Innovative Approaches to Assessment: Develop a Sense of Direction to Promote Students Learning

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ABSTRACT

Assessment practices in educational settings have undergone much transformation in recent years. The innovative approach to assessment includes providing continuous feedback, correctives and enrichment to students with the goal of enhancing students' academic performance. Classroom assessment practices have been more recently influenced by the learning process. The main purpose of this study was to gather information on assessment practices that use the mastery learning approach, which is formative assessment through which teachers in the classroom can develop a sense of direction while providing continuous feedback, correctives and enrichment to students with the aim of bridging learning gaps in what students currently know and what they should know. In this study, the semi-structured interview was conducted with six vocational teachers from vocational colleges. Discussion on the findings was based on the experience of the participants in developing a sense of direction by giving continuous feedback, correctives and enrichment to promote student learning. The outcomes could be a source reference for providing information to teachers on a new concept of assessment and how, at the same time, it can be successfully embedded in the teaching and learning process to promote student learning.

Keywords: Correction, enrichment, feedback, formative assessment, mastery learning

INTRODUCTION

Formative assessment is a process used by teachers and students during instruction that provides feedback to adjust ongoing teaching and learning to improve students' achievement of intended instructional outcomes. Formative assessment techniques

are referred to as activities used in the process of assessing students during the teaching and learning process. Assessment for learning uses formative assessment methods to inform, support and enhance the learning process. The focus of this system is placed on the quality of learning, the provision of advice and feedback for improvement and a strong emphasis on cooperative learning groups.

Part of the problem of implementing formative assessment in classroom is the confusion surrounding the purpose of assessment and the concept itself among teachers and students. It appears that teachers are not only unfamiliar with the concept; most regard it as an extra burden, another programme that has to be carried out in the classroom in addition to their already heavy workload. Despite the many efforts of the Ministry of Education to clarify and explain the concept, many teachers and students still view it apprehensively, thinking it has to be administered separately from their teaching and learning process (Adi Badiozaman, 2007).

Taking a slight detour from usual practice, assessment is now regarded as an essential element of teaching and learning development; thus, the teaching and learning process has become an important on-going process that was neglected when the focus, previously, was merely on achievement. This change of focus for assessment was further emphasised in a forum conducted by the Malaysian Examination Syndicate during which it was pointed out that "the Ministry of Education must re-educate the public to view and accept assessment and not just examination." It has also been highlighted that the change of focus in assessment should be holistic and integrated and it should develop and maintain a meaningful balance between formative and summative assessments (Adi Badiozaman, 2007).

Understanding the Purpose of Assessment

It is important to highlight and bring assessment to a common definition through discussion to develop a shared ground and understanding for both theoretical and practical development in education (Taras, 2005). According to Rowntree (1987), assessment is about "getting to know our students and the quality of their learning." Cohen (1994) described assessment as non-threatening and developmental in nature and that it allowed learners to have sufficient opportunity to reveal what they know. Hill (2008) defined assessment as the general process of monitoring and keeping record of students' progress. McMullan et al. (2003) provided a more specific definition, introducing assessment as "a form of systematic inquiry with the following elements: learning as hypotheses, educational practices and experiences as context, evaluation as information gathering, and decision making as direction for improvement."

Assessment to Guide Improvement

Since the late 20th century, the use of intelligence tests and academic exams to sort students into tracks has been largely discredited (Guskey, 2007). In today's economy, when everyone needs to be capable of learning throughout their careers and lives, it would be especially counterproductive to keep sorting students in this way; far better would be to try to educate all children to a high level than to label some as losers and anoint others as winners as early as possible. The first limited manifestation of an alternative approach was the mastery learning movement of the late 1970s (Block, 1971; Bloom, 1971; Guskey 1980a, 1980b, 1980c).

Consistent with prevailing approaches to assessment, mastery learning focussed entirely on basic skills in reading and mathematics, and it reduced those skills down to the smallest testable units possible, rather than measuring students' capacity to integrate or apply their new knowledge and skills. At the same time, however, mastery learning represented a real departure from the status quo, since it argued that students should continue to receive instruction and opportunities to practice until they mastered the relevant content. In theory, everyone could succeed. The purpose of assessment was not to put students into categories but, simply, to generate information about their performance in order to help them improve.

To critics of mastery learning, the approach highlighted the limitations of shallow-learning models (Slavin, 1987), a problem that "criterion-referenced" testing was designed to address. Whereas norm-referenced tests aim to show how students stack up against each another, criterion-based assessments are meant to determine where students stand in relation to a specific standard. Like mastery learning, the goal is not to identify winners and losers but, rather, to enable as many students as possible to master the given knowledge and skills. However, while mastery learning uses tests to help students master discrete bits of content, criterion-based assessments measure student performance in relation to specific learning targets and standards of performance.

A Sense of Direction: Feedback, Correctives and Enrichment

Teachers who use mastery learning provide students with frequent and specific feedback on their learning progress through regular, formative classroom assessment. This feedback is both diagnostic and prescriptive. It reinforces precisely what students were expected to learn, identifies what they learnt well and describes what needs to be learnt better. The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM, 2000) stressed the use of assessment that supports learning and provides useful information to both teachers and students. Ainsworth and Viegut (2006), and Stiggins (2008) similarly emphasised the vital nature of feedback from assessment for learning. By itself, however, feedback does little to help students improve their learning. Significant improvement requires feedback to be paired with correctives i.e. activities that offer

guidance and direction to students on how to remedy their learning problems. Because of individual differences among students, no single method of instruction works best for all. To help every student learn well, therefore, teachers must differentiate their instruction, both in the initial teaching and especially through corrective activities (Bloom, 1976). Generally, assessment is not entirely about marking and giving grades. It is a broad term used to indicate the act of measuring, evaluating, interpreting, making sense of the results, collecting information and providing feedback for a set of purposes. Figure 1 illustrates the sequence of the mastery learning process.
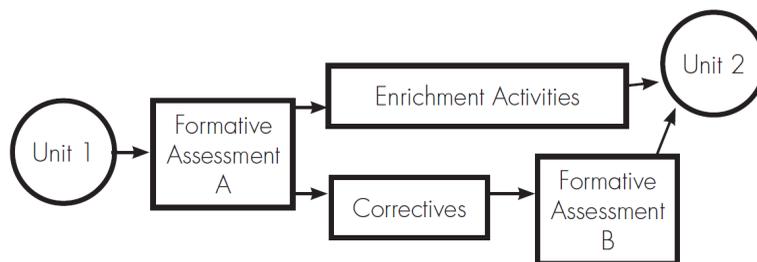

Figure 1. The mastery learning instructional process (Guskey, 2007)

METHODOLOGY

A semi-structured interview was conducted with six vocational teachers who were selected through purposive sampling to share their experiences. The interview technique is a suitable method of exploration to share experiences; here, the vocational teachers could share experiences accumulated throughout their teaching experience of using formative assessment in the classroom. According to Merriam (2001), for this to occur, the participants selected must possess relevant knowledge and information regarding the phenomenon being studied. The interview data collected were managed using the ATLAS t.i. software for qualitative data analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Competency assessment involves the process of assessing the competence of students. The competence assessment approach depends only on what is listed in the curriculum. Through the formative assessment process, the competence of students based on criteria (Criterion-Referenced Assessment) that has been set, of which the students are also aware, the performance of students is determined by comparing the performance obtained

from students to a statement of the criteria. The findings showed that in assessment, vocational teachers used mastery learning with the a mobility module system. Students are allowed to repeat or do what they can to meet the criteria. However, repeated assessment in one module sometimes cannot be carried out properly due to time constraints. Vocational teachers in vocational colleges also try to run training and learning by the student's ability, consider the dominance of prior learning to support student learning and provide opportunities for students to repeat activities. Teachers try to give opportunities to students to improve their performance and they then provide feedback to the students individually.

Correctives and enrichment are more meaningful and can be run better if teachers understand and appreciate their respective roles and use assessment results to help improve understanding and build positive behaviour among students towards learning. The findings of interviews with teachers revealed that the students enjoyed the work and displayed responsibility in completing it and could detect their mistakes after feedback was given by the teacher. Guskey (2007) stated that a second assessment is made to provide opportunity to students to succeed and detect their mistakes, but the evaluation process can be hindered by time constraints, lack of resources and student absence from school on the day of assessment. Tan (2010) highlighted that the problem of student absence disrupts the assessment process and makes it difficult for teachers to implement assessment.

Mastery learning can enhance learning as teachers can give more attention to weak students without slowing the pace of learning. As a result, all the students in the class have the potential to succeed in achieving learning outcomes. This approach also encourages the attitude of helping one another to learn among students. Modular certification granted to students also helps students gain recognition of the stages of the module. Individualised assessment gives space to those who deserve to be assessed in advance, who, after mastering a certain level, can then help others who have not mastered the level to get their certificate. Through corrective and enrichment activities as well, students can achieve mastery level specified in a module. Nair and Gopal (2014) noted that corrective activities and learning strategies in systematic mastery learning, compared with conventional methods, can help students gain more significant achievement.

Vocational teachers also conduct assessment when students are ready to be assessed and focus on the assessment of the individual, identifying and collecting various pieces of evidence (process or product) relevant to the criteria established for each competency. Teachers allow students who are competent in a module to perform the next module, whereas students who are not competent may repeat the assessment after receiving feedback from the teacher on their performance during the learning process. Race (2010) stated that giving constructive feedback orally or in writing is an important aspect in assessment

for learning. Teachers can give feedback in various circumstances, either immediately or they may provide more official answers in a more formal and planned setting. Based on the interviews with the vocational teachers, it was found that oral feedback was commonly used to reprimand the students when they made mistakes. This was also done during assessment that occurred during the process of teaching and learning. Feedback is also important for students to self-assess the level of their present competency.

CONCLUSION

This study was conducted in response to the strategic plan outlined in the Eleventh Malaysia Plan (2016-2020) for the improvement of the education system and examines the new assessment system, which moves away from memory-based learning designed for the average student to education that stimulates thinking, creativity and caring in all students, caters for individual ability and learning styles and is based on more equitable access. Due to time required, lack of information and understanding the purpose of assessment (Tan, 2010; A Majid, 2011). Generally, assessment is not entirely about marking and giving grades. It is a broad term used to indicate the act of measuring, evaluating, interpreting, making sense of the results, collecting information and providing feedback, correctives and enrichmentf or a set of purposes.

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