

# A Framework for Enhancing Formative Classroom Assessment Practices at a Higher Education Institution in Lesotho

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## Abstract

Classroom Assessment forms the basis for sustainable assessment. In the event that assessment reforms are not fully translated into day to day teaching and learning, it becomes almost impossible to create sustainable assessment for life-long learning. The study therefore, is intended to contribute to development of classroom assessment frame work which can enhance life-long learning. The study considers the students experiences of assessment and the context within which assessment is practiced.

The aim of this study was to evaluate the assessment practices at The Institute of Extra-Mural Studies (IEMS) in Lesotho, with the intention of contributing to the enhancement of such practices. The objectives of the study were:

- To reassess the contemporary views on effective classroom assessment practices in higher education;
- To investigate the students' experiences, perceptions and expectations of classroom assessment at IEMS;
- To assess institutional practices on classroom assessment at IEMS.

Both diversity and transparency of assessment at IEMS seems to be major challenges. The guidelines on grading and standards of assessment at IEMS requires improvement to close the gaps inherent within the document. A guide for developing a frame work for classroom assessment has been provided.

**Keywords:** Classroom assessment, diversity, transparency, grading, standards

## 1. Introduction

The shift from the traditional views of student assessment to more contemporary ways of assessment seems to be taking a very slow turn. This is embellished by classroom and school ethos which seem to uphold assessment of learning while largely compromising the practice of assessment as learning. Advocacy for new set of assessment ideas and new assessment culture in which assessment is used as a tool for learning appear not to be translated into practice. Leahy, Lyon, Thompson and William (2005) advocates for a shift from quality control in learning to quality assurance, in which case teaching is modified to meet the students needs at a particular point in time. Goodman (2012), talks about the idea of sustainable assessment which actively involve students in learning intentions and grasping the success criteria.

The old assumption that anyone who carries out instruction in the classroom can assess continues to pose a major challenge in education. The argument driven forth in this study is that the beliefs, knowledge and skills of teachers in assessment are very fundamental in paving the direction assessment takes in the classroom. There may be different ways of viewing assessment and an interpretation of the different views of students' assessment forms a basis for teaching and learning in the classrooms.

Harlen (2007:43) defines assessment as the process of collecting evidence and making judgments relating to outcomes such as students' achievement of particular goals of learning or teachers and others understand. Students' achievement as the thrust for assessment cannot be over emphasized. The role of teachers in linking classroom assessment to learning therefore is very important. Rogers (2007) talks about teachers as the designers of learning. This paradox as Rogers succinctly puts it, is about giving choices to the learner to construct his or her own learning. Harlen (2007) highlights the relationship between what is assessed, what is taught and how it is taught and hence the opportunities for learning thereof. Dreyer (2008), supports the view by indicating that assessment is strongly entwined with learning as assessment determines whether learning is taking place, what learning took place and what learning still needs to take place. Black and William (1998), emphasis the importance of feedback that provides guidance to students on how to improve. According to Black and William (1998), learning is directed by what teachers and students do in the classroom.

Challenges embedded in assessment are quite mammoth. Black et al (2004), identifies three main challenges in assessment the first being that the assessment methods that teachers use are not effective in promoting goal learning, the second problem is that grading practices tend to emphasize competition rather than personal improvement and the last but not least problem is that assessment feedback often has a negative impact particularly on low-achieving students who are led to believe that they lack ability and so are not able to learn. This practice according to William (2011), perpetuate assessment to be used primarily to describe processes of evaluating the effectiveness of the sequences of instructional activities when the sequence was completed, the actions that guided learning process before the end of the sequence were generally not regarded as kinds of assessments. This traditional view of classroom assessment seems to have taken supremacy over contemporary views and as such classroom assessment seems to be still viewed as assessment of learning.

## 2. The Concept of Students' Assessment

The concept of assessment is commonly misinterpreted to refer to testing. The word testing usually carries a connotation of pass or fail and whenever the word is mentioned, the resulting emotions are hardly ever positive. Therefore better appreciation of the concept of assessment is very fundamental. This implies a re-definition of assessment as a means of communicating with students, what counts as valid knowledge (Havnes and McDowell, 2008), and the role of students as active participants in assessment as a crucial aspect of a new assessment culture (Havnes and McDowell, 2008). The re-definition of assessment should according to Havnes and McDowell (2008) take into cognisance issues of identities in learning, expectations of both artisans (experts) and novices (students) and clearly articulated construct prior to assessment (Havnes and McDowell, 2008).

Cosidering the broader definition of assessment, it embrace such attributes as formulation of opinion about something, making judgement and or decisions about an act or performance. Nel (2011) defines assessment as the process of gathering, interpreting, recording and using information about a student's response to a learning task. It consists of taking samples of behavior at a given point in time and estimating the worth of those behaviours.

Drawing from the definition given by Nel (2011), it is apparent that assessment is regarded as a process which involves four main steps: gathering of information about students performance and the manner in which this information is gathered differ; secondly, the process entails interpreting of the information about student performance on a given learning task; the process of nterpretation in this case is guided by certain principles, procedures and guidelines; the third step involves recording of the performance and the interpretation therein. Narrowing the definition to classroom assessment, it refers to both formal and informal means by which lecturers and students can follow the progress of a student toward meeting or exceeding the level of knowledge, understanding and skills designated as essential in the course outline (McMillan, 2013). In carrying out classroom assessment, different approaches can be used.

### 2.1 Approaches to Classroom assessment

Alkharusi (2010) argues that students within a classroom share common characteristics of the Lecturer and his or her assessment practices, and as such even though students respond differently to the same classroom assessment process, their responses may have commonality.

Educators have long recognized that the assessment tasks used in the classroom communicate important messages to students about the value, importance and usefulness of the tasks (Alkharusi, 2013). It is clear therefore, that there is what can be called a reciprocal relationship between student's perceptions of assessment and their learning strategies. Hence, approaches to classroom assessment are very essential in determining the type of learning that occurs.

There are two main approaches to classroom assessment namely; formative classroom assessment and summative classroom assessment. According to McMillan (2013), these two approaches define the Lecturers' intended use of information and sometimes describe the Lecturers method of collecting information about student learning. A further elaboration on the two approaches brings up three concepts thus, assessment of learning, assessment for learning and assessment as learning. Both assessment for learning and assessment as learning fall under the formative approach while assessment of learning categorically falls under summative approach.

Though there is a clear intersection of the strategies for assessment for learning and assessment as learning, the distinguishing feature between the two is that assessment as learning emphasizes the active role of the student as an assessor while the emphasis in assessment for learning lies on the Lecturer as the main assessor. Approaches to student assessment demands a clearly articulated frame of reference.

### 2.2 Assessment Frames of Reference

In order to facilitate effective gathering of students' performance, first the purpose of the assessment must be placed within a certain frame of reference. This provides a lens through which the particular assessment would be viewed. Nel (2011) identifies four types of frames of reference. These are standard –referenced assessments, criterion-referenced assessment, norm-referenced assessment and ideographic / ipsative or self – referenced assessment. The frame of reference has to be guided by assessment standards and principles of assessment.

### 2.3 Congruence with planned learning

Lectures are expected to articulate clear learning intentions that are congruent with both the content and depth of thinking implied by the standards and curriculum goals in such a way that they are attainable and assessable (McMillan, 2013).

“Congruence with planned learning refers to the extent to which student perceive the assessment tasks align with the subject's learning objectives and activities” (Alkharusi, 2013) The issue of congruence between instruction, assessment and outcomes is very important.

Learning intentions, goals or targets describe concepts and dispositions that constitute the intended consequences of teaching and learning. Success criteria describe the qualities of excellence of students' work on a particular assignment. They can be communicated by rubrics or checklists. The earlier congruence between approaches to learning, teaching and assessment was replaced by an inconsistency or imbalances in the educational system (Havnes and McDowell, 2008). Alignment of teaching and learning based on research about teaching and learning (Havnes and McDowell, 2008)

#### **2.4 Authenticity in Assessment**

Authenticity refers to the extent to which students perceive the assessment tasks as being related to their everyday living (Alkharusi, 2013). Mueler (2014), describes authentic task as an assignment given to students designed to assess their ability to apply standard-driven knowledge and skills to real-world challenges. Authenticity of an assessment therefore, is defined by its resemblance to the real world specifically to the professional real world. Authentic assessment require students to demonstrate their learning (Mueler, 2014).

Contemporary views on assessments emphasis a move from conservative testing culture dominated by the use of a single total score with the ranking of students as its aim, to a more contextual qualitative paradigm that emphasis descriptive profiles aimed at providing multi-dimensional feedback to foster learning (Havnes and McDowell, 2008). The move from 'an act performed at the end of a learning trajectory to an act in the course of learning and secondly from an act by Lecturers on students (Havnes and McDowell, 2008).

#### **2.5 Transparency and Diversity**

Transparency refers to the extent to which students are clearly informed about the purposes and forms of the assessment (Alkharusi, 2013). Diversity on the other hand refers to the extent to which students perceive that they can complete the assessment tasks at their own speed (Alkharusi, 2013). Both transparency and diversity are very critical in the design of formative classroom assessment.

#### **2.6 Assessment Framework**

Improvement in classroom assessment will most likely strongly contribute to the improvement of learning. Hence there is a dire need for a framework to foster this principle.

The framework does not intend to prescribe one assessment methodology for measuring student learning instead the framework should be viewed as a set of building blocks and best practices that can be assembled, modified or shaped to a particular institution's aligned integrated approach to learning teaching and assessment. The goal of the assessment framework is to provide a foundation of terms, processes and procedures so that all the lectures, tutors and facilitators may assess from a common understanding. Assessment framework also focuses on the student and provide best practice information on how to assess students' achievement.

### **3. Methodology**

The study made use of a dual approach. The dual approach was used in order to seek convergence and corroboration and to eliminate bias while also improving credibility of the results. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used in carrying out the study each being used to enrich and broaden the other. As indicated by Bamberger (2000), the most crucial stages for integration will include but not limited to;

- Conceptual and analytical framework
- Exploratory analysis
- Sample selection
- Data analysis and
- Presentation of findings.

The target population consisted of 45 students from the department of Diploma in Adult Education. Comprehensive sampling was purposively used. The Students' Perceptions of Assessment Questionnaire (SPAQ) was administered to all the 45. The SPAQ is a pre-validated questionnaire with a four- point Likert Scale response pattern. The scales are: Almost Never, Sometimes, often and Always. These are weighted 1,2,3, and 4 respectively. The SPAQ addresses:

1. Congruence with planned learning
2. Authenticity
3. Student Consultation
4. Transparency
5. Student Capability.

The analysis of the document on the guidelines for assessment at IEMS provided the context which gives a frame of reference for assessment at the institution. According to Bowen (2009), document analysis forms part of qualitative research in which documents are interpreted by the researcher to give meaning around an area of interest. Bowen (2009) views the process of analysing documents as similar to that of analysing focus group or

interview transcript. This is because both analysis incorporates coding content into themes (Babbie, 2001). Data analysis was positioned on quantitative-qualitative continuum (Cryer, 2006). Data collected using SPAQ was analysed descriptively using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) while document analysis was carried out on the guidelines for assessment at IEMS. Triangulation of data collected through SPAQ and document analysis enabled analysis of the object of research from different perspectives (Corby, 2006) and provided the researcher with more confidence about the results (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche' and Delpont, 2002).

#### 4. Findings

The results of the questionnaire are aligned to the categories on the questionnaire. Firstly, authenticity referred to the extent to which assessment tasks feature real life situations that are relevant to the student. Students seemed to regard the assessment tasks in Research Methods as being authentic and a large percentage of the students (71.1%) indicated that they were requested to apply their learning to real life situations. Furthermore, a large percentage (44.4%) of students attested that they could demonstrate to others that their learning has helped them to do a number of things.

Secondly, student consultation focused on the extent to which students are consulted and informed about the forms of assessment tasks being employed. The results indicated that students felt that they were generally not consulted and they were less informed about the forms of assessment tasks given to them. About 33.3% of the students showed that they are almost never given a chance to select how they will be assessed. A large percentage of students (27.3%) also had the opinion that they did not have a say in how they were going to be assessed. The average scale statement mean for student consultation was about 2.53 which shows that majority of students had the impression that they were not consulted about their assessment.

Thirdly, transparency referred to the extent to which the purposes and forms of assessment tasks are well defined and clear to the student. About 2.9% of the students showed that they almost never understand what was required of them while 8.3% confirmed that they almost never knew what was needed to successfully complete a Research Method tasks. Majority of the students seemed to agree with the fact that they were well informed about their assessment in advance.

Fourthly, diversity in this case measured the extent to which multiple, varied assessment tasks are employed in assessing students. The results revealed that more than 40% of the students opined that they had as much chance as any other student at completing assessment task. A similar percentage of the students was also of the impression that when they were confused about the assessment task, they were almost never given another way to answer it. About 28% of the students felt that they were almost never given assessment tasks that suit their ability.

#### 4.2 Document analysis

The analysis focused on five categories which were pre-defined. The categories were aligned to those in the SPAQ except for the additional one category. The main purpose of the categories was to provide answers to the research questions and also to provide a good basis for triangulation of data. The categories therefore were;

- Congruence with Planned Learning – constructive alignment
- Authenticity of assessment
- Student Consultation on assessment
- Transparency of assessment
- Diversity of assessment

Congruence with Planned Learning or constructive alignment

There are two major reasons for aligning assessments with learning objectives. First, alignment increases the probability of providing students with the opportunities to learn and practice the knowledge and skills that will be required on the various assessments (Harlen, 2007). Second, when assessments and objectives are aligned, best performance will likely translate into "good learning. When objectives and assessments are misaligned, many students will focus their efforts on activities that will lead to good grades on assessments, rather than focusing their efforts on learning what is important (Dreyer, 2008).

Lack of alignment between what is taught (instruction), what is learned (learning) and what is assessed (assessment) can be very detrimental to the overall educational quality. The issues of alignment between instruction, continuous assessment and the learning strategies are therefore paramount in dealing with classroom assessment (Macmillan, 2013 and Spiller, 2009).

The IEMS guidelines for assessment addresses the issue of alignment by indicating that the students' scores should be; based on benchmarks as opposed to ranking based on norm.

Authenticity of assessment

According to Struyven et al (2002), students regard authentic assessment as being fair because it measures qualities, skills and competences as opposed to requiring only recall of information. Authenticity forms a major part of performance-based assessment which are characterised by the following;

- clear performance targets that are linked to instructional goals
- authenticity in products and performances
- criteria and performance standards
- teaching, modelling, and guiding students through the strategies to be used
- use of on-going assessments for feedback and adjustment

Authenticity as a concept has not been addressed by the guidelines for grading and assessment at IEMS. Though the institution attests to have adopted performance –based assessment, there is no mention of how authenticity could be fostered.

#### **Student Consultation on assessment matters**

Dreyer (2008), highlights five assessment for learning strategies which emphasis the importance of students' involvement in assessment. These are;

- Clarify and share intentions and criteria
- Engineer effective classroom discussion
- Provide feedback that moves learners forward
- Activate learners as instructional resources for one another

The guidelines made no mention of student involvement, rather it presented students as users of the assessment as opposed to being part of the process.

#### **Transparency of assessment**

Performance assessment is frequently measured through the use of rubrics which entail clearly defined performance criteria that serve as a scoring guide (Mertler, 2001). The document analysed includes statements which address the issue of transparency in assessment. Examples of such statements are;

- descriptors should be established so that students are clear about what is expected of them
- It is recommended that marking rubrics be provided for each assessment item or question in the course
- facilitators expected to develop their course level descriptors which should describe the normal expectations of students achieving particular grades
- The standard of assessment should be provided to the students and the assessors so that the assessment is assessed with little ambiguity
- The grade descriptors should represent a range of competencies

#### **Diversity of assessment**

Torrance (2007) opines a move from assessment as an end product of learning, through assessment as supporting learning, to assessment as part of learning, a move from a situation where procedures and practices come to completely dominate the learning experience and criteria compliance comes to replace learning. When assessment becomes part of learning, then the students become active players in their assessment. classroom assessment activities varies from oral questioning and feedback, assignments, student presentations, diagnostic tests, and end of unit quizzes. The diversity of assessment in classroom assessment can best be fostered through assessment for learning.

The guidelines for assessment at IEMS is quite silent when coming to the issue of diversity in assessment. This means that the lecturers in their different programs are free to use which ever method of assessment they may chose at the time.

### **5. Conclusion**

The analysis has unfolded the experiences and viewpoints of students on assessment. The stated views and experiences provide some form of evidence relating to the discussed themes, and hence contributes to the overall findings of the study.

The document analysis has on the other hand provided a context in which assessment activities take place and the extent to which that context is conducive to, contributes to or supportive of, the assessment. Based on the findings from SPAQ and the document analysis, the discussions and recommendations are based on the categories understudied in the two instances.

Poor alignment between instruction and continuous assessment can have a negative impact on the student attitudes, motivation and classroom climate (Macmillan, 2013). The guidelines on grading and performance assessment at IEMS stipulates that in the course outline, the learning outcomes, the learning activities and the assessment tasks must be shown to be properly aligned. Though the emphasis is placed on the documentation of the whole issue, majority of students have affirmed that assessment tasks in Research Methods course were aligned to both learning and instruction. The dilemma though is that without clearly articulated guidelines on how to actually do the alignment, the opposite may be happening in other courses.

Mueller (2014), opines that the attributes of authentic assessment include performing task, based on real-life situation, requires constructing or applying the skills, they are student-structured and results in direct evidence.

Students attested to the fact that assessment tasks in the Research methods course were authentic and were

based on real-life situations. The guidelines on grading and performance assessment does not place any emphasis on the authenticity of assessment. The overstating of descriptors seemed to have overshadowed the importance of authenticity in assessment.

Students' involvement in assessment seems to be a foreign concept at IEMS. Though the guidelines on grading and performance assessment do highlight the importance of making students aware of how they would be assessed, the guidelines do not mention anything regarding student involvement. The findings from the students' experiences confirms that the students felt left out from the decisions on assessment hence in most instances were not even aware of how they were to be assessed.

Despite the fact that the guidelines on grading and performance standards of assessment IEMS, advocates for the development of descriptors in order to ensure that students are clear about what is expected of them, the experiences of students were such that majority were in the dark concerning assessment of some tasks. This implies that the assessment criteria was not shared with the students. Best practices for classroom assessment especially assessment as learning demands that assessment criteria should be properly communicated to the students. The model proposed by Rowe (2012) for assessment as learning seems lacking in the guidelines on grading and performance assessment at IEMS. Thus;

- there is mention of a platform for lecturers to discuss the learning outcomes with the students
- there is no indication for lecturers to create assessment criteria with the students for the various tasks that need to be completed and or skills that need to be learned or mastered
- providing feedback to students as they learn and purposively asking them guiding questions to help them monitor their own learning seems to be missing from the guidelines.

Students felt that there was little or no diversity when it comes to assessment at IEMS. This experienced is validated by the fact that the guidelines on grading and standards of assessment at IEMS do not clearly articulate the issue of diversity of assessment. This leaves its implementation to mere chance.

### 5.1 Development of a Frame Work for Classroom Assessment

Based on the findings of this study, the following guide has been proposed for the development of a frame work for classroom assessment;

- Establish a system of assessment for different programs which provide the relationship between that system and the program goals and philosophy
- Develop specific operational criteria applicable to the specific programme
- Clearly articulate the purpose of assessment
- Provide clarity on performance measures and standards
- Integrate principles of Assessment for learning, Assessment as learning and Assessment is learning in designing assessment strategies
- Devise mechanisms of strengthening and maintaining validity and reliability of assessment tasks for all programmes
- Provide examples of authentic assessment for classroom assessment in appropriate for the program or course
- Provide guidelines on how to align instruction, learning and assessment for the different programs
- Articulate ways and means of involving students in the assessment processes
- Devise means of sharing assessment criterias with the relevant students
- Provide examples of different methods of assessment applicable to the respective program or course

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