

Classroom Assessment: The Confusion Of Many Voices

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Classroom assessment has become one of the major hot topics in contemporary education. The academic literature on classroom assessment is extensive, with well over 10,000 works in JSTOR and several hundred in Academic Search Premier. Within the popular press, classroom assessment is again a key issue with over 3 million hits on Google. This is the result of a desire for greater accountability in the education system, a trend which has gained traction over the past 20 years.

Within the academic community, assessment has been treated with confusion at best, and with mild disdain at worst in some circles for three major reasons. First, the link between assessment and accountability places many teachers on edge that classroom assessment is another method of evaluation, a myth that should be challenged. Second, the vast literature on classroom assessment has created a mound of information that has led to a sense of overload among many teachers. Finally, especially in college environments, faculty members have had limited training in the utilization of classroom assessment in the classroom. As a result, they tend to view classroom assessment with distrust as they create a false link between classroom assessment and course evaluations. Also, most academics in a university setting do not know how to apply classroom assessment techniques in an effort to improve their teaching. This review and subsequent bibliography seeks to address these problems in classroom assessment by providing a summary of the major themes of classroom assessment, focusing on the different types of assessment. The bibliography will focus on various issues of classroom assessment, with an emphasis on techniques of assessment. The overall goal of this review and bibliography is to demonstrate the power of classroom assessment techniques and how these techniques can be utilized to improve teaching effectiveness in nonthreatening, non-evaluative manner.

Classroom assessment's place in the classroom and academia

Initially, it is important to place classroom assessment in the wider picture of teaching in the classroom. Brookhart, places classroom assessment at the "intersection of three teaching

functions: instruction, classroom management and assessment (Brookhart, 2004: 430). Brookhart goes on to show that theories of classroom assessment come from psychology, sociology and measurement (Brookhart, 2004: 430). While very restrictive in her inclusion of just three areas of study, this discussion is important in that it shows that assessment is influenced by very disparate academic disciplines and is used in various manners within the classroom. This leads to a great amount of confusion as often disciplinary language needs to be understood in order to understand the applicability of an assessment tool. Also, the role a specific assessment activity plays in the classroom needs to be clearly defined in order to avoid misunderstanding or misinterpreting conclusions from the assessment exercise.

Another important issue in classroom assessment is the role of classroom assessment in the education system. Cross (1998) believes that a shift has occurred from assessment for accountability to assessment for improvement. This view is challenged by Miller (1999: 94) in that he believes that universities should “focus on accountability to the community.” This is one of the key debates and it leads to great trepidation within the education community. Faculty members want to know what the purpose of assessment activities is. How are the data used? These problems have led to a lack of buy in by many faculty members. In my experience at another university, I have discovered that the community, in Miller’s (1999) example, wants the university to define the assessment tools, only to be able to show documentable success. This puts universities in a good position to use classroom assessment as a method of demonstrating learning in the classroom. We can set the rules for the assessment program. However, this requires us to be proactive in the development of assessment tools and results.

Weaving through the confusion of terms

In order to understand assessment, and break down the false link between assessment and evaluation, it is necessary to contrast the two terms. Brookhart (2005: 5) defines assessment as “collecting information about something to be used for some purpose. She (Brookhart, 2005: 6) contrasts evaluation from assessment, stating that “[e]valuation means using assessment information to make judgments about the worth of something.” These definitions show the connection between assessment and evaluation in that assessment is used as the building block of evaluation. However, when taken alone, assessment is simply the collection of information for a specific purpose. There is not value judgment given to assessment. Assessment is about gaining information in the effort to answer a research question. This is different from evaluation which is about affixing value.

Taken further, McNamme and Chen (2005: 72) and Chappuis and Stiggins (2002: 40) both emphasize that a basic dichotomy exists in classroom assessment practices; assessments of learning and assessments for learning. Most teachers are familiar with the assessment of learning. This is generally a graded event. The event does not have to be graded in order to

assess if learning has occurred. A simple question posed at the end of a class has the ability to determine if learning has occurred. However, when someone outside of the classroom wants to know if learning has occurred, usually the desire is to see some sort of quantitative score. Most often, this takes the form of an exam or a paper. Also, students want to measure their learning against an established norm and often this norm is a score on a graded event.

Assessment for learning opens a very interesting opportunity for increased student involvement in the learning process. Chappuis and Stiggins (2002: 40) define assessment for learning as occurring “during the teaching and learning process rather than after it and has as its primary focus the ongoing improvement of learning for all students.” The goal here is to use assessment to help focus student learning, not just as a diagnostic tool, which it could be used for, but also as a catalyst for classroom discussion, out of the classroom preparation and group work. Assessment for learning is a powerful tool as it has the potential to increase learning by creating a learner centered environment, but still allowing the teacher to focus learning.

This dichotomy is echoed by several researchers through discussions of formative and summative assessment. Formative assessment is defined by Frey and Schmitt (2007: 411) as assessing “learning while still occurring.” This is contrasted with summative which occurs “at the end of learning (Frey and Schmitt, 2007: 411). Frey and Schmitt connect with McNamnee and Chenn (2005) and Chappuis and Stiggins (2002) in that, according to Frey and Schmitt (2007: 411), “most textbooks describe the purpose of formative assessment as informing the teacher, and seldom mention providing feedback to students.” This confirms Chappuis and Stiggins (2002) claim that assessment can be used to improve learning in students. When used as a tool to provide feedback to students, formative assessment becomes a synonym for assessment for learning.

Rea-Dickins (2006) challenges the dichotomy between formative and summative assessment by combining the two processes. According to Rea-Dickins (2006: 164), “[i]t is commonly held that classroom-based assessment should be summative and formative, concerned both with establishing what learners can do at a given point in time...and with monitoring learner progress and informing teaching as a means to supporting learning.” In other words, assessment does not have to be either formative, as a teaching tool, or summative, as a tool to document progress, but it can be used together to redirect teaching and learning.

Another key type of assessment is authentic assessment. Authentic assessment is defined by Frey and Schmitt (2007: 406) as “assessments that specifically address real-world applications.” These focus on applications that individuals will use outside of the classroom. For example, Frey and Schmitt (2007: 408) identify civil service exams in China as an example of authentic assessment. These tools can be formative or summative, either being used as part of the learning process or as a tool to assess learning.

Isaacson (1999) adds more descriptive categories of assessment tools, further muddying the understanding of classroom assessment by typical faculty members. Isaacson (1999: 30) adds definitions of behavioral assessment, mastery learning, curriculum-based assessment and performance assessment to the literature on classroom assessment. Also, Isaacson (1999: 32) looks at holistic and analytic scoring as different techniques of assessment.

All of these definitions create a cacophony of voices that drown each other out and create confusion for those who want to use classroom assessment in the classroom. While common in academic, the struggle over defining the techniques tends to become the focus of the discussion and this seriously limits the effectiveness of classroom assessment as faculty members struggle to get past terms in an effort to begin assessment.

Assessment as a clue to important concepts

One final key issue in classroom assessment that needs amplification was raised by Columba (2001). In her article, she emphasizes that “through assessment we communicate most clearly to students which activities and learning outcomes we value” (Columba, 2001: 372). This is especially important in formative assessment where we are using assessment as a learning activity. By focusing on certain activities, we emphasize what themes are important. It is important that we make sure the correct themes are emphasized and that the themes emphasized in formative assessment follow through to summative assessment in an effort to keep the assessment tools fair for the students. This is especially important if grades are tied to the summative assessment activities.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the literature review presented above and are presented here in an effort to encourage more faculty to adopt a wide variety of assessment activities in their classrooms.

- Focus classroom assessment on the classroom level for the average faculty member. This will allow faculty members to reflect upon their teaching, but since the product is owned by the individual faculty member, they will be more confident in using assessment tools.
- Limit discussions of defining and categorizing classroom assessment techniques. Focus on specific items that work best in the classroom for a specific purpose.
- Promote the dichotomy of formative and summative assessment. This would be the most common uses for classroom assessment for the average instructor.
- Promote responsible use of assessment tools in the classroom. Emphasize consistency between what is used in formative and summative assessment.

Classroom assessment is not necessarily an evaluation tool. Assessment can be used privately by an instructor in an effort to critically reflect upon student learning in the classroom and adapt to student needs. The emphasis on accountability has led to confusion over the role of assessment as assessment can be used for accountability at a large level, but its great strength is at the individual classroom level. It is hoped that the individual instructor will see through the threats and confusion associated with classroom assessment and begin to see the power associated with assessment tools and how they can increase teaching and learning effectiveness in the classroom.

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Annotated Readings

Abbe, Allison, et al. (2007). Cross Cultural Competence in Army Leaders: A Conceptual and Empirical Foundation. Washington, DC: US Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences.

The authors review a series of assessment tools that measure cross cultural competence. They conclude that a multimethod approach for cross cultural competence would be beneficial, but time consuming. They conclude that culture general training should be an important focus in the classroom and there is no sufficient assessment to tool for this need.

Altshuler, Lisa, et al. (2003). “Assessing Changes in Intercultural Sensitivity among Physician Trainees Using the Intercultural Development Inventory.” International Journal of Intercultural Relations. 27: 387-401.

Paige, R. Michael, et al. (2003). “Assessing Intercultural Sensitivity: An Empirical Analysis of the Manner and Bennett Intercultural Development Inventory.” International Journal of Intercultural Relations. 27: 467-486.

Paige, R. Michael, et al. (2004). “Assessing the Impact of a Strategies-Based Curriculum on Language and Culture Learning Abroad.” Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad. 10: 253-276.

The authors look at the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) as a tool to assess intercultural competence. Through a series of statistical analyses, they conclude that the IDI is a satisfactory tool for measuring intercultural competence. The authors also conclude that the IDI can be used in a classroom environment to assess intercultural competence and has relevance at both the programmatic and classroom level.

Angelo, T. A., & Cross, K. P. (1993) Classroom assessment techniques: a handbook for college teachers. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

This work provides a detailed account of at least 50 classroom assessment techniques. It also provides methods for the application of classroom assessment. This work is an outstanding resource for the instructor who would like to implement classroom assessment techniques in the classroom. It provides a listing of methods and how to apply in a straightforward manner.

Banta, Trudy. (1999). “How We Learn about Assessment.” Assessment Update. 11(2): 3;15.

Banta reviews the Assessment Institute Meeting in 1998 and provides several conclusions from the meeting. She concluded that faculty learn about assessment best in teams. Teams provide a support network at universities and a discussion group to discuss new ideas. Second, she emphasizes the importance of primary trait analysis as a classroom assessment method.

Bean, John C. (1996).Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking and Active Learning in the Classroom. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

This work looks to link the Writing Across the Curriculum movement to the critical thinking movement and offers methods on how to assess writing across the curriculum. It provides methods to integrate writing into the classroom in a very approachable manner. This work is a great source to introduce techniques of writing into any classroom.

Beckman, Sarah. (1997). "Classroom Assessment in a Baccalaureate Nursing Course." Assessment Update. 9(4): 12-13.

Beckman chronicles the use of different assessment tools in a nursing course. Her goal was to clarify unclear concepts in the classroom towards the end of each class. She identified three techniques, the minute paper, the peer critique and the muddiest point, as useful techniques to achieve the goal of clarifying concepts.

Brookhart, Susan. (2001). "Classroom Assessment and Research: An Update on Uses, Approaches and Research Findings; A Review." Teachers College Record. 103(1): 5-9.

This review of a book by Angelo emphasizes that student involvement in learning is increased as a result of classroom assessment. This is accomplished in two major areas. First, students reflect upon learning as a result of participating in a classroom assessment program. Second, student motivation is increased as students feel instructors care about what they think.

Buhagiar, Michael. (2007). "Classroom Assessment within the Alternative Assessment Paradigm: Revisiting the Theory." The Curriculum Journal. 18(1): 39-56.

Buhagiar emphasizes widening assessment techniques to include what he calls alternative assessment techniques. These techniques are identified as methods of documenting student learning that are not based on psychometric standards. Buhagiar also astutely recognizes that assessment is an activity that affects people. This is an important statement as instructors rarely think about how the assessment affects the student, but simply wants to know what information can be extracted from the tool.

Click, Ben and Sarah Magruder. (2004). "Implementing Electronic Portfolios for Performance Assessment: A Pilot Program Involving a College Writing Center." Assessment Update. July-August, 2004: 1-2; 13-15.

The authors demonstrate the use of electronic portfolios in an effort to document teaching techniques in a teacher education program. The electronic portfolio idea can be implemented in other classrooms and provides the student with a tangible, portable record of work in a class. This can be used to demonstrate development in the class or as products for the student to use in the future.

Davis, Barbara Gross. (1993). "Tools for Teaching." San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

This work is a great introduction to the college teaching experience. It covers all aspects of teaching from developing the syllabus to holding office hours. Assessment is woven through the book focusing on the development of the syllabus, through testing and grading, into evaluation to improve teaching.

Della-Piana, Gabriel. (2008). "Enduring Issues in Educational Assessment." Phi Delta Kappan. April, 2008: 590-592.

Della-Piana emphasizes several issues that hinder the development of national system of assessments. Validity is explained in this article as the validity of inferences people take from the assessment scores. This is an example of the problems of crossing from assessment to evaluation.

Gaeddert, Barry. (2003). "improving Graduate Theological Instruction: Using Classroom Assessment Techniques to Connect Teaching and Learning."

This article emphasizes methods of assessing the affective domain of Bloom's taxonomy. Given the nature of university teaching, the affective domain is often ignored in assessment programs. Gaeddert employs several techniques from Angelo and Cross's work (1993) to show their applicability for assessing the affective domain.

Girgin, Kadire Zeynep and Dannelle D. Stevens. (2005). "Bridging in-class Participation with Innovative Instruction: Use and Implication in a Turkish University Classroom." Innovations in Education and Teaching International. 42(1): 93-106.

This article looks emphasizes the importance of student-centered classrooms. In their assessment program, the authors concluded that student-centered classrooms increased

motivation and saw an increase of deep learning. The authors also suggest the use of the Think-pair-share assessment technique as an activity to get all students involved in the class.

Guskey, Thomas. (2003). "How Classroom Assessments Improve Learning." Educational Leadership. February, 2003: 6-11.

Guskey advocates for the use of assessment tools as a methods of diagnosing academic content that students did not understand and engaging in corrective instruction to improve student learning. He separates corrective instruction from reteaching in that corrective instruction adapts to different learning styles and presents the material in a different manner.

Hammer, Mitchell, et al. (2003). "Measuring Intercultural Sensitivity: The Intercultural Development Inventory." International Journal of Intercultural Relations. 27: 421-443.

The authors introduce and show the effectiveness of the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) as an assessment tool for cross cultural competence. They statistically demonstrate the validity of the IDI. Most importantly, they show that the IDI is an effective assessment tool across various cultures. The lack of instruments that are cross culturally effective is seen as a major problem in the assessment literature.

Kan, Adnan. (2007). "An Alternative Method in the New Education Program from the Point of Performance-based Assessment: Rubric Scoring Scales." Educational Sciences: Theory and Practice. 70(1): 144-152.

Kan details the development of rubrics as part of the assessment process. Kan identifies two main types of rubrics, analytic and holistic. The difference between the two types of rubrics is whether the evaluator looks at individual parts of the assessment activity, or scores it as a single, whole activity.

Klak, Thomas and Patricia Martin. (2003). "Do University-Sponsored International Cultural Events help Students to Appreciate 'Difference'?" International Journal of Intercultural Relations. 27: 445-465.

This article uses assessment to see if exposure to intercultural topics in the classroom or events outside of the classroom raises ones intercultural sensitivity. They employed a series of assessment tools to demonstrate that intercultural sensitivity increases due to exposure to intercultural themes in a classroom and participation in intercultural events outside of the classroom.

Lee, Lina. (1997). "Using Portfolios to Develop L2 Cultural Knowledge and Awareness of Students in Intermediate Spanish." Hispania. 80(2): 355-367.

Lee suggests the use of portfolios as a tool to assess increased cultural knowledge in a Spanish language classroom. She concludes that portfolios move beyond just the content of the portfolio and allow students to individualize their learning within established parameters. She also concludes that portfolio assessments train students to become more independent and sets the foundation for lifelong learning.

Lei, Simon. (2008). "Assessment Techniques of Instructors in Two Community Colleges in a State-Wide System." Education. 128(3): 392-411.

Lei survey 400 faculty members at two community colleges in order to determine if their education level and status at the college influenced their selection of assessment tools. Lei concluded that permanent faculty tended to deemphasize traditional, objective exams and emphasize group work and cooperative learning. Lei concluded that this is the result of full time faculty's ability and willingness to invest more time into assessment programs.

Ohlsen, Michele. (2007). "Classroom Assessment Practices of Secondary School Members of NCTM." American Secondary Education. 36(1): 4-53.

Ohlsen reports on the result of a survey that shows most Math teachers use teacher-created assessment tools, mainly exams and quizzes. As expected, math teachers tended to avoid using oral presentations, essay essay questions and team projects. While NCTM is pushing performance based assessment, most teachers are not adopting performance based assessment. This shows the disconnection between theory at the national council level and practice in the classroom.

Reynolds, Nedra. (2000). Portfolio Keeping. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.

Reynolds, Nedra. (2000). Portfolio Teaching. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.

These two works provide a great introduction to implementing Portfolio based assessment in the classroom. Reynolds emphasizes the flexibility of portfolios as a great strength of this form of assessment. It also provides an opportunity to compare assessment activities early in the course with assessment activities late in the course in an effort to demonstrate development.

Rohner, Ronald and Leonard Katz. (1970). "Testing for Validity and Reliability in Cross-Cultural Research." American Anthropologist. 72(5): 1068-1073.

One of the major issues facing the assessment of Cross Cultural Competence is how to measure Cross Cultural Competence. Rohner and Katz statistically conclude that cross cultural competence can be measured and that the results of valid based on work showing that multiple raters of an assessment tool rated an individual in the same category.

Ruiz-Primo, Maria, et. al. (2004). “Evaluating students’ science notebooks as an assessment tool.” International Journal of Science Education. 26(12): 1477-1506.

The authors suggest the use of journals as a method of both assessment and increasing student learning. They suggest that the notebooks encourage students to write as a normal part of their science class. They also suggest that the notebooks not only show an outside reviewer student progress, but that they also show the opportunity to learn.

Stiggins, Rick. (2007). “Five Assessment Myths and Their Consequences.” Education Week. 27(8): 28-29.

Stiggins identifies several flaws in several educational assessment techniques commonly used in the United States. He emphasizes the problems that exist with annual assessment as opposed to continual assessment. He also raises a concern over the lack of training for educators in the areas of the annual assessment tools.

Stobart, Gordon. (2005). “Assessment and Change.” Assessment in Education. 12(3): 215-16.

Stobert emphasizes the relationship of classroom assessment to change in policies. Looking at examples from the UK, Stobert concludes that assessment can bring about change, although it is often slow. He then identifies several problems with assessment adapting to change. The primary problem he identifies is the multicultural nature of society and the need to develop assessment tools that can work in a cross cultural setting.

Vonderwell, Selma. (2003). “Assessing Online Learning and Teaching: Adapting the Minute Paper.” TechTrends. 48(4): 29-31.

Vonderwell adapts the minute paper from a classroom setting to an online course. The major difference in the online version of the minute paper is a result of the time frame for classroom discussions. While the minute paper in the classroom setting focuses on the lesson presented each day, the online version focuses on lesson that is covered over a period of a one week lesson.