

## Controversy Surrounding Modern Validity Theory

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### Overview

We can probably all agree that validity is absolutely central to educational assessment. But can we also all agree on what we mean by validity? Perhaps not! The earliest definition decreed that a test is valid if it measures what it purports to measure. Yet, for well over half a century, validity theorists have dismissed this definition, arguing that a single test can have multiple validities, depending on the characteristics of those being assessed, the context within which they are being assessed, and the use to which results are put. According to modern validity theory, it is not 'the test' that is valid, but an 'inference from' or an 'interpretation of' test results. Since any inference or interpretation will invoke the construct supposedly measured by the test, all validity is essentially 'construct validity' nowadays.

Since the turn of the century, however, modern validity theory has come in for sustained attack. The classic 'purports to measure' definition has been resurrected, the centrality of 'construct validity' has been challenged, the boundaries of the concept of validity have been hotly disputed (especially in relation to consequences) and many have criticised the modern conception for being of little use to practitioners. Cracks are even beginning to emerge *within* the mainstream position. For instance, the writings of modern validity theorists are so diverse as to render it entirely unclear whether validity is supposed to be a property of inferences drawn from results, of inferences drawn from validation evidence, of inferences within validity arguments, of interpretations, of uses, of arguments, of explanations, of judgements, of hypotheses and so on.

Toward the end of the last century there was much talk of a general 'consensus' over the meaning of validity. The presentation will explore the growing controversy surrounding modern validity theory and implications for everyday validation practice.

### Biography

Paul is the Director of the Cambridge Assessment Network division, with responsibility for running conferences, seminars and professional development courses in educational assessment. He has spent most of his professional life within English assessment agencies – including the Associated Examining Board, the National Foundation for Educational Research, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and the Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator – where his work has focused on issues related to the design and evaluation of large-scale educational assessment systems (GCSEs, A levels, national curriculum tests, diplomas, etc.). Paul serves on the Editorial Board of *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice* and is a Fellow of the Association for Educational Assessment – Europe. He has published on a range of assessment topics, including: comparability theory; the defensibility of England's national curriculum assessment systems; systems for appealing against results; assessment purposes; the public understanding of measurement inaccuracy; and validity.