Reflective Essay on ASSESSMENT

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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 the quotation, assessment is the most important aspect of learning and teaching, as 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 2, depict the importance of assessment in learning and teaching.

![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)

(a) An unaligned course.  
(b) An aligned course.

Figure 2: Schematic of an aligned and unaligned course

[Adapted from Brabrand, 2008]
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 will 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 the instructional method then. I was assessed this way, as this 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. The situation has remained the same, up to now. The Caribbean Region instituted a regional exam for all Caribbean students. The exam is known as the Caribbean Examination Council (CXC) Exams. 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 like my grandmother’s teeth: few and far apart. This is still current practice, even in these enlightened times.

The situation at the University of Guyana and at the Universidad de Concepcion, where I did my undergrad and postgrad degrees, respectively, remains the same. Learning and teaching is 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.

Now, as a tertiary teacher, I found myself doing the very same thing. I merely followed the traditional approach, as that was the only approach with which I was familiar.

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1The 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 assessed that way because I didn’t know better. At my University, the curriculum has not been reviewed in more than thirty years. Lecturers are just given course outlines, which specify the assessments to be done, and we are expected to follow them. Even though I am familiar with current assessment methods for second and foreign language learning and teaching, and even though there are snippets of my engaging students through evaluation, it is still largely following the norm-referenced assessment (NRA), where the emphasis is on administering analytic assessments to differentiate high-quality from low-quality students.

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 put a big X on the script when I was marking it. I knew that what I had done was a bit harsh. It 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, as 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.

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 improving student learning outcomes.

Some of the strengths of my current assessment approaches are that (1) students are able to retain knowledge and master skills; (2) students have an excellent working knowledge of concepts and they can describe them fully, and (3) assessments are objective and measurable. In essence, my students have excellent declarative knowledge.
Some of the limitations of my current assessment approaches are that (1) surface learning is encouraged; (2) students are assessed analytically; (3) the emphasis is on declarative knowledge, when it should be on functioning knowledge; (4) assessments are not valid and reliable.

Reflecting on the above information, such an assessment approach does not encourage deep thinking in my students and do not 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, as it is all about what they need to do. In the real world, they will have to know and do.

I must admit that after having completed my Master’s Degree in Second and Foreign Language Pedagogy, I have been making valiant steps in encouraging a learner-driven approach to learning and teaching. I have seen some successes; however, I know that more must 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 need to ask myself. Why do I assess learners? Once I am aware of the purposes of assessment, then I can move in the direction of preparing quality assessments for my students.

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 comprehensible 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 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 will require me 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 construct knowledge and negotiate meaning. 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 ILOs mandate that students skillfully 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.

My views about learning, teaching and assessment have been significantly altered since I began the 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. He was either bright or not. And whether he was bright or not determined if he 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.

The value of constructive alignment (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.

As a tertiary teacher, I have found the PGCTT to be of great benefit to me as I seek to transform my teaching for the betterment of the students with whom I come into contact. With ED 401, I have been able to see the great value derived from constructively aligning my teaching in order to enhance learning that matters, learning that emphasise 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 have been very refreshing. I must admit that this has been novel to me, doing a course that is fully online. It has been the very first time that I have had to submit reflective writings, actually requiring me to design lesson plans. It is the first time that I have had to do micro-teaching. It is the first time that I have 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 have been engaged in independent and collaborative learning, which is what good teaching is all about. These are the kinds of assessment practices I need to adapt when I return to the University of Guyana.

ED 402 has opened up my eyes about the curriculum. Curriculum planning, design and development - fundamentally shaped by the framework in which it is placed - are 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. 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 & Irby 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 I will have to make my assessments authentic. To this end, I will have to follow the criterion-referenced assessment (CRA) 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 (LOs). Once these are aligned properly, then my learners will 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. How I confront these challenges will determine if I embrace quality or mediocrity.

REFERENCES


