Reflective Essay on Assessment

Kerwin Anthony Livingstone, PhD
Independent Researcher, Guyana
Email: profesordelenguasmodernas@yahoo.es

The goal of education is learning, and the vehicle used to accomplish this goal is teaching. In the learning-teaching process, the fundamental component which determines the degree of learner outcomes' achievement is assessment. Assessment has the express objective of determining whether or not learners have learned what they are supposed to learn. This reflective essay on assessment looks at assessment and what it is, what assessment should not be, how to constructively align assessment to learning outcomes, and valid assessment practices, among others. It is based on my personal experiences in the learning-teaching arena, from the secondary institution system to the tertiary institution system, and how my assessment practices have been transformed since having completed the Postgraduate Certificate in Tertiary Teaching. It is underscored that since assessment should send the right messages to learners, it should be done carefully in order to give an accurate picture of student learning.

Keywords: assessment, learning and teaching, learning, teaching, learner(s).

INTRODUCTION

The core business of an educational institution is learning and teaching. The principal objective of education is learning, and the means used to fulfil this aim is teaching. In learning and teaching, the core curricular component which determines whether or not learner outcomes have been achieved is assessment. The chief goal of assessment is to verify whether or not learners have learned what they are supposed to learn. In other words, teaching has to be assessed to determine the degree of learning, and whether or not learning has taken place.

Assessment is defined as “a process of collecting information about something that we are interested in, according to procedures that are systematic and substantially grounded” (Bachman, 2004: 6-7). This means that information about a specific issue has to be collected, and that certain processes must ensure that that information is obtained correctly. In the context of education, this “something” or “specific issue” in which education researchers and practitioners are interested is learner achievement. Assessment informs learner achievement; consequently, assessing student learning outcomes are critical to determining learner achievement. According to Huhta (2008), assessment uses all kinds of teaching strategies and techniques to make judgements about learning. These declarations seem to suggest that assessment practices should provide teachers with information that they could use to decide whether or not learning outcomes are on the way to being achieved, or if they have been reached.

Bearing in mind the afore-mentioned, this reflective essay on assessment looks at facts and issues in assessment – aligning learning and teaching; the value of constructive alignment; valid, constructively aligned assessment practices. It is largely based on my personal reflection and experiences of assessment and assessment practices, from the secondary to the tertiary institution systems, and the transformation of my assessment practices which began to take place during (and after) my graduate studies in Tertiary Teaching. It is underscored that since assessment should send the right messages to learners, it should be done carefully in order to give an accurate picture of student learning.

FACTS AND ISSUES IN ASSESSMENT

In learning and teaching, one of the most crucial aspects of the educative process is assessing student learning. Biggs and Tang (2011) establish that “Assessment is the senior partner in the instructional process. Get it wrong, and everything else collapses” (p. 196). As established by
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Figure 1: Aligning ILOs with LTAs and ATs in Constructive Alignment
[Adapted from Higher Education Academy, 2011]

Figure 2: Schematic of an Aligned and Unaligned Course
[Adapted from Brabrand, 2008]

the quotation, assessment is the most important aspect of learning and teaching, since it ensures that judgments are made about student learning. In other words, it reveals how well the students have learned what they were supposed to. Assessing students is the only way to validate if learning outcomes have been achieved. The following figures, Figure 1 and Figure 2 above, depict the importance of assessment in learning and teaching.

Aligning Learning and Teaching

As can be observed in Figure 1, there is alignment among intended learning outcomes (ILOs), learning-teaching activities (LTAs), and assessment tasks (ATs). What is of critical importance is that LTAs and ATs are to be designed in such a way that they ensure the achievement of ILOs. In Figure 2, the result of designing an aligned course, as well as an unaligned course, can be clearly seen. In Figure 2(a), there is a mismatch, in that the teacher’s intention is not aligned to student activity or to assessment. Such a situation makes learning counterproductive. In Figure 2(b), the teacher’s intention is clearly reflected in student activity and in assessment. This is considered to be a careful design of learning and teaching, the objective of which is to engender significant learning experiences for learners.

The Value of Constructive Alignment

Aligning learning and teaching can be done through constructive alignment (CA) which is vital to sound educational practices and experiences. The value of CA in learning and teaching is priceless. CA is all about ensuring that there is harmony in the way students are expected to learn course content. This is not to be done haphazardly, but should be thoughtfully planned and crafted with the students in mind. The principal objective is to make learning student-centred, which is in sharp contrast to the traditional teaching approach. Shuell (1986) reveals that “It is helpful to remember that what the student does is actually more important in determining what is learned, than what the teacher does” (p. 429). In essence, students are encouraged to be the protagonists of their own learning. They are the ones who are responsible for taking control of their own learning during task execution. They are expected to use high cognitive skills to realise tasks, stimulating higher order thinking and a deep approach to learning.

Valid, Constructively Aligned Assessment Practices

Ally (2004) reveals that “Learners must be tested to determine whether or not they have achieved the learning
outcome. Online testing or other forms of testing and assessment should be integrated into the learning sequence to check the learner’s achievement level and to provide appropriate feedback” (p. 8). Assessing students is never an easy task. It is a process that must be carefully and thoughtfully done, so that the emphasis is on improving student learning outcomes. As challenging and valid assessment practices, I regard the following:

1. Aligning appropriate, valid and reliable learning evaluation methods to all course ILOs.
2. Developing and fine-tuning fair, appropriate and comprehensive learning evaluation tools.
3. Designing and specifying learning evaluation methods that foster deeper comprehension of concepts.
4. Preparing learning evaluation methods that promote experiential and deep learning, and that are adapted to student learning diversity.
5. Putting aside time and required resources to employ new learning evaluation methods.
6. Creating clear, fair and transparent grading criteria/rubrics that assess students holistically.

These kinds of assessment practices require teachers to have an in-depth knowledge of assessment and evaluation, and the tools to effect quality assessments. This kind of assessment follows constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2011) where students must negotiate meaning and construct knowledge. Students’ cognitive, psychomotor and affective skills may be evaluated. It is necessary to evaluate students at their levels of understanding. If the course ILOs state that students remember essential facts, then the assessment task must assess their recollection skills. By way of another example, if the lesson’s ILOs mandate that students skilfully execute a surgical procedure, then the assessment task ought to evaluate such a skill. It therefore follows that a good knowledge of the various levels of learning will ensure that assessment tasks are closely aligned to the various levels of learning and understanding contained in the ILOs.

PERSONAL REFLECTION ON ASSESSMENT AND ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

Personal Experiences as a Secondary School Student

When I was a secondary school student, my courses were assessed following the cumulative frequency curve model which only served to separate the bright students/fast learners from the dull ones/slow learners. I was only assessed to demonstrate the mastery of certain skills. I have to admit that I crammed a lot, because I wanted to remember all of the important facts. I wanted to ensure that I would regurgitate all that the teacher had given me, so that I would pass my tests with flying colours. I was like a sponge that sucked in everything, and let it out back copiously. This was the practice in vogue at the time, given that the traditional approach to learning and teaching was 

Personal Experiences as a University Graduate Teacher

Now, as a tertiary teacher, I found myself doing the very same thing. I merely followed the traditional approach, since that was the only way my teachers knew how to assess. And, as such, assessment only encouraged a surface approach to learning and a desire to achieve comparative scores and grades. There were no grading criteria, so I did not know on what I was being assessed.

Concerning secondary education, the Caribbean Region instituted a regional exam for all Caribbean students. The exam is known as the Caribbean Examination Council (CXC) Exams. The CXC established itself in 1972. The first set of exams was held in 1979, assessing both academic and technical/vocational subjects. In 1998, the CXC introduced the Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Exams (CAPE), which was the portal of entry into regional and extra regional Universities. I am a product of it. I can attest to the fact that this exam is only concerned with numbers, with grades, with results, with outcomes. If deep learning takes place, it is fleeting. This is still current practice, for the most part, even in these enlightened times.

Personal Experiences as a University Student

The situation at the University of Guyana, where I did my undergraduate degree, remains the same. Learning and teaching is still steeped in the traditional approach and has not changed much. As a student there, it was all about the grades, the results, the outcomes. Tertiary education distinguished the exceptionally bright from the exceptionally dull student. My tertiary schooling adhered to traditional assessment practices, as this was widely embraced. Once again, there were no grading criteria for assessments, so I did not know on what I was being assessed. It is still done this way, for the most part. Even though the traditional approach has been effective for centuries, and even though it may engage learners, it does not lend itself to student learning diversity. What is required of academic/teaching staff is to engage in reflective practice and find new ways of making learning and teaching effective.
I can vividly recall that for one of my Spanish Translation courses, I had given my 12 students a specialised text to translate from English to Spanish. Even though the instructions were very clear, the student did not translate the text as expected. I just got upset and marked X on the script when I was marking it. I knew that what I had done was a bit harsh. I did not tell the student what she was supposed to do. I did not even ask her if she understood the instructions. I naturally assumed that she did, because she was a final year Spanish major student. Further, no grading criteria were given for the translation task. Now more than ever, I know that that was not the right way to do it, since it did not help her in any way, whatsoever. What I should have done, as I now know, was to give her a more specific, positive, and constructive feedback which would have allowed her to take corrective action towards improving her work.

Some of the limitations of my previous assessment approaches were that (1) surface learning was encouraged; (2) students were assessed analytically; (3) the emphasis was on declarative knowledge, when it should be on functioning knowledge; (4) assessments were not valid and reliable. Reflecting on this information, it is necessary to highlight that assessment approaches ought to encourage deep thinking in learners and prepare them for the world challenges with which they will be confronted, upon leaving the institution. While assessing for declarative knowledge is important, since theory does have its place in learning and teaching, students should be assessed for functioning knowledge, because it is all about what they need to do. In the real world, they will have to know and do.

**Personal Experiences as a Graduate Student in Foreign Languages**

Being a graduate student in Foreign Languages helped to alter even further my perspectives on learning, teaching and assessment. Before beginning the programme, I thought that teaching was ‘one-size-fits-all’. During that academic programme, I grew to realise that the ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach was out-dated and did not attend to learner needs and interests. I understood, then, that assessments can either make or break students and, as such, assessment practices should be as diverse as possible in order to embrace and support student learning diversity. In other words, since learners and learners’ styles of learning are diverse, the kinds of assessment tasks prepared by teachers should also account for this learning diversity.

I must admit that after having completed my Master’s Degree in Second and Foreign Language Pedagogy, I began making valiant steps towards encouraging a learner-driven approach to learning and teaching. I saw some successes; however, I knew that more had to be done. Kim and Bonk (2006) admit that “Regardless of the delivery mode of the learning materials, the first step in assessment design and selection is clarification of the purpose of the assessment” (p. 28). And this is the question that I keep asking myself. Why do I assess learners? Once I am aware of the purposes of assessment, then I should move in the direction of preparing quality assessments for my students. This is the only way forward.

**Personal Experiences as a Graduate Student in Tertiary Teaching**

My views about learning, teaching and assessment have been significantly altered since I began the Postgraduate Certificate in Tertiary Teaching (PGCTT). Learning and teaching has been an age-old practice. Throughout the years, these phenomena have evolved in different ways, benefitting some students and forsaking others. In the olden days, the teacher was the sage of the classroom who directed the show from start to finish. For too long, teaching and learning were teacher-centred, with no real concern for what the student was expected to do. The student was either bright or not. And whether the student was bright or not determined if the student succeeded or not. This kind of scenario was counter-productive and only ensured that students used low cognitive skills to complete tasks, thus resulting in a surface approach to learning.

As a tertiary teacher, I found the PGCTT, offered by the University of the South Pacific, Fiji Islands, to be of great benefit to me as I sought to transform my teaching for the betterment of the students with whom I come into contact. With ED 401 (Learning and Teaching in Higher Education), I have been able to see the great value derived from constructively aligning my teaching in order to enhance learning that matters, learning that emphasises creativity, application and life-long learning. I do realise the need to upgrade my teaching methods so that all students can learn, which is indicative of CA.

The learning and teaching approaches in the PGCTT were very refreshing. It was a novel experience for me, doing a course that was fully online. It was the very first time that I had to submit reflective writings, actually requiring me to design lesson plans. It was the first time that I ever had to do micro-teaching. It was the first time that I had to take part in asynchronous discussion forums, submit assignments on Moodle, prepare reflective writings and essays, and interact with such a large class, asynchronously. I was engaged in independent and collaborative learning, which is what good teaching is all about. These are the kinds of assessment practices I have tried to adapt in my pedagogical practices. Of extreme importance was the fact that grading rubrics and criteria were provided for all assessment tasks. I, as a learner, knew from the onset how I was being assessed. I knew exactly what I had to do if I hoped to achieve a particular grade. This is what is (still) absent in many educational institutions today. Learners are assessed and often times they do not know how they are being assessed. They are
handed a mark or grade, without any proper explanation as to how that grade was obtained. Learners need to be provided with grading criteria, especially when preparing assessment tasks for learners, in order to promote transparency. When learners know how they are being assessed, the likelihood of their tailoring their responses to suit the criteria would be high. Such practice should be encouraged in educational institutions.

Concerning Information and Communication Technology, none can ignore the fact that the world has embraced (the use of) technology and technology resources in everyday life, including in the world of work. I am computer and technology savvy. While I do not know everything about computer and technology, I am a quick learner, and I am open to learning, exploring and using new learning technologies, simply because I am passionate about it. My passion for technology was heightened while I was doing my Master’s Degree in Education (Educational Technology) in Fiji. I was introduced to many kinds of technology resources that are readily available to users. This is a fascinating field that has since captivated me, and I see myself exploring more of technology-enhanced learning. It is the way forward. The fact cannot be denied that the world in which we live has transformed itself into a technology-driven world. Since this is the case, teachers should do everything in their power to ensure that they, or their students, are not left behind.

ED 402 (Curriculum Design and Development) opened up my eyes about the curriculum. Curriculum planning, design and development - fundamentally shaped by the framework in which it is placed - is a constant process, always in search of significance to the learning environment. The curriculum, determined by the changing goals of life and community, is a strategic plan of action in which educational goals are mirrored and implemented. Consequently, education objectives are also susceptible to reform and dynamism. This curricular process promotes creativity, application and life-long learning through learning and teaching goals and objectives, learning experiences, instructional practices and resources and assessments. It verbalises the roles of students and teachers, throughout the pedagogical process, ensuring that they experience “learning that matters” (Lunenburg & Hryb 2006, p. 86). I have highlighted the term ‘assessments’, as it is one of the single most important components of a curriculum. The two are like Siamese twins: inseparable. In essence, the curriculum must be constructively aligned, if students are expected to have significant educational experiences. Having done the PGCTT, I am now more informed about learning and teaching and curriculum. I am now in a position to transform my pedagogy for the benefit of my students.

I have grown to realise that I have to make my assessments authentic. To this end, I have to follow the criterion-referenced assessment which encourages holistic assessment practices. What I need to do, with my knowledge of constructive alignment, is to ensure that my assessments are aligned to my learning outcomes. Once these are aligned properly, then my learners would be able to have significant educational experiences, causing them to nurture creative, critical and complex cognitive skills beyond the classroom. This is what I sincerely desire for my students, and I am prepared to work towards making this a reality. The way in which I confront these challenges will determine if I embrace quality, or if I acquiesce to mediocrity.

CONCLUSION

This reflective essay has centred its attention on assessment, what assessment is and what it is not, aligning learning, teaching and assessment, constructively aligning assessments to outcomes of learning, and embracing valid assessment practices as the way forward. For the most part, the focus of this reflective essay has been on my personal reflection and experiences, from the secondary to the tertiary education system, and how these experiences have shaped my assessment practices as a teacher. As has been underscored throughout this paper, assessment is a core and vital component of the learning-teaching process. Since assessment should send the right signals to learners, it should be done prudently in order to provide a truthful representation of student learning.

My philosophy of assessment is still evolving. In fact, I still consider it to be a “work in progress”, because effective teachers always find new(er) ways to hone their craft through reflective practice. Even though a teacher, I am still a learner. Being a reflective practitioner has helped me to grow in my love for assessment and assessing learning. More importantly, I have discovered that, by sharing my ‘passion’ for learning, teaching, and assessment, and using various pedagogical principles with enthusiasm and empathy, learners will be impacted profoundly, ultimately connecting them to their ‘passion’ for learning. As I reflect on my beliefs about assessment, my mission as a tertiary teacher is threefold: firstly, to promote positive learning; secondly, to spark learner enthusiasm for learning; and finally, to provide a strong foundation for lifelong learning.

REFERENCES


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Accepted 18 September 2019


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