



More than a test: assessments for learning

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ARTICLE INFO

Received : 12/12/2012

Accepted : 31/01/2013

Published : 01/06/2013

KEYWORD

Assessments,
learning,
feedback,

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Assessments, an essential part of most curricula, are often complex in their planning, implementation and interpretation (1). This complexity is frequently reflected in a range of descriptions in available literature. Although assessments have commonly served as a measure of a student's performance, there is historical evidence linked to its utility as a tool for learning (2). One definition of an assessment states that it is 'an *on-going process aimed at understanding and improving student learning. It involves making our expectations explicit and public; setting appropriate criteria and high standards for learning quality; systematically gathering, analysing, and interpreting evidence to determine how well performance matches those expectations and standards; and using the resulting information to document, explain, and improve performance* (3). A number of studies lend support to the association between quality of learning and some forms of assessments, although views have been divided on the earlier findings (4). Despite the uncertainty, efforts to adopt assessment for learning as a means of improving learning are increasingly gaining prominence in higher education(5, 6).

Generally, assessment methods differ during the two phases of undergraduate training. The options available include multiple choice questions, essays, clinical assessments including objective structured tests, completion of logbooks of procedures and vivas. Commonly, such assessments lead to an award of a mark or grade – summative feedback. The limitations of such methods in assessing the cognitive, affective, interpersonal and psychosocial domains of learning have been noted by Bloom (7). To improve our understanding of students' learning, specific procedures that encourage inquiry-based learning and peer or tutor interaction need to be adopted and encouraged. This can be achieved through regular, formal or informal approaches such as assignments, project work, portfolios and reflective journals (8, 9).

Active student participation and detailed feedback from assessors are essential for assessments to promote and encourage learning (8;10). Providing timely feedback which is

linked to pre-specified learning outcomes or activities is crucial (5, 6, 11). Feedback may be verbal or written but should be communicated clearly and regularly with a greater focus on the positive attributes of the completed work together with information relating to how to improve performance (10, 12). On the other hand, students as active learners must engage with feedback to bridge identified 'learning gaps'. This is one way to identify their current achievements and plan for future targets(5, 12).

Somewhat implicit in this discourse lies the challenges relating to organisational and individual commitment in the design of studies in this area. Furthermore, improved research methodologies are needed to provide a sound evidence base to inform assessment for learning approaches. It is therefore, of great importance, that both educators and students increase their awareness and understanding of this concept.

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