



Classroom Assessment: Getting the Right Balance

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the three approaches of assessment with a view to deciding which approach should be employed in classroom assessment and why. It provided an in-depth comparison of the three different approaches of classroom assessment which are assessment *of* learning, assessment *for* learning and assessment *as* learning. While assessment of learning provides certification and placement for students and report to parents, schools and the public through assessment of student performance in the form of assignments, tests, and examinations taken by students at the end of unit of study, term, semester, or year; assessment for learning and assessment as learning happen during the teaching and learning process, and focus on the ways teachers and learners can best understand the instructional objectives through collaborative learning activities that enhance peer- and self-assessment and making obvious to the students what they are to learn, what is expected of them, and how to improve on their work. It was concluded that all the three approaches of assessment contribute to student learning in different ways and therefore an appropriate blend of the three approaches should be employed since no one assessment approach is sufficient. It was recommended, amongst others, that all the three approaches of classroom assessment should be used together in an appropriate mix, and teachers must be trained and retrained on the effective use of the various forms of assessment.

Keywords: Classroom assessment, assessment of learning, assessment for learning, assessment as learning, learning outcome, feedback, peer-assessment, self-assessment.

INTRODUCTION

Assessment is the systematic process of documenting and using empirical data on the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs to refine programmes and improve student learning (Kuh, Jankowski, Ikenberry, & Kenzie, 2014). It is a systematic process of gathering information about what a student knows, is able to do, and is learning to do. Assessment information provides the foundation for decision-making and planning for instruction and learning. Assessment is an integral part of instruction that enhances, empowers, and celebrates student learning. Using a variety of assessment techniques, teachers gather information about what students know and are able to do, and provide positive, supportive feedback to students. They also use this information to diagnose individual needs and to improve their instructional programmes, which in turn helps students learn more effectively. Unfortunately, one of the major challenges teachers have in the classroom is the assessment of student learning. Yet it is assessment that gives meaning to learning. If there is no assessment, it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to know whether or not students have learnt the skills taught by the teacher. Students' grades from assessment provide evidence of the extent to which a learner has mastered the learning objectives.

Assessment must be considered during the planning stage of instruction when learning outcomes and teaching methods are being targeted. It is expected to be a continuous activity, not something to be dealt with only at the end of a unit of study. Assessment may occur at the beginning of a unit of study, during the study, at the end of a unit of study, or whenever information about teaching and learning is useful. Assessment is used to find out what students know and can do; identify students' strengths and plan

instructions which build on and extend the strengths; identify students' difficulties and plan instructions to meet the difficulties; monitor student learning and provide feedback to students and parents; motivate students and provide incentives to study; and determine the knowledge, skills, and attitudes students have developed over a period of time.

Students should be made aware of the expected outcomes of the courses they are taking and the approaches to be used in assessing their performance relative to the learning outcomes. Different approaches to classroom assessment exist, three of which are Assessment of Learning (AoL), Assessment for Learning (AfL), and Assessment as Learning (AaL). Although assessment of learning has preoccupied the teaching profession for many years, there is, in recent times, strong inclination towards assessment for learning and assessment as learning. According to Marzano (2000) educational researchers have been critical of the traditional assessment (Assessment of Learning) practices for quite some time now. Marzano (2000) contended that scores and grades from assessment of learning are highly suspect as different teachers have scored/graded the same tests or assignments differently. Thus researchers (Wiliam, 2012; Kezar, 2011) have suggested the need for innovations.

While change is a constant feature of time and existence, care must be exercised to avoid innovation in the wrong direction. Therefore, this work x-rays assessment of learning, and the suggested innovations (assessment for learning, and assessment as learning) to enable practitioners understand them, recognize the inevitable contradictions and similarities among them, and know which one to use (when, why, and how) and which way the innovation shall be directed.

Statement of the Problem

Assessment is an integral part of learning: guiding the teaching-learning process and stimulating further learning. Classroom assessment is a complex task that means something different for different persons, audiences and situations. Assessment has many purposes (as a result of different forms of assessment) that at one time support one another, and at other times conflict with or compete with one another (Earl, 2006). Three different approaches to classroom assessment which are Assessment of Learning (AoL), Assessment for Learning (AfL), and Assessment as Learning (AaL) compete with each other. There are suggestions that classroom assessment moves away from the traditional approach (assessment of learning) to assessment for learning and assessment as learning which the researchers claimed are student-centred (Carless, 2015; Wiliam, 2012; Kezar, 2011).

This paper discusses the three different approaches to classroom assessment (assessment of learning, assessment for learning, and assessment as learning) with a view to creating adequate understanding of all them, recognition of the inevitable contradictions and similarities among them, and knowing which one to use (when, why, and how). Further, discussing all three approaches will solve the riddle of moving or not moving away from assessment of learning (the traditional approach to assessment) which has sustained education for quite a long while. Furthermore, adequate knowledge and understanding of the three approaches of assessment will enable teachers and other practitioners employ the right mix classroom assessment.

Purpose of the Paper

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the various approaches to classroom assessment with a view to enabling teachers and other practitioners employ the most suitable or the right mix of assessment approaches in the classroom. Specifically, the paper defined the three approaches of classroom assessment, discussed their advantages and disadvantages, and suggested the way forward.

Classroom Assessment Approaches

Assessment of Learning

Assessment of Learning (AoL) refers to strategies designed to confirm what students know, demonstrate whether or not they have met curriculum outcomes or the goals of their individualised programmes, or to certify proficiency and make decisions about students' future programme or placements (Earl & Katz, 2005). Assessment of Learning has been the most prevailing assessment in schools for many decades. It is the traditional assessment method and has served the purpose of man for as long as anyone can imagine. Its purpose is to certify learning and report to all stakeholders the progress of learners in school,

usually by indicating learners' relative position compared to others. Assessment of learning in the classrooms is typically done at the end of a unit, course, grade, programme, term, or semester, and takes the form of tests or examinations that include questions drawn from the material studied during that time (Earl, 2006).

The history of assessment of learning is as old as education. Assessment of learning, which is summative in nature, has been accepted as a norm in the school system by students, parents, teachers, educators, and other stakeholders. Assessment of learning enables the teacher to achieve the following:

- (a) Determination of the extent of achievement of learning objectives by learners.
- (b) Determination of learners' strengths and weaknesses.
- (c) Measurement of effectiveness of instructions.
- (d) Motivation of learners to study.
- (e) Selection, certification, and placement of learners.
- (f) Provision of feedback to learners, teachers, parents and other stakeholders.

As a summative assessment, designed to provide evidence of achievement of learning objectives to parents, students themselves, and sometimes to outside groups (employers, other educational institutions, and many more), it is very pertinent that classroom assessment ensures that scores, grades and reports of students are fair and accurate. Unfortunately though, studies have declared that scores, grades and reports from assessment of learning have been contentious (Florez & Sammons, 2013; Bevitt, 2015) which points to the need to move away from, or supplement assessment of learning in the classroom. They further agreed that assessment of learning is teacher-centred when it is expected that assessment, and all other teaching-learning processes should be student-centred. Studies have suggested that classroom assessment moves away from the traditional approach to assessment for learning, and assessment as learning which the researchers claimed are student-centred (Carless, 2015; Kezar, 2011).

Complete move from summative assessment to formative assessment will be counter-productive. What should be advocated is that assessment of learning (summative assessment) procedures should be in harmony with the procedures of other forms of formative assessment (assessment for learning and assessment as learning) and that they are transparent, with judgments supported by evidence so that all involved can have trust in the results. In other words, assessment of learning should be used along with assessment for learning and assessment as learning - the appropriate mix should be determined by the teacher, the effective teacher.

Assessment for Learning

According to Earl (2006), assessment for learning offers an alternative perspective to traditional assessment in schools. This implies an inclination towards assessment for learning away from assessment of learning. Assessment for learning is the process of seeking and interpreting for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go, and how to get there. In assessment for learning, emphasis shifts from summative to formative assessment. Assessment for learning happens during the teaching and learning process, often more than once, rather than at the end of a unit, course, grade, programme, term, or semester, and takes the form of student-teacher interaction through questioning, role playing, aligning instructions, identifying students' learning needs, selecting and adapting learning materials, and many more. Assessment for learning makes obvious to the students what they are to learn, what is expected of them, and advice on how to improve on their work.

The teacher uses several strategies to accomplish assessment for learning which include strategic questioning, effective teacher feedback, peer feedback, and student self-assessment (UK, 2007). Strategic questioning provides teachers with the opportunity to identify and correct misunderstandings and gaps in knowledge, while effective teacher feedback focuses on established success criteria and tells the students what they have achieved, where they need to improve, and specific suggestions about how the improvement might be accomplished. Peer feedback is similar to teacher feedback, except that in peer feedback, the feedback occurs when students assess each other's work and provide advice on what

has been done well in relation to the success criteria; what still needs to be done to improve; and how to achieve the needed improvement. In student self-assessment, the focus is on the ability of students to understand both learning intentions and success criteria; use the criteria to judge what they have learnt and what they still need to learn; and set learning targets based on what they still need to learn.

The beautiful attributes of assessment for learning notwithstanding, this assessment approach is incapable of providing selection, certification, and placement of learners. It cannot also make feedbacks available to parents, other institutions of learning, employers of labour, and other stakeholders. Thus, while assessment for learning provides teachers and students with the opportunity to identify and correct misunderstandings and gaps in knowledge in the course of study, it needs the support of assessment of learning to provide certification of learners and feedback to parents and other stakeholders. In other words, there should be synergy between assessment for learning and assessment of learning.

Assessment as Learning

Assessment as learning is the use of ongoing self-assessment by students in order to monitor their own learning, which is characterised by students reflecting on their own learning and making adjustments to enable them achieve deeper understanding of what is being learnt (Rowe, 2006a). With the advent of technology, self-learning, self-assessment, self-monitoring, self-scoring, and even self-grading have become an integral part of education. Rowe (2006a) suggested that an understanding of assessment as learning is essential in this digital age where information is readily accessible to students, and where teachers are no longer knowledge-bearers but knowledge-guides. This implies that as teachers guide students through the acquisition of knowledge in “assessment of learning” and “assessment for learning”, teachers must, in “assessment as learning”, guide students through the process of understanding their own cognitive processes so that students will be able to monitor their own learning and make adjustments.

In assessment as learning, formative assessment, which is the main focus of assessment for learning, is reinforced by emphasising the role of students in learning: the student is not only a contributor to the assessment and learning process, but is also a critical connector between them. Assessment as learning makes the student an active link between assessment and learning, a critical assessor who can make sense of obtained information, relate same to prior knowledge, and master the skills involved. This is the regulatory process in metacognition. Through metacognition, students are able to learn about themselves as learners and become aware of how they learn – knowledge of one’s own thought processes. Students reflect on their work on a regular basis, usually through self and peer assessment (with the guidance of the teacher), and decide what their next learning will be. Students personally monitor what they are learning and use the feedback from this monitoring to make adjustments, adaptations, and even major changes in what they understand (Earl, 2006).

Assessment as learning ensures that the students are their own best assessors. The teacher in promoting the development of independent learners through assessment as learning must achieve the following:

- (a) Guide students in setting their own goals, and monitoring their progress toward them.
- (b) Provide models of good practice and quality work that reflect curriculum outcomes.
- (c) Work with students to develop clear criteria of good practice.
- (d) Guide students in developing internal feedback or self-monitoring mechanisms to validate and question their own thinking, and to become comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty that is inevitable in learning anything new.
- (e) Provide regular and challenging opportunities to practise, so that students can become confident, competent self-assessors.

Like assessment for learning, assessment as learning cannot provide selection, certification, and placement of learners. It cannot also make feedbacks available to parents, other institutions of learning, employers of labour, and other stakeholders. Again, what is needed is synergy amongst assessment as learning, assessment for learning, and assessment of learning.

The Way Forward

The primary purpose of assessment is to improve students' learning and teachers' teaching as both respond to the information assessment provides. Assessment makes it possible for students and teachers to appreciate the information gained in the teaching and learning process to enable them take the next step. Through assessment, parents, schools, and other stakeholders are informed about the progress of students and teachers, and areas of attention. Classroom assessment is one of the most important tools teachers use to understand the progress and needs of their students. When classroom assessment is used properly, it shapes learning, gives the teacher valuable insights about students' strengths and weaknesses, motivates students, makes bare the level of students' mastery of learning objectives, points to flaws in instructional delivery, and indicates areas that need review.

As discussed earlier, assessment of learning (otherwise known as summative assessment) is the summary of assessment of student performance in the form of assignments, tests, and examinations taken by students and graded by teachers at the end of unit of study, term, semester, or year. The goal of assessment of learning is to evaluate student learning at the end of an instructional unit by comparing it against a standard or benchmark. The scores and grades from such assessment are used for promotion, certification, placement, and admission to higher levels of education. Assessment of learning (summative assessment) has been part of the education system for a very long time. However, later forms of assessment, assessment for learning and assessment as learning (also called formative assessment) draw on information gathered during the teaching and learning process to provide teachers and students with the opportunity to identify and correct misunderstandings and gaps in knowledge in the course of study. Assessment for learning and assessment as learning also involve assessment processes through self- and peer-assessment. These later forms of assessment are being suggested as replacements for assessment of learning which has given meaning and sustenance to learning for several decades. Rather than replace assessment of learning with assessment for, and as learning, the appropriate thing to do is complement assessment of learning with assessment for, and as learning.

CONCLUSION

Assessment of learning has a long history in education. It has been widely accepted by parents, schools and other stakeholders. It has served the education system and man so well in the areas of evaluation of students' learning, motivation, certification, placement, promotion, and references to other institutions. It has served education long and well. No human endeavour is perfect - what is desirable is ensuring that human errors are reduced to the barest minimum. Thus if assessment of learning has errors in scoring and grading, what should be done is not "throw the child away with the bathwater", but make efforts to reduce the errors to the barest minimum, thereby making assessment of learning more effective and efficient.

Assessment for learning is a vital component of effective teaching as teachers and learners cannot avoid giving and getting feedback from any learning activity. Assessment for learning happens during the teaching and learning process, and focuses on the ways teachers and learners can best understand the instructional objectives. It involves practices that maximise the value of the feedback process to ensure that learning is optimised; collaborative learning activities that enhance peer- and self-assessment; and making obvious to the students what they are to learn, what is expected of them, and how to improve on their work. Unfortunately, this assessment approach is incapable of providing selection, certification, and placement of learners; and unable to make feedbacks available to parents, other institutions of learning, employers of labour, and other stakeholders.

Assessment as learning makes the student an active link between assessment and learning, a critical assessor who can make sense of obtained information, relate same to prior knowledge, and master the skills involved which is the regulatory process in metacognition. This implies that the student is not only a contributor to the assessment and learning process, but is also a critical connector between them. What the teacher does is to guide students through the process of understanding their own cognitive processes so that students will be able to monitor their own learning and make adjustments. This makes the teaching and learning process very pleasurable with the student at the centre of the process. However, like assessment for learning, assessment as learning cannot provide selection, certification, and placement

of learners. It cannot also make feedbacks available to parents, other institutions of learning, employers of labour, and other stakeholders.

From the foregoing, it is obvious that all the three approaches of assessment contribute to student learning but in different ways. Thus, no one assessment approach is sufficient. Therefore, what is needed is an appropriate blend of the three approaches. What is “appropriate” here is a function of unit of study, level of class, and purpose of instruction. Deciding the appropriate mix or the right balance is the duty of the “effective teacher”. The effective teacher is one who is adequately equipped to perform the complex task of teaching which includes meeting students’ expectations through the mastery of teaching content, building positive relationships with students, monitoring students’ progress and providing feedback, using effective communication, employing proper course organization and planning, stimulating the classroom environment, acknowledging students’ individual differences, and using a variety of pedagogies to mitigate such individual differences. Such variety of pedagogies include the right balance of classroom assessment approaches that guarantee effective teaching and learning processes with attendant high student outcome.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. All the three approaches of assessment should be used together. While assessment for learning and assessment as learning are used to facilitate and enrich the teaching and learning function, assessment of learning is needed to provide certification, placement, promotion to students and report to the parent, school and public.
2. Teachers must be trained and retrained on the appropriate use of the various forms of assessment. This will lead to producing effective teachers who will have the capacity to put the various forms of assessment to effective use.
3. Students should be involved in determining the criteria that will be used for assessing their work. This can be part of the planning process at the beginning of each unit. Students should have a clear understanding of the types of assessment procedures that will be used throughout the unit. This way their participation will be optimum.

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