ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING IN UGANDAN UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

The effectiveness of the teaching and learning process is best inferred from the effectiveness of their assessment and evaluation. This paper highlights the concept of formative assessment at universities in Uganda. It is aimed at harnessing the role of formative assessment as assessment for learning. The paper highlights the forms of formative assessment, feedback and feed forward. The kinds of assessment done at formative level are explored. Recommendations to improve assessment for learning are discussed. The way forward is given to aid the implementers in better service delivery.

Key words: Assessment, evaluation, formative assessment, feedback and feed forward

Introduction

Assessment of learning is the process of measuring the ability of an individual or group of individuals on a given task. Assessment is a key process that can aid learning. Whereas students may ignore their lecturers and what they teach them, they must participate in the assessment process because they are interested in getting a qualification. It is therefore imperative that lecturers individually or collectively pay great attention to the assessment practices in order to promote learning. Assessment measures the breadth and depth of learning. In the right hands, assessment can inspire, motivate and provide the feedback that is essential for targeting prompt corrective help (Petty, 2014).

In education we consider two types of assessment namely; formative and summative assessment. Summative assessment occurs at the end of a program while formative assessment occurs as the program takes place. Formative assessment is meant to aid the learner to improve the process of learning as the teaching is going on. It is aimed at getting evidence and interpreting it to be used by the teachers and learners to gauge the position of learners in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there. Formative assessment is also called assessment for learning.

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Assessment can be used to grade the attainment of learners, help to select candidates for jobs or future courses, provide evidence on the effectiveness of courses and teachers and serves as evidence of learners' achievement. The teacher benefits more from formative assessment. This is used throughout the course to form judgements on whether, and to what extent, learning has been successful; and to pinpoint difficulties so that remedial action can be taken.

Aim and objectives

This paper aims to draw stakeholders' attention to a prominent aspect of formative assessment as a key pillar in the quest to effective learning in Uganda's Universities.

Methodology

This study used a narrative literature review design (Noguchi, 2006; Ridley, 2008), characterized by using peer-reviewed articles as the major data source. The peer-reviewed articles and other sources used were available in the English language and had been published in the period 2000 and 2018.

Formative Assessment

Formative assessment aims at improving student learning through exposure hence familiarizing with the required levels of learning, revealing the gaps in learning and providing a feedback which guides the direction of learning. Formative assessment can include teacher assessment, self-assessment or peer assessment. Students can mark their own work called self- assessment. Petty (2014) submits that any kind of acknowledgement of learning success is reinforcement. A lecturer can give students a set of informal competences and ask them to tick these off themselves achieve them or ask them to self-assess against clear criteria. In addition, students can mark each other's work called peer assessment. Biggs (2007) reported an almost doubled attainment on a University engineering course when students marked their peers' work. The average mark on the unit rose from 45% to around 75% as a result of this strategy.

Different universities and different faculties/colleges/schools/ departments have set out guidelines for assessing students' learning. Usually the timing and nature of formative assessment is left to the discretion of the

instructor. This has created a number of challenges because the instructor is left with a lot of powers to solely decide the future of the student. The university guides on the mark out of which students are supposed to be scored. This may be 30% or 40% or 50% as the case may be in a given university.

Need for formative assessment to be informative assessment

Formative assessment must be informative. Sadler (1989) looked at praise and criticism and concluded that every learner needs three important pieces of information if they are to learn to maximum. Learners need information on what they have done well, and what is good about it. They also need information about what needs improving and how to improve it. Students also need to know the goals they are working towards. This information can come from teachers, learners' self-assessment or from peer assessment.

Formative assessment is a process that occurs during instruction using activities that range from a performance task, to a thoughtful and thorough conversation between teacher and student. Learners need to know what they are trying to do if they are to do it. Students must understand the tasks, the criteria for a good piece of work, which includes the assessment criteria. They need to know what they are aiming for.

Learners also need information about what they have done well and what is good about it. You simply can't learn if you never discover when you have succeeded. What students need most is an informative view on what they have done well. It is better for learning if the learner discovers they have succeeded with one of their goals than that they have your approval.

Learners also need information about what needs improving and how to improve it. This needs to be constructive which means forward looking and positive, showing how to improve not just what is wrong. It can be called the mission.

Formative assessment can be seen as an instructional tool for use while learning occurs. It should therefore be emphasized that these assessment systems should be seen as means to a greater goal of helping children develop the cognitive, academic, emotional and physical competencies they need to succeed in 21st century life.

Formative assessment is meant to aid learning. Unfortunately, we cannot rely on the results from this assessment because of its subjectivity. Possibly this could be the reason why most of the products of our education system fail to perform basic tasks and yet they obtained very high grades in the summative assessment. Most of the schools pay a lot of attention to promotional exams possibly because these are the ones that are made public and consequently serve as a basis for judging who the best teacher is.

Black and Williams gave the advantages of self and peer assessment:

- They help students to clarify goals
- They help students to make judgements about their own work
- Students are able to see other ways of doing it.
- They put students in charge of their own improvement and develop in the students a sense of ownership, responsibility and accountability.
- They increase students' effort and persistence.
- They help students to develop a self-critical and reflective habit of mind.
- They save the lecturer time for more productive activities.

Feedback and Feed forward of formative assessment

Heitin (2012), citing Prof. Douglas Fisher and Prof. Nancy Frey of San Diego State University, said the most important components of formative assessment are strong feedback and "feed forward." Good feedback should be timely, specific, actionable, and useful. Students are given opportunities to re-learn and practice the skill again right away. Similarly, lecturers should also "feed forward" by asking themselves how they will use what they learned in the feedback process to inform their instruction. This helps lecturers to decide what needs to be taught again and to whom, which implies flexibility in planning and willingness to turn from whole class instruction.

Rowe, R. (2018). As feedback is designed to enhance student learning, it is insufficient to only provide feedback at the end of the module that simply tells students where they've gone wrong. To be effective, feedback needs to be a two-way dialogue which helps motivate students – although not all students need the same type of feedback. Students need ongoing formal and informal feedback on their work (both assessed and non-assessed) throughout each module, along with support on how to use it. It is

important to make sure students are aware that you are giving them feedback. This should be fairly clear when using written feedback, but remember formative feedback may not always be written down.

Students also need the opportunity to give teachers feedback on what they have learned so you know your teaching is helping them to achieve the intended learning outcomes for your course and can adapt your teaching where necessary (for example spending more time on a particular theory if students are struggling to understand it). Feedback should therefore be a continuous process of conversation and reflection.

This is where formative feedback comes in. Formative feedback is feedback 'for' learning. It is often provided to students during the course of a module so they are able to use it to improve the way they learn and enhance their future academic performance. It can also form part of the feedback at the end of module, where it 'feeds forward' to future modules. Providing shorter bursts of formative feedback, for example in response to mini-tasks, also helps to develop a continuous conversation between students and academics that supports students to become reflective learners.

Feedback needs to be tied in with wider course design and formative assessment structures to ensure that the course is structured in a way that allows students to reflect on and use the feedback they receive. There is no point in returning feedback within three weeks for example if students are expected to submit another similar assessment within two weeks. Thinking about feedback when designing your module (and of course, in the context of your other departmental modules) will ensure that it is useful for students and sustainable for academics.

Conclusions

Formative assessment is assessment for learning and can take on different modes that include peer assessment and self-assessment. The success of formative assessment relates to when it is carried out, the mode of delivery, when it is graded and when the feedback is given.

Recommendations

Lecturers at Universities should carry out formative assessment with the objective of helping learners to learn.

Formative assessment should be carried out in different forms including peer assessment and self-assessment.

Standardization of formative assessment should be promoted to enable stakeholders to rely on the results from it.

Feedback should always be given immediately to enhance learning in Universities.

Formative Assessment Model at University

This model shows the interaction between the two types of assessment and points to the conditions of effective of learning. Effective assessment for learning is the one that gives immediate feedback. This can be seen as the interactive relationship between formative assessment and summative assessment. This is when the two forms of assessment give meaningful feedback to aid learning.
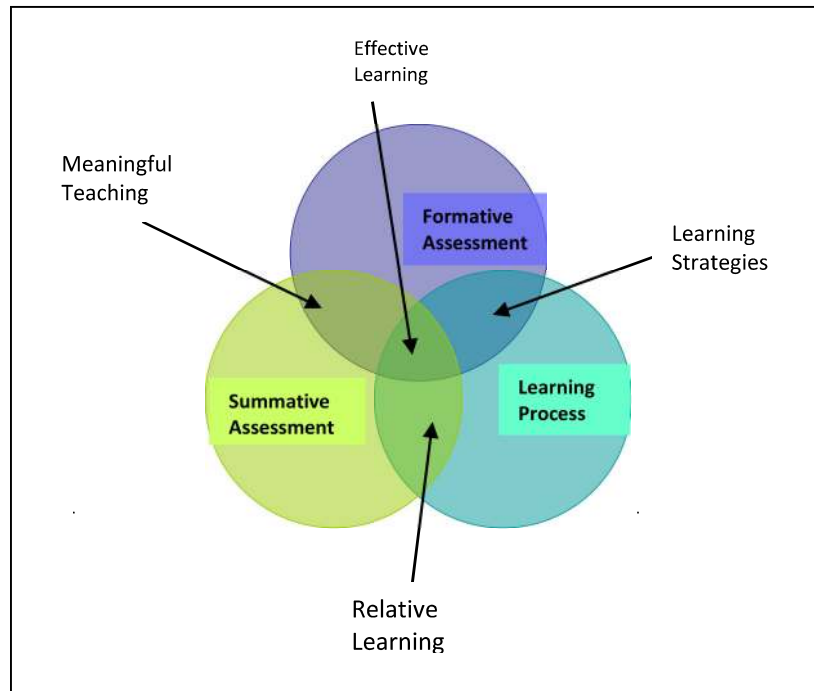

Figure 8.1: Model for Effective Learning at University in Uganda

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