shrugging her shoulders. "You've given me a **summative** test ... which is fair enough - I get a grade, and to know whether I've passed or failed - but If I don't know where I went wrong, how will I be able to put things right?". Then somewhat petulantly she added "You'd be better giving me some **formative** tests, tests that *help me learn* by challenging me and then giving me **feedback** on what I did well and where I might improve!". "Tests is tests" said the educationally backward rabbit, "they aint f' your benefit. they're f'r ours!".

"Oh I see said Alice sarcastically, if I forget about learning my table etiquette, or conversation, and simply go away for a year and learn my sums I can pass the test that allows me to join your silly party club. "Yep" said the rabbit "that's how it's always been". But that's absurd, said Alice, if you set a valid test on table manners and conversation skills that would encourage people to learn about *those* skills in order to pass your test and that would surely improve the quality of your parties. The hatter and the rabbit simply shrugged, unwilling, or more likely unable, to appreciate her point.

By now, although thoroughly disillusioned with the testing, Alice was getting hungry and the jam tarts looked so very delicious. She swallowed her pride for on last time and exclaimed ... "right, I'm willing to do your test one last time"

Again, the hatter passed the blackboard, Alice payed closer attention this time, did the sum and passed the blackboard back to the Hatter. The hatter looked solemnly over his half-rims "You got 70% .. the passmark's 80%". But this is ludicrous said Alice Stamping haughtily ... I thought the passmark was 65%! The hatter beckoned over his psychiatrist associate. "Tell the child" he said gravely.

"I'm afraid Alice", said the shrink,"that the test is **norm-referenced** the hatter and his cronies shift the passmark so that a pre-determined proportion of candidates pass or fail. "So even though I did *better* this time than last I still fail?" quizzed Alice. "I'm afraid that's true" said the psychiatrist solemnly. "But why don't they operate a system where if I can prove I know what they expect me to know I can pass the test?" retorted Alice, her tummy rumbling incessantly by now.