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Review Article

Rethinking teaching and learning assessments in the 21st century

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Abstract

Assessment plays an essential role in education because it measures the extent of student learning for both assessment of learning and assessment for learning. Assessment is constructed to promote student learning at the subject or broader level. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to rethink assessment for students' learning to make it compatible with online or hybrid learning, which has been on the rise. Therefore, this article aims to discuss the need to rethink assessment in teaching and learning. The article provides insights into the reasons for and types of assessment. It also discusses various issues concerning assessments and different approaches to assessment that educators can apply in their modern teaching and learning, especially in the context of the 21st century. The article concludes by emphasizing the need for rethinking teaching and learning assessment to ensure it can help students develop the necessary knowledge and skills to thrive in and outside the classroom setting.

Keywords: Assessment; teaching and learning assessment; issues of assessment; approaches to assessment

Introduction

The global education system abruptly switched from face-to-face to online and distance learning when the COVID-19 pandemic began to hit the world in early 2020. According to a recent report on the impact of COVID-19 on higher education around the world in 109 countries and two regions of China (Hong Kong and Macao), COVID-19 had considerable impacts on higher education institutions, delaying students'

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enrollment for the new academic year (Marinoni et al., 2020). The report added that COVID-19 also affected teaching and learning, which gave rise to distance and online modes. Therefore, it created many challenges, including access to technical infrastructure, competencies, and pedagogies for distance learning. Furthermore, COVID-19 impacted international students' mobility (89%) and led to the cancellation or postponement of exams (61%) and research conferences (81%). The report also indicated a radical change in terms of teaching methods and learning assessments, which impacted students' learning outcomes (Marinoni et al., 2020).

According to Elkington (2020), the fundamentals of student learning are to pay attention to assessment methods, feedback, self-assessment, and peer assessment. In this sense, transforming assessment can positively impact student learning, satisfaction, and academic confidence. As Ramsden (2003) stated:

> The lecturer who would teach from a conception of assessment as understanding the process and outcome of his or her students' learning was at one time faced with the problem that a view of learning as the passive absorption of quantities of knowledge was implicit in most accepted theories of educational measurement. The theory of learning underlying traditional testing regarded the acquisition of facts, skills and techniques as an additive process, rather like progressively building a wall by adding extra bricks. Competence became defined as the ability to reproduce these facts, skills and techniques. (p. 198)

In contemporary society, self-directed participants are required to plan, monitor, and assess their own learning. Online learning during the COVID-19 crisis is probably the best example for educators to rethink assessment for students' learning because lecturers need to adjust assessment methods to fit hybrid learning. For this reason, Elkington (2020) highlighted three areas to transform assessment: innovative assessment, feedback practices, and self- and peer assessment. Therefore, educational institutions play an essential role in supporting innovative assessment through technologies to enhance assessment practices, improve feedback, and assess management via e-submission and e-feedback.

This article discusses the need to rethink assessment in teaching and learning. It discusses reasons for and types of assessment. It also provides an overview of issues concerning assessments in higher education. The article then sheds light on different approaches to assessment, including examinations for assessment, coursework for assessment, project or fieldwork reports for assessment, and self- and peer assessment for assessment. The article concludes with ideas for rethinking assessment to stimulate

self-directed learning, critical thinking, collaboration, and teamwork, which are the aims of teaching and learning in the 21st century.

What is assessment?

Assessment is like a currency rewarded for students' efforts in studying. It plays a vital role in affecting students' learning and quality (Entwistle et al., 2020). For example, a multiple-choice question may not encourage students to think deeply. In contrast, open-ended questions enhance students' critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity because they require a deep-thinking approach. Lecturers usually pay little attention to the assessment's impact on learning (Entwistle et al., 2020). Students go to school to learn specific skills, knowledge, and attitudes. Therefore, the term 'assessment' is used to measure or obtain information about learners' knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Morris, 1996). This information can be gathered via formal and informal assessments.

According to Entwistle et al. (2020), assessment in education nowadays has various forms, and it is fundamental to the learning process, where it points out what students need to learn and improves the quality of their work and mistakes. In short, the assessment shows us what we need to learn and improve. It indicates the learners' progress and whether they have reached sufficient knowledge and skills to continue to a higher level of learning. Entwistle et al. (2020) added that an assessment often links to a standard of performance certificates such as a degree or a recognition of professional competence, which is useful for a future job. However, quality assurance and control must be in place to ensure fairness and accuracy.

Common terms in assessment

According to Entwistle et al. (2020), when designing assessment procedures, there are two things to consider: validity and reliability. Validity assesses the ability of what has been learned, while reliability indicates the degree of consistency in assessing the student's performance. Two other technical terminologies are essential when discussing assessment. They are norm-referenced and criterion-referenced. Norm-referenced assessment is used to determine students' highest and lowest performance to understand their scores compared to a similar experience or percentage of other students. It is relative to the grades given to the assessed students (Morris, 1996), while a criterion-referenced assessment describes the skills a person can perform based on preselected criteria. The judgment depends on pre-established criteria rather than the comparative performance of peers.

Reasons for assessment

According to Morris (1996), there are six main reasons to do the assessment. First, assessment is used for grading students. This assessment aims to determine and compare levels of students' achievement. Second, assessment is used to select or decide which learners should be admitted to a program, course, institute, or job. Therefore, examination results play an essential role in determining job prospects or academic opportunities in most societies. Third, assessment is used to diagnose the areas where a student has not successfully learned. This assessment helps a teacher determine the difficulties a student is experiencing. This diagnosis assessment aims to provide learning support to the student. Fourth, assessment determines areas of skills or competencies a student has mastered, such as a driving or swimming test. Fifth, assessment is used to guide and help students decide, for example, which subjects to study or which career paths to follow. Finally, assessment is used to predict how a student will achieve in later academic studies or an area of work. For instance, academic or scholastic aptitude tests determine whether a student is ready to learn to read or has an aptitude for mathematics. In short, assessments are used to grade, select, master, guide, predict, and diagnose students (Morris, 1996).

Types of assessment

Grading and selection assessments are typically characterized as summative assessments because they determine if a student passes or fails at the end of a course of study (Morris, 1996). In this sense, summative assessments are often norm-referenced, as their key concern is to compare and rank students' results. On the contrary, mastery, diagnosis, prediction, and guidance assessments are generally considered formative assessments (identify areas of students' strengths and weaknesses) because they are adopted to help improve a student's future performance (Morris, 1996). Therefore, formative assessments are often based on criterion-referencing because their crucial concern is identifying the students' abilities. In this sense, as Sol (2020) stated, to provide students with meaningful feedback, "teachers should be trained to be good classroom observers. They should be able to collect meaningful information about their students' learning and use that information to enhance the learning process and inform their teaching practices simultaneously" (p. 110).

Issues of assessment

Teaching staff and faculty members usually take assessments in higher education seriously; however, the methods used can vary considerably. As Entwistle et al. (2020)

argued, curriculum developers, educators, and policymakers need to contextualize assessment methods or criteria based on the context. Thus, coursework assessments, project work, and final examinations are often introduced to schools or universities to avoid a single form of assessment. Kiyosaki (2001) noted that people with high academic IQs are often not doing well in the real world because educators focus mostly on mental skills and fail to convert mental knowledge into actionable knowledge. Additionally, educators emphasize too much the need to be right, causing the fear of being wrong and prohibiting people from taking action, even though we usually acknowledge that people learn by doing and by making mistakes. However, the school system often penalizes people for making too many mistakes (Kiyosaki, 2001). For this reason, Gibbs (2006b) raised concerns about the rigid standards in higher education. He cautioned that these standards could hinder the adoption of innovative assessments due to potential pushback from external examiners and quality assurance controls. Additionally, changes in assessment might take more time to get approval than changes in any other aspect of a course (Gibbs, 2006b).

There has been a radical change over the last 20 years in the view of what higher education is seen to be for and the shift towards preparing students for employment (Gibbs, 2006b). In contemporary society, employers (the demand side) have indirectly influenced higher education institutions (the supply side) to incorporate new skills into their curricula, such as oral communication, collaboration, and initiative skills (Entwistle et al., 2020). These skills are essential in the workplace but are challenging to implement in traditional assessment procedures, leading to degree classifications. Nevertheless, some institutes or universities have taken various initiatives to provide these skills for students as additional skills (Entwistle et al., 2020). Similarly, Gibbs (2006b) raised new kinds of assessments that need to be designed to assess critical skills, transferable skills, generic skills, or graduate attributes vital for entering the job market rather than appraising only the knowledge acquisition from new learning. In line with this perspective, Kiyosaki (2001) recognized and acknowledged this changing landscape of academic assessment. He stated that:

> The problem is our current educational system recognizes only one genius. If your child's genius is not the genius the system recognizes, our child may learn to feel stupid in school rather than smart. Worst of all, your child's genius may be ignored or may be damaged in the system. I know that many kids are made to feel less smart because they are compared with other kids. Instead of recognizing a child for his or her unique genius, all children are held to one IQ standard. Kids leave school feeling they are not smart. Children who leave school mentally and emotionally believing that they are not as smart as other kids leave school with a tremendous handicap in life. (Kiyosaki, 2001, p. 37)

Through our experience as lecturers, understanding multiple intelligence theory is essential because it allows us to provide students with various learning assessments and classroom activities, for example, project-based learning, problem-based learning, and oral/written exams, to measure students' learning. Gardner (1983, as cited in Kiyosaki, 2001) highlighted multiple intelligences to inform educators that we should not provide a single assessment to measure students' intelligence. Gardner (1983) differentiated multiple intelligences into seven geniuses or types, as follows:

1. *Verbal-linguistic*: This is the genius that our educational system currently uses to measure a person's intelligence quotient. It is a person's ability to read and write words.
2. *Numerical*: This is the genius that deals with data measured in numbers.
3. *Spatial*: This is the genius many creative people—artists and designers—have. An architect would have to be good at all three first geniuses because the profession would require words, numbers, and creative design.
4. *Physical*: This is the genius that many great athletes and dancers are blessed with.
5. *Intrapersonal*: This is the genius often called "emotional intelligence." It's what we say to ourselves, for example, when we are fearful or angry.
6. *Interpersonal*: This is the genius found in people who can talk easily with others. People with this genius are often charismatic communicators, great singers, preachers, politicians, actors, salespeople, and speakers.
7. *Environmental*: This is the genius that emanates from humans to the things around them. There are people who are naturally gifted in dealing with such things as trees, plants, fish, the ocean, animals, and the land. (Gardner, 1983, as cited in Kiyosaki, 2001, pp. 31–32)

According to Gibbs (2006b), another problem related to assessment is that students are often conservative and wary of unfamiliar or potentially more demanding approaches. Students are likely to feel dejected about the assessment methods if the result is unpredictable. They need to pay a fee to retake the exam if they fail or do not obtain a promising degree from the course (Gibbs, 2006b). This unfamiliarity with new assessment methods for students also makes it difficult for lecturers to make innovative assessments, and students may feel dissatisfied when they find significant variations. Gibbs (2006b) further explained that other problems were related to the lecturer's time to correct and give feedback to students. In the present society, students tend to be very strategic because they allocate their time and effort to study only what is assessed. Assignments and tests are often designed for quick and easy grading, such as multiple-choice, matching, and filling the gap. This has led to the nature of the assignments and tests being less open-ended, undermining the emphasis on

cultivating critical thinking (Gibbs, 2006b). Therefore, assessments now tend to be crude and straightforward instead of being imaginative and innovative.

Different approaches to assessment

There are many ways to assess students' learning outcomes, such as using examinations, coursework, project or fieldwork reports, and self- or peer assessment, among others. However, educators should not depend solely on a single assessment method. Tai et al. (2023), for example, highlighted three significant assessment changes that educators should consider. First, regular marks should be replaced with regular feedback. Students should receive regular feedback to improve their work rather than final grades for every unit. Then, selected assessments or a final project can be used to demonstrate students' learning outcomes at the end of their degree. Second, educators should provide choices in assessments for students. These choices can demonstrate students' achievements and ensure they meet their learning goals, which are essential for their future lives and work. Third, all assessments should be inclusive of students with disabilities or learning differences. In this sense, instructions, resources, and submissions take multiple formats (text and audio-visual). Therefore, integrating different assessment approaches is strongly recommended. The following paragraphs provide a short summary of various assessment types.

Using examinations for assessment

According to Morris (1996), an examination or class test is a formal assessment. It plays an essential role in measuring students' abilities by covering various topics in the course. Generally, the difficult questions will affect students' scores. A lecturer can increase the level of difficult questions by creating abstract questions, in which the answers are not stated directly in the text. Meanwhile, specific questions about a particular lecture or a reflection on the lecturer's idea will encourage students to pay more attention to the lecture and take notes. However, ambiguous questions should not be asked because this might create conflict between different examiners (Morris, 1996). Another thing to consider is reliability, which can be increased by setting criteria when marking an essay (Entwistle et al., 2020). Hence, validity needs to be considered balanced and fair to cover the whole course sample, including the difficulty level of questions. Generally speaking, the examination dramatically impacts the style of teaching and learning used in schools (Morris, 1996). Therefore, it should be combined with multiple-choice, short-answer, problem-based, or essay-type questions from easy to difficult. Lecturers need to remember that ill-constructed assessments may push students to adopt learning strategies to predict examination

questions, making them focus only on specific test parts (Entwistle et al., 2020). This surface approach often fails to produce a high-quality learning effort (Gibbs, 2006a).

Examinations can also discourage students who experience a series of failures (Morris, 1996). Thus, as Kiyosaki (2001) stated, "Our school system is designed to teach some kids, but unfortunately, it is not designed to teach all kids" (p. 38). Alternatively, advance notice questions and open-book examinations have been innovated besides conventional 'unseen' examinations (Entwistle et al., 2020). This approach aims to reduce memory-based learning and anxiety, creating another set of problems. Students might write answers in advance and try to remember them. Therefore, it might be better to give advance notice of topics instead of actual questions to allow students to apply self-directed learning and collaborative learning. This method generally helps students create group discussions, group learning, and collaboration to talk over the topics (Entwistle et al., 2020). Therefore, as further proposed by Entwistle et al. (2020), "alternatively, the exam can be carried out in the student's own time, which removes the certainty of the answers being the student's own work but also removes artificial constraints of time and access to information" (p. 65). On the other hand, open-book examinations also cause a problem because they are related to unequal access to books and time constraints during exams, making it onerous for students to use books effectively. By choice, the notes should be allowed to be used during the exam as a more workable compromise (Entwistle et al., 2020).

Using coursework for assessment

According to Murphy (2006), 'coursework' refers to a typical academic assignment given in the course of study to assess students' knowledge, skills, and competency for the final grade. It is often favored over traditional examination conditions because it reduces students' panic in finals and offers more significant opportunities for assessment for learning. It also offers students opportunities to work under more natural conditions, including collaboration, group work, access to libraries, and multiple draft revisions. Students may be required to complete several pieces of coursework for the course of study on particular topics. However, too much coursework will induce students to apply a surface approach to finishing assignments due to the high workload (Entwistle et al., 2020). Therefore, offering constructive feedback and monitoring the learning process are vital for students' learning (Murphy, 2006).

Entwistle et al. (2020) further noted that marking coursework is time-consuming to be fully effective; therefore, course teams need to have specific guidelines to guide students, including details of the course, essay topics, deadlines, presentation dates,

and more. Moreover, lecturers need to provide constructive feedback or comments on the work itself (e.g., an essay) or a separate paper. Those comments and feedback consist of positive and negative reinforcement to encourage students to keep doing and correcting their work. Thus, lecturers need to balance them carefully (Entwistle et al., 2020).

Using project or fieldwork reports for assessment

Project or fieldwork reports are usually used for the final year degree assessment because students can get an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and skills contextually; however, project work is not easy to handle because it requires independent work, planning, organization, and a thorough review of literature, and is time-consuming for writing academic scientific reports (Entwistle et al., 2020). In this sense, students need guidance from lecturers to discuss the nature of the project first and move on to specific details on what is needed and how to evaluate it. Lecturers or course teams should also offer meticulously written guidelines about the criteria for content and presentation of project reports, plus an additional form for students to fill in details about their work for final comments and marks (Entwistle et al., 2020).

Having a set of criteria and guidelines can be helpful for lecturers and students to ensure consistent practice and help students use feedback as a learning aid (Elkington, 2020). If the project involves an outside institution or university, a formal agreement would be required to draw attention to the criteria used to assess the project and reduce subjective evaluation. Moreover, Elkington (2020) noted that it is vital to double-check marks internally if they are counted toward the final degree classification. However, the problem might emerge when students have little access to resources to complete their projects and low levels of support from a mentor or supervisor. Therefore, specific criteria and guidelines for a supervisor or mentor to follow will help control this variability. Another problem of the project work, as noted by Entwistle et al. (2020), is related to the project done by a group or a pair of students collaboratively. Project collaboration should be encouraged for educational reasons; however, it creates consequential problems in assessment. For example, should both students receive the same mark? By choice, the lecturer, supervisor, or mentor can orally check students' contributions and understanding of the project, or individual students can evaluate each other's contributions to the project (Entwistle et al., 2020).

Using self- and peer assessments for assessment

Self- and peer assessments have been created as a way of helping students acknowledge the quality and responsibility of their work (Entwistle et al., 2020). Entwistle et al. (2020) further explained that self- and peer assessments help students become autonomous learners, have reflective and evaluative skills, and work collaboratively. Students can build confidence, assessment literacy, self-reflection, and communication skills by assessing and giving constructive feedback to each other. These skills are vital for the workplace and will be priceless throughout their lives, whether they are employed or self-employed, pursuing further study, or doing community work (Elkington, 2020). Using self and/or peer assessment also reduces teacher time on marking (Gibbs, 2006a). However, there has been criticism of self-assessment due to its subjectivity. Students usually overestimate their scores and grades when competing with each other (Entwistle et al., 2020).

Using other assessment tools for assessment

Based on our personal teaching experiences over the past decade, other assessment tools, such as reflection papers, may be necessary for lecturers to get constructive feedback, inform teaching pedagogy, and improve students' critical thinking. For example, lecturers can assign students to write a reflection paper after finishing each unit or chapter. This reflection paper will help lecturers receive feedback on their teaching and help students develop critical thinking skills. The lecturer can ask students to submit the reflection paper online via the Learning Management System, Google Classroom, or even in traditional hard copy format. However, to ensure that all students complete the reflection paper, lecturers must provide scores as a stimulus for increasing students' motivation.

Concluding remarks

Overall, a single assessment method cannot fit all situations. Therefore, lecturers need to use various assessment methods to measure students' learning outcomes. These assessment methods may include coursework, project or fieldwork reports, self-assessment, peer assessment, and final examinations. Teaching and learning in the 21st century cannot depend solely on traditional assessment methods, such as quizzes and final exams, to classify grades. Online learning and distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic have forced us to rethink teaching and learning assessment procedures and methods. While the need to rethink assessment is vital in the current context, a lot needs to be done to ensure that assessment serves its purposes. In this

regard, all stakeholders have important roles to play in the assessment rethinking process.

Institutional leaders need to provide full support and an open environment for innovation to adjust learning assessments. Rethinking assessment in higher education needs to focus on altering how we see and employ assessment to improve student learning. Summative exams and essays are two examples of traditional assessment techniques that are sometimes criticized for being excessively concerned with testing students' knowledge and skills at a specific point in time rather than assisting them in developing a deep understanding and the capacity to apply their learning to novel situations. In this sense, rethinking assessment promotes a more all-encompassing strategy that considers various ways that students acquire information and skills and apply them by using assessment techniques, such as formative assessment, self-assessment, peer assessment, and authentic assessment, which can help them apply their knowledge and skills to solve problems and make informed decisions in the real world.

Furthermore, it is essential to provide teachers with regular professional development and training opportunities on pedagogy, assessments for learning, and how to use technologies to engage students. A combination of traditional and online assessments should also be considered to develop students' sense of self-directed learning and 21st-century learning skills. According to Wingard and Farrugia (2021), working individuals must be not only technically adept but also incredibly agile in their ability to think and act creatively, as well as pick up new abilities quickly, considering the fast pace of innovation and disruption in the competitive corporate world.

In light of the above discussion, it is important to promote the use of project reports or fieldwork reports to improve students' 21st-century skills, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, collaboration, teamwork, leadership, creativity and innovation, self-directed learning, and cross-cultural understanding. To improve students' learning outcomes, there is a need to rethink assessment in higher education. It is crucial if we want to foster a learning environment that is more focused on students' various needs. We can assist students in developing the skills they need to thrive in university and beyond by utilizing a range of evaluation techniques and emphasizing the learning process rather than just the final product. Rethinking assessment will help students learn more effectively, develop a deeper understanding of the learning material, become more independent learners, develop critical thinking skills, apply their knowledge and skills to new situations, become more engaged in learning, and develop a growth mindset.

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Conflict of interest

None.

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