

ASSESSMENT FOR IMPROVING LEARNING

By



Mrs. Victoria Kwawukume
The West African Examinations Council
Accra, Ghana.

Abstract

Present systems of examining, its rationale, functions and development have engaged the attention of researchers and stakeholders of education in this country.

In the English-speaking West African countries constituting the WAEC, the menace of examination leakages has played no mean role in efforts to fashion out a more adequate examining modules that could help enhance teaching and learning in our schools. Other considerations include fairness to students and maintaining the standards already set by the Examining Bodies.

It is in the light of the above that this paper is relevant.

This paper attempts to discuss the topic Assessment for Improving Learning. Its focus is on examining the role of assessment as a tool for improving learning with particular reference to pre-tertiary education in Ghana.

The paper also looks at the Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment and how the three components are linked and their impact on learning.

ASSESSMENT FOR IMPROVING LEARNING

1. **Background**

Ghana's most recent education reforms began in 1987 based on an International Monetary fund and World Bank educational experts recommendation. Before then there had been a number of Review or Reform Committees, Commissions etc on education dating back to colonial times, intended to address problems such as low participation, curriculum dysfunctionality, gender disparity, rural-urban dichotomy etc.

The Accelerated Development Plan of Education of 1951, rapidly expanded recruitment into elementary and secondary education. The Kwapong Review Committee of 1966 made recommendations intended to address limited placements at the secondary school level. In 1974 the Dzobo Review Committee introduced the concept of comprehensive Junior Secondary School (JSS) on experimental basis to teach academic and practical skills to all pupils which was later transformed into Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE).

In 1993 and 1996 the General Certificate of Education (GCE) at the Ordinary and Advanced Levels respectively were phased out and replaced with the Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination (SSSCE).

With the introduction of the BECE and the SSSCE the pre-tertiary educational system, structurally assumed the 6-3-3 format i.e. 6 years of Primary Education, 3 years of Basic Education and 3 years of Senior Secondary Education. However the Government has proposed 11 years of pre-secondary level education as follows: 2 years kindergarten, 6 years Basic (Primary) Education 3 years Junior High Secondary School Education, followed by 4 years of Senior High School Education. (Government white paper, October 2004). Thus latest Review is yet to see the light of day.

2. **Observation**

Literature on these Review or Reform Reports have dealt extensively on structure, gender, accessibility, assessment, curriculum issues etc. The issue of focus in the paper is, in a rapidly changing educational environment as the case in Ghana, to what extent are Assessment Modules helping to improve learning in Ghana's Educational Institutions?. Before then, indications were that since 1951, actions of Governments and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO's) had led to improvement in accessibility, gender balance, curriculum enrichment, structural reforms and efficient assessment modules to a larger or lesser extent depending on the overall educational objectives of the government in power. It is observed however that assessment, as an instrument for improving education in general and learning in particular, is yet to receive a centre stage attention from stakeholders in education.

3. Assessment

(a) What is Assessment

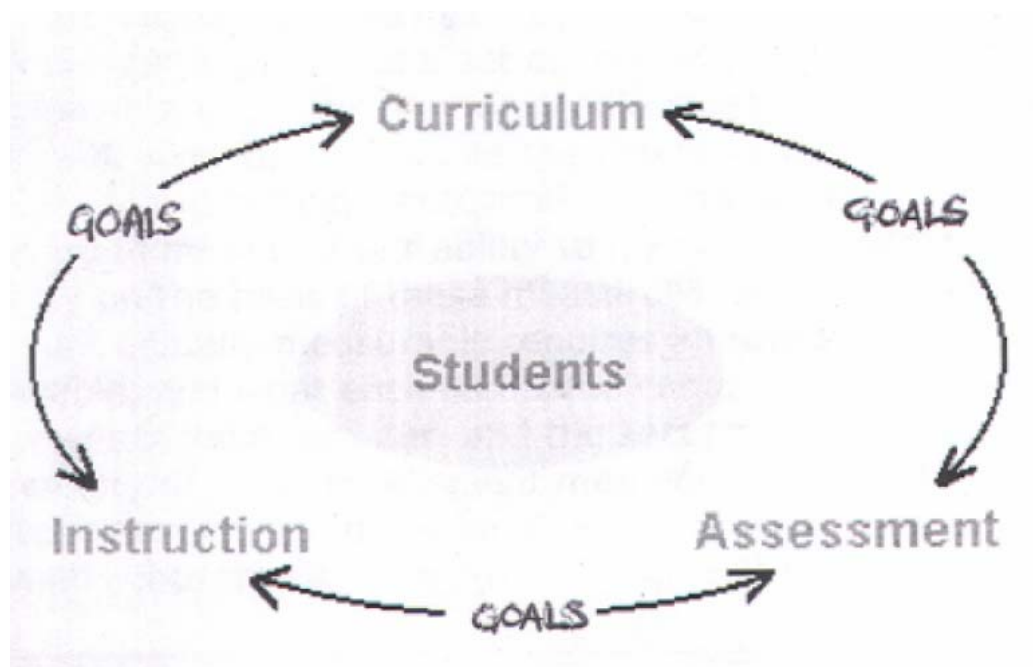
Assessment is a mechanism for providing instructors as well as learners with data for improving their teaching methods and for guiding and motivating students to be actively involved in their own learning. Assessment can also be defined as the process of documenting, usually in measurable terms, knowledge, skills, attitude and beliefs. Assessment plays 'dual role'. It drives student learning and provides important feedback to both instructors and students. It also informs educational planning and policy.

Assessment gives essential information about what students are learning and the extent to which teaching goals are being met.

(b) Relationship Between Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment (CIA)

According to the Field – tested Learning Assessment Guide (FLAG): Assessment Primer, <http://www.flaguide.org/start/assess-in-context-pup>, the three main components of any learning programme are the curriculum or the content, the instructional methods used to deliver the curriculum and the assessment techniques with which the success in attaining course goals is evaluated.

CIA MODEL OF COURSE DEVELOPMENT



These three components are inextricably linked and are bound together by the goals we set for the course as shown in the CIA Model. This CIA Model requires that goals be formalized and clearly articulated at the outset. The course goals set the standard against which the success of the course development effort and its implementation must be measured. The role of assessment then is to measure the efficacy of the curriculum and the instructional methods with respect to stated course goals.

(c) Why do Assessment?

For every course that is taught, decisions are made about what students should know and be able to do by the end of the course. Though these goals are not formalized by writing them down, decisions are made about the curriculum, the instructional methods and the assessment techniques to be employed. In terms of curriculum, decisions are made on topics to cover and how the selected topics connect with previous and forthcoming topics. Decisions are made on which instructional methods to use to deliver the curriculum, either by lectures, group activities, readings, homework assignments etc. Decisions are also made on what assessment techniques to use (e.g. multiple-choice tests etc.). Decisions made usually reflect the course goals, whether they are stated or not.

4. Assessment Modules

In arriving at the decision for the establishment of the West African Examinations Council, Dr G. B. Jeffrey F. R. S. gave a brief outline of three different kinds of examinations for the purpose of assessing students within the English-speaking West African sub region, viz 'the external', 'the school' and 'the competitive' forms of examination (1979).

For the purpose of this paper, we shall concentrate on the first - Dr. Jeffrey defined 'External Examination' as the one in which the syllabus is prepared by an external examining authority which conducts the examination and maintains a standard with little or no regard to the circumstances in which the candidate has prepared himself for the examination.' Until 1987 when the Continuous Assessment Concept as an assessment module was introduced, virtually all schools from primary to tertiary in Ghana used the 'external' terminal method to measure achievements of students. The weaknesses of external assessment are completely ignored and unprovided for.

The question to ask at this point is whether the external-terminal assessment module did achieve its main objectives of correctly measuring the achievements of students?

In other words, did it improve on learning? To me, the fact that it is still part of the assessment procedures in Ghana's Educational system speaks for itself. It is still relevant and indeed contributing and enhancing educational measurement in the country. However, the fact that Ghana, like many other developing countries

in Africa introduced the Continuous Assessment Scheme in 1987, based upon International Monetary Fund/World Bank educational experts' recommendation, is a clear indication that the External-Terminal Assessment Scheme has its own limitations.

The experts recommended a de-emphasise in the external examinations and certification at particular points in the educational system. (Kellaghan and Greany 1992).

The hope of the country then was that the change would assist in reducing the burdens formerly imposed on the learner by the External-Terminal Assessment. A circular issued by the Ministry of Education and Culture (MOE and C 1987, pg. 28) read: 'Assessment shall be by CA 40% of the overall assessment shall be based on internal marks while the remaining 60% shall be by external examinations'.

However, based on a study by the WAEC, Accra, Ghana in 1994, the Ministry of Education reviewed the proportions for internal and external examinations for the first and second cycle institutions to 30% and 70% respectively.

The study by the WAEC, Accra, Ghana questioned the reliability of the Continuous Assessment scores and indicated that, generally the Continuous Assessment scores were abused by some teachers. For instance, it was established that CA scores in certain subjects obtained by some students did not have any positive linear relationship with scores obtained in the external examination. In a similar study by Mukhtar (1998) with regard to Teacher Training Colleges, he asserted that in a particular instance a male student who scored 15 out of 30 marks in CA in Basic Science obtained 62 out of 70 in the external examination, whereas a female student who scored 25 out of 30 in the CA obtained 18 out of 70 in the external examination.

Though this observations by Mukhtar could not be generalized in order to make conclusive statements, they nevertheless, point to the fact of possible abuse in the CA Scheme and appeared in the WAEC finding of the reliability of the CA scores.

5. **Questions to be Answered**

There are very important questions requiring indepth studies beyond the scope of this presentation.

Some of them are:

- (1) Are the two main Assessment Schemes serving their intended purposes as effective educational measurement schemes and thereby improving learning?
- (2) How are the CA scores truly generated at the various levels of learning?

- (3) What are teachers' and students' perceptions of what the CA scores are used for?

Bartels (Journal of Educational Development and practice, Volume, No. 1, 2003) has made some research on these which is worth considering.

- (4) With respect to question 1, he noted with concern that in his research with regard to Teacher Training Colleges, ' a majority of the tutors he polled (85%) felt that the CA programme was not serving its intended purpose'. He continued, ' From the students end it was evident that not more than 2% knew the purpose of CA.
- (5) On question 2, Bartels noted that none of the colleges he studied ' followed any specific procedures or guidelines in assessing their subject areas.

One student was reported to have said the following:

Favouritism and victimization are the order of the day, either you danced to the master's voice or you are condemned. We don't want CA.

- (6) On the question of tutors' and students' perception of what the CA scores are used for Bartels noted that both tutors and students felt that CA scores are collected and dumped somewhere.

This was conducted by the WAEC study in 200...

This is a clear indication of doubt as to whether the CA component plays any role in students final grading.

6. **Conclusion**

The focus of this paper has been a discussion of Assessment for Improving learning. Attempts have been made in the background to look at the various Reform/Review committees and their focus.

In the subsequent sections we looked at some of the factors that have tended to affect Assessment, the two main Assessment Modules in Pre-tertiary institutions and their impact on the learning process and finally the role of Continuous Assessment in our Educational Institutions.

7. **Recommendations**

It is obvious that the two main mode of assessment in the educational institutions in Ghana have the potential to improve learning. It is obvious also from the information gathered that certain steps ought to be taken in order to realize their full potential. These include:

- (1) All teachers directly involved in the assessment modules should be given intensive training on the rational and management of CA scores and to ensure comparability of standards.
- (2) An effective Monitoring and Supervising Machinery should be put in place to check possible abuse of the schemes.
- (3) Teachers teaching workload may also be considered with the view to making it possible to create enough room for CA to be properly organized in the schools.

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