

Traditional or Performance Assessment: What is the Right Way in Assessing Learners?

Frank Quansah

University of Cape Coast, Ghana, Department of Education and Psychology

Abstract

Assessment is one of the critical components of classroom instruction. People within the educational community, which includes policymakers, educators, students, parents, administrators, have different ideas regarding the implementation of assessment strategies. While some believe traditional assessment methods are more effective, others are of the view that performance and portfolio assessment tools are superior. Alternative assessment started being used as a means for educational reform due to the increasing awareness of the influence of testing on curriculum and instruction. Currently, “traditional assessment, which is generally called testing, is challenged by alternative assessment approaches. Which form of the assessment procedure is appropriate in assessing learners? Traditional or alternative assessment procedures? This paper seeks to compare traditional assessment procedures (e.g., multiple choice and essay) with performance and portfolio assessments with the view of unearthing which assessment procedure should be adopted in this current generation.

Keywords: Alternative assessment, performance assessment, multiple choice, portfolio assessment

1. Introduction

Assessment is one of the critical components of classroom instruction. According to Taras (2005), assessment refers to the judgement of students’ work. Similarly, Rust (2002) describes assessment as making a judgement, identifying the strength and weakness, the good and the bad, and the right and the wrong in some cases of something. Educational assessment is an integral part of learning and the practice of teaching, and helps improve learners’ achievement (Assessment Reform Group, 2009). Assessment is changing for many reasons. Changes in the skills and knowledge needed for success; in understanding of how students learn; and in relationship between assessment and instruction have necessitated the change in assessment strategies.

People within the educational community, which includes policymakers, educators, students, parents, administrators, have different ideas regarding the implementation of assessment strategies (Dietel, Herman & Knuth, 1991). While some believe traditional assessment methods are more effective, others are of the view that performance and portfolio assessment tools are superior. For example, Oloruntegbe and Omoifo (2000) were of the view that teachers seldom teach and assess skills and attitudes. As a result stakeholders in education are beginning to recognize that minimums and basics are no longer sufficient (Winking, 1997) and are calling for a closer match between the skills that students learn in schools and the skills they will need upon leaving school. Law and Eckes (1995), on the other hand, believe that for validity and reliability reasons, teachers should stick to traditional assessment. This dilemma has been an issue to teachers on which assessment strategy to employ in assessing learners. This paper seeks to compare traditional assessment procedures (e.g., multiple choice and essay) with performance and portfolio assessments.

2. Traditional Assessment

Traditional assessment refers to the conventional methods of testing which usually produces written document, such as quizzes or exams. Standardized test, most state achievement test such as BECE and WASSCE are also examples of traditional assessment. These comprise tests given to students by teachers to measure how much the students have learned. The most widely used traditional assessment tools include multiple-choice tests, true/false tests, short answers, and essays.

Multiple choice test involves items which consist of one or more introductory sentences followed by a list of two or more suggested responses. They are commonly utilised by teachers, schools, and assessment organisations because they are economical, objective and easily scored (Bailey, 1998). True/false items require students to make a decision and find out which of two potential responses is true. They are easy to score and administer. However, guessing might increase the chance of success by 50% (Simonson et al., 2000). In short-answer test, “items are written either as a direct question requiring the learner to fill in a word or phrase or as statements in which a space has been left blank for a brief written answer” (Simonson et al., 2000, p. 270). Lastly, essays are effective assessment tools since the questions are flexible and assess the higher order learning skills. However, they are not very practical due to the fact that it is very difficult and time consuming to score the essays. Moreover, subjectivity might be an issue in scoring (Simonson et al., 2000).

3. Performance Assessment

Performance assessment is “product and behaviour-based measurements based on settings designed to emulate

real-life contexts or conditions in which specific knowledge or skills are actually applied” (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association & National Council on Measurement in Education, 1999, p. 179). Palm (2008) maintained that performance assessment is seen as having better possibilities to measure complex skills and communication, which are considered important competencies and disciplinary knowledge needed in today’s society. According to the Office of Technology Assessment, U.S. Congress (1992):
“Performance assessment is best understood as a continuum of formats that range from the simplest student-constructed response to comprehensive collections of large bodies of work over time.....Constructed-response questions require students to produce an answer to a question rather than to select from an array of possible answers (as multiple-choice items do). For example, answers supplied by filling in the blank; solving a mathematics problem; writing short answers” (p. 19).

According to Elliott (1995), there are two major concepts that describe performance assessment: Performance - a student’s active generation of a response that is observable either directly or indirectly via a permanent product; and Authentic - the nature of the task and context in which the assessment occurs is relevant and represents “real world” problems or issues. Some form of essay tests come in the form of performance-based assessment but there are many others including experiments in science, writing speeches, letter to newspaper editor, artistic production and conducting surveys.

4. Portfolio Assessment

Portfolios consist of student work that displays mastery of skill of the task and expression (Kulieke et al., 1990). Paulson, Paulson, and Meyer (as cited in Bailey, 1998) define portfolios as “a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student’s efforts, progress, and achievements in one or more areas. The collection must include student participation in selecting contents, the criteria for judging merit, and evidence of student self-reflection” (p. 216). Because of their cumulative nature, portfolios require a lot of input and responsibility from the student. Moreover, they demand a great deal of time and commitment from the teachers, which yields a practical problem in assessment (Bailey, 1998).

According to Davis et al. (2001), portfolio is a collection of various forms of evidence of achievement of learning outcomes. In practical terms, a student portfolio for assessment purposes is a compendium of reports, papers, and other material, together with the student’s reflection on his or her learning and on strengths and weaknesses. The assessment portfolio is prepared by an individual student either at the direction of the faculty or as uniquely devised by the student. It may also contain reports of grades, evaluations, and examinations, and it is usually held together in some appropriate binder or in a computer-based form so that it can be circulated easily to defined faculty for the specific purpose of assessment (Al-Shehri, 1995). Various assessment tools such as tutor rating scales and peer ratings can be included in the portfolio to provide evidence of the student’s performance.

5. Comparison of Traditional Assessment with Performance/Portfolio Assessment

From Bailey’s (1998) view traditional assessments are mostly standardised in nature. Law and Eckes (1995) point out that most standardised tests assess only the lower-order thinking skills of the learner. Based on this, Simonson et al. (2000) argued that traditional assessment often focus on learner’s ability of memorisation and recall, which are lower level of cognitive skills. Brualdi (1996) further added that traditional assessment tools require learners to display their knowledge in a predetermined way. Unlike the traditional assessments, performance and portfolio assessments are classroom based and mostly assess higher order thinking skills (Nitko, 2001). Thus, students have the opportunity to demonstrate what they learned by engaging in hands-on activities. This is done through the application of their acquired knowledge and skills.

Traditional assessments are indirect and inauthentic (Bailey, 1998). Bailey adds that traditional assessment are mostly one-shot, speed-based, and norm-referenced. In agreement to Bailey’s view, Law and Eckes (1995) state that traditional assessments are single-occasion tests. That is, they measure what learners can do at a particular time. However, test scores do not show the progress the child is making. Consequently, they cannot tell what particular difficulties the students had during the test.

In performance and portfolio assessment, however, students have the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge in performing meaningful and realistic task. This helps to monitor the progress the student is making as well as focus on the growth and performance of the student (Law and Eckes, 1995). That is, if a learner fails to perform a given task at a particular time, he/she still has the opportunity to demonstrate his/her ability at a different time and different situation. This indicates that performance and portfolio assessments are longitudinal and continuous unlike the traditional assessment which is one-shot. Because performance and portfolio assessments are longitudinal and continuous, the teacher has a chance to measure the strengths and weaknesses of the student in a variety of areas and situations. Therefore, Brualdi (1996) argued that performance and portfolio assessment are authentic in the sense that they allow learners to express their knowledge on the material in their own ways using various intelligences. Learners have opportunity to practice the authentic activities that they might encounter

in real life. These activities allow them to transfer their skills to various real world related settings.

Bailey (1998) also mentions that there is no feedback provided to learners in traditional assessment. The projects are mainly individualized and the assessment procedure is decontextualised. However, in performance and portfolio assessment feedback is provided to learners and are mostly group-based and contextualised. This is clear as the progress and growth of the student is known, and as a result the instructors get to have a comprehensive view of student learning (Winking, 1997). According to Niguidila (1993), unlike traditional assessments which focuses on students' scores, performance and portfolio assessments look at students' product which give teachers insight regarding learners' knowledge and skills.

Miller, Linn and Gronlund (2009), comparing traditional assessment with performance assessment, stated that:

“Performance assessment provide a basis for teachers to evaluate both the effectiveness of the process or procedure used (e.g., approach to data collection or manipulation of instrument) and the product resulting from performance of a task (e.g., completed report of results or completed artwork). Unlike simple tests of factual knowledge, this is unlikely to be a single right or best answer. Rather, there may be multiple performance and problem solutions that would be judged to be excellent. Problem formulation, the organisation of ideas, the integration of multiple types of evidence, and originality are all important aspect of performance that may not be adequately assessed by paper-and-pencil tests” (p. 261).

Miller et al. (2009) further stated that portfolio assessment, on the other hand, provides information for both formative and summative evaluation. Portfolio gives an insight into the progress the child is making and reveals the strength and weaknesses of the child unlike traditional assessment. It is clear that both performance and portfolio assessment provide feedback to students whereas traditional assessment do not.

As Law and Ecke (1995) mention, alternative assessments can be laborious in terms of time and energy spent by the teacher. For example, the diversity of products in portfolios, which is viewed as one of the most important strengths, can cause problems for the teacher in terms of practicality (Bailey, 1998). They might be harder to score and quite time consuming to evaluate the learner's performance (Simonson et al., 2000). Reeves (2000) claims that unlike multiple-choice tests, which are practical to score, performance assessments are viewed quite time consuming when grading. While the traditional forms of assessment can be scored using machine, the alternative form of assessment relies on human judgment.

It appears traditional assessments have no positive characteristics at all. However, this is not true. There are merits of traditional tests just like there are demerits of alternative tests. Traditional assessment strategies are more objective, reliable and valid. This is especially true for standardised tests and other types of multiple choice tests (Law & Eckes, 1995). Alternative assessments – performance and portfolio assessment, on the other hand, carry some concerns in terms of subjectivity, reliability and validity. Bailey (1998) agrees with Law and Ecke's assertion about the reliability issues in alternative assessment, and questions its validity. In her argument, Bailey cited portfolio assessment as an example and claims that the wide variety of student products might cause reliability problems. However, the positive washback they provide to the learner has made portfolios to be a widely used assessment tool. However, Simonson et al. (2000) claim that “proponents of alternative assessment (performance and portfolio assessment) suggest that the content validity of “authentic” tasks is ensured because there is a direct link between the expected behaviour and the ultimate goal of skill/learning transfer” (p. 275).

6. Conclusion

There has been a movement from traditional assessment toward alternative assessment - performance and portfolio assessments. Alternative assessment started being used as a means for educational reform due to the increasing awareness of the influence of testing on curriculum and instruction (Dietel et al., 1991). Currently, “traditional assessment, which is generally called testing, is challenged by alternative assessment approaches” (Reeves, 2000, p. 103). The question here is: Which form of the assessment procedure is appropriate in assessing learners? Traditional or alternative assessment procedures?

It must, however, be noted that regardless of the advantages and the disadvantage of each form of assessment procedure, the purpose of the assessment should be paramount in making a decision to use one form and not the other. While some knowledge and skills to be assessed only requires the use of traditional assessment procedures, others require the use of alternative assessment procedures like portfolio and task performance. In Vocational and Technical Schools, for example, portfolio and performance assessments are emphasised more than traditional assessment. It must be re-echoed that, it is essential for traditional assessment procedures to be used to assess whether learners can remember facts and knowledge learnt before alternative assessment can be used. This is seen in most Technical and Vocational Schools in Ghana.

It is for a fact that traditional assessment cannot be overlooked for a number of reasons. The increasing enrollment of students across all the levels of education, inadequate teachers, inadequate Teaching and Learning Materials (TLMs), lack of funds, insufficient time for teaching and learning, among others are some of the great

challenges to the use of alternative assessment. It is, thus, important for teachers to utilise the form of assessment procedure (whether traditional or alternative) which will help in achieving their learning objectives in a feasible manner.

References

- Al-Shehri A. (1995). Learning by reflection in general practice: A study report. *Education for General Practice*, 7, 237–248.
- American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association & National Council on Measurement in Education. (1999). *Standards for educational and psychological testing*. Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.
- Assessment Reform Group (2002). *Assessment for learning: Ten principles*. Nuffield, UK: Nuffield Foundation.
- Bailey, K. M. (1998). *Learning about language assessment: dilemmas, decisions, and directions*. New York, NY: Heinle & Heinle Pub.
- Brualdi, A. (1998). Implementing performance assessment in the classroom. *Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation*, 6(2), 1 – 20.
- Davis, M. H., Friedman, M., Harden, R. M., Howie, J., Ker, J., McGhee, C., Pippard, M. J., & Snadden, D. (2001). Portfolio assessment in medical students' final examinations. *Med Teach*, 23, 357–366.
- Dietel, R. J., Herman, J. L., & Knuth, R. A. (1991). *What does research say about assessment?* NCREL, Oak Brook. Retrieved from <http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs> on March 1, 2017.
- Elliott, S. N. (1995). *Creating meaningful performance assessments*. Retrieved from <http://www.ericdigest/edrs.com> on February, 25, 2017.
- Kulieke, M., Bakker, J., Collins, C., Fennimore, T., Fine, C., Herman, J., Jones, B.F., Raack, L., & Tinzmann, M. B. (1990). *Why should assessment be based on a vision of learning?* NCREL, Oak Brook: IL Publication.
- Law, B., & Eckes, M. (1995). *Assessment and ESL*. Manitoba, Canada: Peguis Publishers.
- Miller, D. M., Linn, R. L., & Gronlund, N. E. (2009). *Measurement and assessment in teaching*. New Jersey, NY: Pearson Education Upper Saddle River.
- Niguidula, D. (1993). *The digital portfolio: a richer picture of student performance*. Retrieved from <http://www.essentialschools.org/cs/resources> from February 28, 2017.
- Nitko, J. A. (2001). *Educational assessment of students*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Office of Technology Assessment, U.S. Congress. (1992). *Testing in American schools: Asking the right questions (OTA-SET-519)*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Oloruntegbe, K. O., & Omoifo, C. N. (2000). Assessing process skills in STM education: Going beyond paper and pencil tests. *Educational Thought*, 1(1) 35-44.
- Palm, T. (2008). Performance assessment and authentic assessment: A conceptual analysis of the literature. *Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation*, 13(4), 1-11.
- Reeves, T. C. (2000). Alternative assessment approaches for online learning environments in higher education. *Educational Computing Research*, 3(1), 101-111.
- Rust, C. (2002). *Guide to assessment*. Learning and Teaching Briefing Paper Series, Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development – OCSLD.
- Simonson, M., Smaldino, S., Albright, M., & Zvacek, S. (2000). *Teaching and learning at a distance: Foundations of distance education* (11th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Taras, M. (2005). Assessment – summative and formative – Some theoretical reflections. *Bri. J. Educa. Stud.*, 53(4), 466-478.
- Winking, D. (1997). Critical issue: *Ensuring equity with alternative assessments*. Oak Brook: IL Publication.