

## Holistic Assessment of Student's Learning Outcome

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### Abstract

The use of holistic assessment may have some potential benefits. Academicians need to develop courses in such ways that offer students teaching and learning materials, experiences and tasks that are relevant in the real world. In addition, holistic assessment help to ensure that curriculum is designed to manifest real world tasks and provide challenging situations that stimulates the students. Assessing these learning outcomes could be tricky, and no one modality could really capture a learner's proficiency of learning content. This paper focused on the holistic assessment of student learning outcomes and their implications to curriculum planning. It also proffers some recommendations that could help in enhancing educational service delivery.

### Introduction

Holistic assessment refers to a global approach in the assessment of a student-learning outcome. According to Sadler (2009), in holistic assessment the teacher or the assessor has to develop complex mental responses to a student's work. Consequently, this will include how the assessor appreciates the work from the student regarding the quality of the work. When grading the students work, the assessor provides a grade and supports it with a valid justification for assigning the grade. The rationale may include a summary of the work or comments highlighting the main point in the student's work.

Meyers and Nulty (2009) suggest that for maximum a student-learning outcome, academicians need to develop courses in such ways that offer students teaching and learning materials, experiences and tasks that are relevant in the real world. Additionally, the tasks need to be constructive and interlinked and provide a challenge to the students while also acting as a motivation factor. Adopting of effective teaching to match the personal strengths of the students ensures that a student's learning outcome is achieved (Meyers & Nulty, 2009).

### Types of Holistic Assessments

#### Constructive Alignment

According to Thota and Whitefield (2010), constructive alignment is an assessment method used to achieve holistic assessment especially in the field of computer science. This assessment method involves formulation of the planned learning outcomes and coordination with assessment tasks that have a possibility of achieving those learning outcomes. This method promotes the students ability to develop constructive meaning via deep learning from relevant activities.

#### Reflection and Reflective Practice/Reflective Journals

Learning journals includes writing assignment that requires students to reflect on something and write about what they have reflected about (Park, 2003). These journals are useful for students of all ages. When students reflect on something, they are able to consider it in more detail (Langer, 2002). Students are able to exhibit a useful outcome through reflection involving a distinct purpose (Langer, 2002). Bisman (2011) indicates that learning journals characterize self-directed methods that facilitate reflection. Learning journals develops a student's ability to think critically and develop the ability of self-enquiry (Langer, 2002). Students can be able to note down their feelings, thoughts or comments regarding what they learned in their coursework. That is the students can be able to narrate their personal journey about their studies and course content. Learning journals assist the students in meeting the needs of their respective areas of study (Bisman, 2011). Additionally, learning journals stimulate uniqueness and distinctiveness in the way a student learns and thinks.

According to Park (2003), learning journals assist in involving students in the learning process. Additionally, students become more informed and self-aware of what they learn and how they learn. This enhances the student learning process. Park (2003) further notes that learning journals assist in developing independent thinking in a student and contributes to students being responsible in their learning. This produces active participation from the students in the learning process. Langer (2002) suggests that students using learning journals are able to make a simple shift from theory to practice.

Examples of journals used in reflection include dialogue journals, structured journals and unstructured journal (Langer, 2002). Dialogue journals assist in developing student expressions and reflection by encouraging

the exchange of ideas between two students. Structured journals provide a form of restriction on what needs to be written. The assessor can be able to compare student responses and reflections. Unstructured journals provide students with the freedom to choose what to write regarding the course work.

Teachers are able to receive valuable feedback on how the students dealt with various issues in the learning process. Some of the valuable information that the teachers are able to know from the learning journals include how the students reacted the course material, how their comprehension changes in the course of learning and how the students study.

### **Peer Assessment**

According to Gielen, Dochy and Onghena (2011) peer assessment refers to an arrangement where individuals consider the amount, value, level, worth or outcome of learning from peers of similar status. Peer assessment becomes a significant educational learning process by providing students with critical information on how their work is assessed (Harris, 2011). This allows them to have a greater understanding of the requirements for producing standardized work in their field of study. Consequently, peer assessment encourages a sense of ownership and allows students to reflect on the quality of their work (Harris, 2011). In the process, peer assessment discourages poor practices in the students course work by enhancing sharing of the best practices.

Introduction of peer assessment in the first year of undergraduates allows them to develop essential learning skills early in their degree studies. These students are able to provide purposeful feedback to their colleagues. According to Cartney (2010), peer assessment has the potential of bridging the gap between feedback given by the tutor and feedback acted upon by the students. For peer assessment to be effective, assessors need to have awareness on the potential emotional and cognitive aspects of the student learning process (Cartney, 2010). According to Wiley and Gardner (2010), the use of peer assessment processes for different purposes within a single subject has the potential of achieving the desired learning outcomes from the students. Results from the study by Wiley and Gardner (2010) indicated that student's feedback received from the peer learning exercise enhanced their learning by increasing their level of engagement in learning the coursework. A study in undergraduate medical education by Schonrock et al (2007) indicated that peer assessment enhances performance of students concerning professional behavior. However, the study indicates that for peer assessment to enhance performance, it will be effective if applied after the students adapt to the complex learning environment. Peer assessment could be beneficial in areas such as the teaching profession. According to Al-Barakat and Al-Hassan (2009), training of student teachers using peer assessment provides them with the ability to make critical judgments when they start teaching their own students.

### **Self-assessment**

Taras (2010), portrays self-assessment to cover self-appraisal and self-evaluation. Self-assessment involves the student's ability in recognizing the criteria to use in their work and how they can be able to achieve those standards (Taras, 2010). The main goal of self-assessment is to develop the learning skills of the students or learners. There are a several models of self-assessment developed for higher education (Taras, 2010). These models are categorized as weak, median or strong models of self-assessment. An example of a weaker model of assessment is self-marking. This involves students employing the use of model answers for making comparisons with their own work. The assessor creates a standard, which the students use to grade their own work. There is transparency in the learning process through self-marking. Potential benefits from self-marking include immediate feedback, time saving on the part of the assessors and encourages student engagement in the assessment process. An example of a median model of self-assessment is the standard model (Taras, 2010). This model necessitates the learner to use principles to judge, grade and provide feedback for their work. The feedback from this model should be used to improve the students work to such an extent that the final sample of the work presented to the assessor should be void of any weaknesses. The self-assessment from the students should help them understand their true weaknesses and strengths in the work. A stronger model of self-assessment integrates the assessor's feedback (Taras, 2010). This model will entail the students receiving feedback from the assessor, without any grading, for further discussions with their peers. From the feedback from the assessor, the students can be able to formulate their own feedback taking into consideration the assessor's feedback. The advantage of this model is that the students assess their work without having distractions on the grade they are going to receive. This allows them to make informed and non-biased assessments.

According to Taras (2010), a stronger model of self-assessment involves a situation where the students develop their own criteria for assessment. This type of learning is known as the contract design. In this model of self-assessment, the student has the duty of setting up objectives, new feedback from a new peer each week and reviewed objectives. The students are responsible for assessing their work against the set standards and providing justifiable reasons for grading their work. This reduces the assessor's role to merely confirming that

the standards or set conditions in assessment have been met. The benefit of this model is that it incorporates the holistic approach of learning and assessing in education (Taras, 2010).

### **Group Presentations**

Students working in groups provide better learning outcomes. According to Kneale (1996), group work encourages the concept of decision making among students. The increase in interaction between the students' increases the interest among the students since they are encouraged to produce quality work. Students working in groups are being considered an essential method of student learning in higher education since it stimulates motivation and helps to improve the student's oral presentation skills, which prove to be vital in their careers (Dart, 2006).

The idea of group presentations may be effective in achieving the student-learning outcome. For instance, the use of quality presentation slides encourages students to be more involved in class discussions as opposed to long and plain lecture hours. According to Strauss, Corrigan and Hofacker (2011), use of structural aids such as slides provide a holistic approach that encourages faster information comprehension from students. A study by Kagesten and Engelbrecht (2007) on the use of presentations to develop learning skills in undergraduate students showed that use of this holistic approach encourages deep learning and motivates students to be involved, actively, in the learning process. Furthermore, presentations may enhance a student's oral skills.

### **Report Writing**

Report writing is an essential element in almost every career field today. According to Hay (1999), report writing encourages students to develop professionalism in communicating ideas, in their different fields of study. Additionally, students involved in report writing are able to develop research-finding skills and are able to understand how to present various results from their research work. For students to be excellent researchers, report writing becomes a key element since it helps students understand the need to provide quality and honest work.

### **Portfolio Assessment**

Portfolio assessment involves the assessor evaluating the student's evidence of work in the learning process at different competence levels (Kuisma, 2007). A portfolio assessment helps the student to understand that the learning process works improve the performance of the assessor and the student. Students can be able to evaluate critically their aspirations and achievements by reflecting on their experiences, which enables them to set clear learning goals. The student's learning outcome in portfolio assessment indicates an increasing level of structural complexity (Kuisma, 2007). The process of growth shifts slowly from quantity learning to quality learning. A study by Driessen et al (2006) shows that portfolio assessment is a valid holistic assessment procedure since it links portfolio ratings with the quality of the learner's reflection.

### **Implications of Holistic Assessment**

The use of holistic assessment may have some potential benefits. Students who have undergone holistic assessment are in a better position to make holistic judgments. Furthermore, they can widen their skills that make it practical for them to provide justification for their work or argument. Consequently, the students can be involved in constructive arguments with their faculty members and peers on various issues that they learn (Sadler, 2009). Additionally, the use of a holistic assessment approach lessens the need of having teacher-derived feedback. This is because students are able to develop an intellectual holistic approach that has the support of experts. This further develops the student's evaluative expertise that allows students to be self-critical and be able to analyze their work as they progress in learning. This will certainly improve the students work output hence reducing the need for the assessor or teacher to respond to their work via many feedbacks.

Another positive implication that may result from holistic assessment is that the students are competent to handle assessments tasks accurately (Sadler, 2009). Most students provide the requirements of most assessments tasks. Through holistic assessment, the students can be able to develop decisive and investigative skills that permit them to handle assessment tasks effectively. Additionally, the students are capable of comprehending how to construct concrete responses to questions.

The use of peer assessment in holistic assessment has the potential of saving assessors and teachers valuable marking time (Harris, 2011). This also ensures that students get valuable assessment since most institutions have a high number of students. This feedback from peer assessment contributes highly to the learning process of the students. On the downside, peer assessment tends to have some negative perceptions especially in undergraduate studies (Harris, 2011). Some students may lack the self-belief to assess their peer's work effectively. This is because some view the idea of assessing as being the sole responsibility of the assessor.

The use of portfolio assessment provides more details and evidence of the students or learners development process and achievement (Driessen et al., 2006). The use of different material and evidence from the student's portfolio allows measurement of the various degrees of dimensions exhibited by a student based on his or her work. Furthermore, the student contributes to his or her learning process, which enhances self-evaluation.

### **Relevance to Curriculum**

Curriculum plays an essential part in contributing to a student's learning outcome. Incorporation of holistic assessment in the design of a curriculum helps the learners to develop a deep approach in learning that contributes to their understanding of the course work material (Meyers & Nulty, 2009). In addition, holistic assessment help to ensure that curriculum is designed to manifest real world tasks and provide challenging situations that stimulates the students

### **Advantages and Disadvantages of Holistic Assessments**

One of the advantages of holistic assessments is that they can be utilized to evaluate various aspects of the learner. For instance, portfolio assessments provide a multidimensional perspective of the learner. Secondly, students are actively involved in the learning process. Peer and self-assessments actively engage the student in the learning process. Thirdly, most of the holistic assessments incorporate a feedback from the assessors, which assist the student in having a clear understanding of what is expected in the learning process.

One of the disadvantages of holistic assessment is that they need to be task-based and construct-based (Nunn & Thurman, 2010). A task-based holistic assessment may encourage generalization. Additionally, assessors have a tendency of applying different holistic assessment without considering the personal attributes of the students. This reduces the learning outcome that is expected from the students.

### **Recommendations**

1. Holistic assessment should be encouraged in schools to understand what the learner has captured in a learning journey.
2. Some facilitators of learning may need the exposure of assessing learning outcomes through holistic method.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the significant advantages associated with application of holistic assessment in student learning outcomes, the application of the various assessment methods need to be tailored in a way the it will enhance a student's personal strength. Academicians that are involved in the design of curricula should ensure that the curricula incorporate various holistic assessments to improve the student's learning outcome. Subsequently, the correct application of holistic assessment in the various areas of study is expected to improve the student's learning outcome.

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