



Teaching Toolkit

Effect of Assessment on Learning

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Assessment influences all aspects of students' education (Brown, Rust & Gibbs 1994; Gibbs, 2006). Changes in assessment will result in changes in learning, so care must be taken if reconsidering assessment practices. Increasing assessment will not automatically lead to greater student involvement and learning, nor will decreasing levels (since, according to Gibbs (2003) this may be withdrawing the only motivation to learn and may actually decrease independent study). Within the current educational structure it is unlikely that student preoccupation with the assessment will wane. This state of affairs has both positive and negative implications.

Negative implications

Two undesirable implications of the assessment/student focus relationship are discussed below. These phenomena are closely related and in each, education is regarded by the student as a product with assessment success as the currency.

Backwash

From the teacher perspective, in an aligned system, the intended learning outcomes form the central pillar, though from the student perspective the curriculum is defined by assessment (Ramsden, 1992). As a result, students learn what they think they will be tested on – this term has been called backwash (Elton, 1987).

This is largely seen negatively (Frederiksen & Collins, 1989) – negative backwash tends to occur in an exam dominated system, where strategy becomes more important than substance (such as teachers actually teaching exam-taking strategies) and encourages a surface approach to learning. While undesirable from an educational perspective, the 'success' associated with this becomes reinforcing and when combined with increasing demands on students' time, becomes a viable approach to study.

Hidden Curriculum

Snyder (1971) described what happens behind the formal curriculum as the 'hidden curriculum'. Students construct their own meaning & understanding of the curriculum from implicit and explicit messages about what counts in assessment. Once students work out what the hidden curriculum is they can approach their learning more strategically and time-efficiently. As a result they may know what they have to do to pass a subject, but not to understand it:

When I retook the exam I just concentrated on passing the exam. I got 96% and the guy couldn't understand why I failed first time. I told him this time I just concentrated on passing the exam rather than understanding the subject. I still don't understand the subject so it defeated the objective in a way

(Gibbs, 1992, p.101)

Positive implications

One of the most fundamental roles of assessment is to encourage and facilitate learning. If a student is engaged in assessment, this opportunity can be capitalised upon.

In relation to backwash, this can be used positively as well as negatively, by using students' fixation on assessment to encourage appropriate learning. This occurs when assessment is well planned, aligned, and designed to measure the full range of identified outcomes. As a result, focusing on the assessment will ensure that students are also learning and demonstrating the intended outcomes (Biggs & Tang, 2007).

Changing the way assessment is conducted, and activities that students are being engaged in can require them to develop a deeper understanding of the material and wider background knowledge.

For example, assessment could be more efficient by redistributing the focus of attention from the last week of term (in the form of a three hour summative exam) to more continuous, formative tasks. This would capture a wider range of topics over a longer period of time.

An awareness of the interaction between assessment and learning therefore can potentially improve the effectiveness of both. Factors associated with improving learning through assessment from Black & Wiliam (1998) are noted below.

1. The provision of effective feedback to pupils
2. The active involvement of pupils in their own learning
3. Adjusting teaching to take account of the results of assessment
4. A recognition of the profound influence assessment has on the motivation and self-esteem of students, both of which are crucial influences on learning
5. The need for students to be able to assess themselves and understand how to improve.