IMPLICATION OF TRADITIONAL AND ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM

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Assessment is a complex process dependent upon an entire network of practices. It presumes a variety of strategies and procedures and requires multiple indicators and sources of evidence. There are two methods of assessment: Traditional assessments and Alternative assessments. Each one has its own potential for enhancing student learning. Traditional assessment is used to determine what students know at the end of a chapter, unit, or series of lectures on a topic in which assessment measures emphasize the interconnections, coherence, and understanding among skills, concepts, and procedures, as well as among knowledge, abilities, and dispositions. We can assess with the goal of increasing that learning. In fact we should think of assessment as a means for enhancing student learning aligns assessment with instruction.

Key words: Assessments; processes; problems; methods; measures; students; solve.

1. Introduction

Assessment is a measuring device which we use when we want to compare an individual with other individuals who belong to the same group. In other words, assessment is a complex process dependent upon an entire network of practices. It presumes a variety of strategies and procedures and requires multiple indicators and sources of evidence. Since no single assessment can completely describe or measure what one has learned or understands, adequate assessment only comes from multiple assessment measures.

2. Methods of assessment

2.1. Traditional assessments

The term traditional assessment is used to determine what students know at the end of a chapter, unit, or series of lectures on a topic. Tests are just one of the tools used in traditional assessment, although they often receive the most attention and are the most pervasive. This is due to factors such as the ease with which they can be administered and scored and the fact that they enable teachers to judge students’ progress quickly and easily.

Traditional assessments such as tests are often graded and returned to students with a number and/or a letter grade at the top. Unfortunately, this number or letter grade often becomes more important than the learning the assessment was intended to measure. Even when comments and feedback are provided in addition to the letter or score, students assume that what matters in the end is the grade.

Traditional assessments ask “how, when, and where” questions but rarely ask “why.” Many traditional assessments mimic the questions asked in homework and are often taken straight from the textbook. Often very little attention is given to the design of assessment items; for example, the types of responses the questions will elicit, whether the questions have multiple points of entry, and what the questions will afford the instructor in terms of insights into student understanding.

The biggest strength of traditional assessments is the ease with which they can be designed and scored. Some textbooks include sample tests or test banks from which the instructor can choose appropriate questions. These features greatly reduce the time and effort needed to create appropriate tests. The grading of these types of tests is again facilitated with the help of the textbook publishers. If sample tests and a test bank are included, the answers are included as well. Thus there is no need to work out any of the problems or design thoughtful
answers to any of the questions as those things have already been done.

The scoring of traditional assessments is further eased when the assessments use a multiple-choice format. Also, there is a perceived degree of objectivity in traditional assessments, especially when assessments have only one right answer. This perceived objectivity is further strengthened when the answer is the main, if not only, goal.

However these methods involve students working alone and are characterized by individual competition: competition for grades, against personal standards, and even for attention. This type of competition may encourage a few top students to succeed, but for the majority of students, a competitive environment is detrimental to their learning.

The time limit inherent in traditional testing situations restricts the types of questions one can ask; the majority of questions are procedural and encourage rote and superficial learning. These types of questions send the message to students that if you do not know the answer immediately, you cannot solve the problem. It is impossible to give careful thought to a problem, or use any of the many heuristic strategies helpful in solving problems when you only have a few minutes to do so.

2.2. Alternative assessments

Instead of disjointed tests that often only measure low-level knowledge, many authors suggest using assessment measures that emphasize the interconnections, coherence, and understanding among skills, concepts, and procedures, as well as among knowledge, abilities, and dispositions. Although these things can be measured using traditional assessments, due to the nature of the questions on traditional assessments, they rarely are.

Alternative assessments have multiple purposes. Some examples include providing students with additional opportunities to learn, using assessments to guide future instruction, providing students with feedback intended to enhance learning, and emphasizing what is important. Like traditional assessments, alternative assessments are also used to evaluate student understanding and assign grades.

These assessments provide instructors with a broader, more genuine picture of student learning. They allow one to assess students’ ability to reason and analyze, apply their knowledge to novel situations, demonstrate their understanding of the connections between concepts, and communicate their understanding in multiple ways.

The major strength of alternative assessments is the amount of information that can be gathered about student understanding, especially when students are required to explain, describe, or justify their answers. Requiring students to provide more than just an answer provides an opportunity for increased insight into student understanding. Students, too, learn more when they are required to explain, describe, or support their thinking.

These explanations can then encourage instructors to use alternative assessments formatively, which means the results of the assessment are used to adapt teaching to meet students’ needs (Black & Wiliam, 1998). In other words, the results of the assessments guide instruction with the goal of enhancing learning. Alternative assessments can also provide opportunities for enhanced and continued learning of the students, especially when they allow for communication between students.

Besides, alternative assessments generally take more time than traditional assessments, both in their design and in their evaluation. In some cases, the time required exceeds the benefits, especially in large lecture classes, where the number of students is just too great to successfully implement certain alternative assessments.

3. How to assess

3.1. Observations

This is one of the best ways to evaluate students’ thinking processes while solving problems. Although a paper and pencil test provides some insight into student knowledge, it does not offer the opportunity for the witness; the teacher cannot see where connections were made solely by marks made on the student’s paper.

Observations can be done while circulating around the room, taking nothing away from the process of teaching and in fact, making the evaluation process part of learning. Observations can also be done during office hours, which is probably a more common place for observations
to occur since few instructors have the flexibility or time to circulate.

3.2 Using open-ended problems

Open-ended questions can vary from simply asking a student to explain their work to requiring them to formulate hypotheses, identify possible explanations, state conjectures, create new problems or extend existing problems, and make generalizations. These problems are usually very carefully developed and furnish a context in which each student can rely on his or her own strengths to solve the problems, thereby generating a variety of approaches to the problem to compare and contrast. The ability to incorporate knowledge from a variety of resources such as formal knowledge, previously learned concepts and skills, and general common sense makes open-ended problems valid means for measuring connections between knowledge bases.

3.3. Self-assessment

This method requires students to monitor their own progress in learning and be active in critically examining their own knowledge, both of which further students’ reflection of their own thinking. To be most effective, the desired goal, evidence about one’s present condition, and some understanding of a way to close the gap between the two, needs be made explicit to students.

3.4. Collaborative testing

It is not only share ideas conducive to greater understanding but it also reduces anxiety in testing situations. Research has also shown that collaborative test taking promotes continued learning (Helmericks, 1993; Lehman, 1995; Vockell, 1994; Webb, 1995). This assessment enhances learning, and learning involves being able to reason and communicate as well as is giving explanations that encourage the explainer to justify statements, recognize misconceptions, reevaluate thinking, and clarify thoughts. Many ways of implementing collaborative testing exist. I have named and will highlight a few that have been successfully implemented in college classrooms.

*Random selection

All students take a test in small groups, each completing his or her own test. One test is then randomly chosen from the group to be graded with the understanding that all students in the group will receive the same grade. The benefit of this approach is that it encourages students to work together, to be aware of what others are doing, and to make sure all their group members really understand the problems and solutions, as anyone’s test could be the one scored.

*Individual clarification

Another technique has all group members solve one problem together and write a single solution. They then individually answer questions about the group solution and solve two similar problems—a problem that is parallel to the group problem and one that extends it. This affords the opportunity for an individual score to be calculated, as well as the group score.

*Group take-home

Group members are given 7–10 days to complete the exam, hand in one solution signed by all, and all receive the same grade. I have found in situations like this that having group members anonymously grade all other members, including themselves, is a means for determining whether everyone contributed equally.

*Student Writing

Student writing can be a very effective way to get information about student understanding in a very short amount of time. This information can be used immediately to adjust teaching in the effort of increasing student understanding. Many ways of using student writing exist. Again, I would like to highlight a few that have been successfully implemented in college classrooms.

*Weekly question

Students are required to hand in questions regarding that week’s reading at the beginning of each week. They can be as simple as questions that clarify or questions that ask for full explanations of connections. This technique forces students to actually do the readings and come to class better prepared. It also informs the teacher of incomplete understandings and areas of confusion.

*One-minute paper

Another technique is called the one-minute paper (even though you really need about three minutes) (Bressoud, 1999). In the last three minutes of class, the students are to write the
answers to two questions: 1) What was the most important point made in class today? and, 2) What unanswered question do you still have? The teacher can have the responses be anonymous or signed, depending if he or she thinks the students will be hesitant to write honest questions or if the teacher desires information on individual students.

*Daily question*

Another way to use writing is to begin class with a writing task. Prompts can be distributed immediately to students as they enter class or be displayed at the front of the room. The goal is to offer the students a non-threatening way to write about their understanding of the content or current concepts they are learning.

*Homework musings*

Homework can also be used as the site for writing. Having students write what they are thinking on their homework as they are solving problems can be very enlightening both for them and for the teacher.

*True-false-explain*

Another way to use homework is to design the questions in a true-false-explain format (Barnett, 1999). Barnett suggests writing questions that address the most important aspects of the concept and that are most likely to be misunderstood. Giving students two to four statements on the same concept, with the requirement that they have to not only determine whether they are true or false, but also defend that position, clarifies relationships among elements within a concept.

4. Conclusion

Teaching and assessment are two in separable aspects of teachers’ task. In spite of the current reluctance to profit from the latter, this study contends that assessment has an essential role in the development of students’ communicative competence.

“Why do you assess your students?” For many, it is not a question about which they have thought deeply. For most of us, the bottom line is that we have to give our students a grade. But there are many other reasons for assessing our students. We assess students because we want to find out what, and to what extent, they have learned what we hoped to have taught them. We

**REFERENCE**


