Differentiated assessment activities: customising to support learning

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DIFFERENTIATED ASSESSMENT ACTIVITIES: CUSTOMISING TO SUPPORT LEARNING

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Abstract
This paper attempts to evaluate the benefits of using differentiated assessments to enhance the learning experience and output of tertiary students. The instructor used multiple modes of assessments like role plays, videos, letters to the editor, production of a career guide, blogs, posters, games and so on to cater to the varied skills and tastes of the students. Students were given a choice of themes as cues to work on. The most important outcome from the instructor's point of view was the improved performance of hitherto mediocre students which reflected on their grades too. Four cases are analysed to show the efficacy of using multiple assessments.

Key words: differentiated assessments; student involvement; improving student performance

THE CONTEXT
This paper attempts to evaluate the benefits of using differentiated assessments to enhance the learning experience of tertiary students in a Western University in the Emirate of Dubai in the UAE. The population of the UAE consists of an overwhelming majority of expatriates amounting to 88% of the population (Emirates24/7, 2012). The expatriates are mainly from the Indian Sub-continent, Iran, and other neighbouring Arab countries. Schools offer national curricula as well as western curricula including American, British, IB etc. Most Emiratis pursue tertiary education in government colleges and are funded fully by the government. Expatriates have to choose from the various private universities offering western or other nationally accredited degrees like Indian, Iranian etc.

The course reviewed is a Business Communication course for first year business students. This course is also subscribed to by a number of final year students as it covers topics like preparing for job interviews and writing CVs. The cosmopolitan student cohort at the university comes from over 100 nationalities mirroring the population make-up of the UAE and about 30-40 nationalities are represented in a typical class. To add to this are the varied prior learning experiences and different learning styles. Students who graduate from schools following western curricula are trained in communication from their formative years as opposed to those from other curricula. Oral and written skills in the English language also varies considerably. This eclectic mix warrants the use of varied assessment techniques. Students’ divergent skill levels and exposure to technology precluded the exclusive use of ICT based assessments. The instructor therefore offered multiple modes of assessments like role plays, presenting self-produced videos on communication topics, writing letters to the editors of local dailies on socially relevant topics, collating relevant local information for a career guide, presenting students’ own social interest websites and blogs, poster presentations, educative games and so on. Students were given a choice of themes as cues to work on. Alternatively they could choose any topic related to Business Communication.

QUALITY ENHANCEMENT TO BENEFIT STUDENTS
Quality Enhancement in simple terms “is about getting teachers to teach better” (Biggs, 2001: 227). Educational institutions have always been engaged in enhancing quality to satisfy various stakeholders including governments, accreditation bodies and patrons. The enhancement of the quality of every/any stage of the complicated process of delivering education benefits all stakeholders. This chapter focuses on quality enhancement through improving assessment practices that positively and immediately impact student learning. These ‘micro quality enhancements’ initiated by reflective practitioners and applied in the ‘microcosm’ of the classroom are critical to overall quality enhancement. When they attain critical mass ‘macro quality enhancement’ measures like policy changes will have to be put in place. ‘Individual learning’ is as much a component of a learning organisation as is ‘organisational learning’ (Hodgkinson and Brown, 2003: 340). Periodic review and improvement of current practices are essential for quality enhancement in a dynamic environment where “new content knowledge, educational innovations, a changing student population, and changing conditions in the institution and society, all make such a review necessary” (Biggs, 2001: 223). Universities as learning/knowledge organisations should encourage and accept the productive innovative practices initiated by pedagogy focused teachers who can best assess students’ needs.
ALTERING ASSESSMENT PRACTICES TO AID LEARNING

Differentiated instruction is gaining wide acceptance the world over especially in schools which cater to special needs students and those from impoverished and otherwise diverse backgrounds. These students have explicitly different learning needs which have to be addressed. The benefits of differentiated instruction have been documented by several educators including Tieso (2001) and Tomlinson (2000). The role of differentiated assessments in facilitating differentiated instruction has also been confirmed. Rock et al (2008) who conducted an extensive survey of literature on differentiated instruction identified “five quality indicators that reflect major factors (variables) associated with differentiated instruction: (a) teacher, (b) content, (c) learner, (d) instruction, and (e) assessment.” Assessment synthesises the other four indicators of quality. Tomlinson and Kalbfleisch (1998) in their attempt to find out elements that make a differentiated classroom successful assert the need for “varied assessment options” as an important factor.

THE NEED FOR DIFFERENTIATED ASSESSMENT

“A quality institution is one that ... continually upgrades its practice in order to adapt to changing conditions...” (Biggs, 2001: 223). Different skills, learning styles and capacities require differentiated teaching and assessment. What excites one student may not motivate another. Motivation is a prerequisite of active learning which promotes engagement with the work and a deep understanding aiding future application of concepts studied. Designing appropriate and varied assessment activities is thus imperative to good learning and teaching. Rick Stiggins (2007) observes that the role of assessment is changing from “ranking students according to their achievement” to “helping all students succeed in meeting standards” by using “assessments that support learning - that is, assessments for learning.” In short, assessment for learning should replace assessment of learning. Chapman and King (2005) offer a lucid definition of the concept:

Differentiated assessment is an ongoing process through which teachers gather data before, during, and after instructing from multiple sources to identify learners' needs and strengths. Students are different in their knowledge and skills. They differ in the ways and speeds at which they process new learning and connect it to prior knowledge and understanding. They also differ in the ways they most effectively demonstrate their progress. This necessitates a strong and continued commitment from the lecturer.

Another characteristic of differentiated assessments is that they are usually formative in nature. Wormald (2006) observes that “this is where differentiating teachers spend the majority of their assessment energy. These teachers are ceaseless assessors, valuing informal, formal, and varied assessments over time instead of one-shot declarations of mastery.” Summative assessments like final exams therefore, do not lend themselves to differentiated assessment easily. The use of differentiated assessments in the course mentioned before was expected to

• avoid transmitting information to students - what Biggs (2000:13) calls “dubbing an audio tape” but to help them learn by “interacting with the world”. The world here is inclusive of the material, lecturer, peers, media of presentation etc. Deep learning resulted from active engagement in a self-chosen activity.
• accommodate individual variations in student learning. Researchers have observed that each students’ experience is unique as he interacts with the “learning context” (Prosser & Trigwell,1999:16).
• help low achievers to improve performance. As Martin Richardson observes “with differentiated assessment even low achievers can learn to high standards and succeed with higher order thinking skills.” (Chapman & King, 2005:xix)

CHOOSING ASSESSMENT ACTIVITIES

The lecturer could assess the skill level, learning style and preferences of most students as they had completed a minimum of two courses with her. Individual consultations were offered to students in the second week of the course to review the topic chosen. Giving students the chance to choose their preferred topic was intended to increase their engagement with the topic. Some students seemed clueless on how to proceed and they were advised based on the lecturer’s assessment of the student, past performance, social milieu and personality. A second session of individual consultations was offered the week before the assessment presentations were to begin. This individual attention helped students to air their doubts and concerns and to receive practical guidance from the lecturer. Students with fear of public speaking were given opportunities to practice with the lecturer; students who could not locate information were directed to useful resources and students with poor time management
Differentiated Assessments

skills were helped to develop weekly schedules to complete the assessment effectively and on time. For differentiated assessments to succeed close monitoring by the lecturer is necessary. As students cannot rely on their peers or prior experience as much as in standard assessments provision should be made for constant lecturer support and monitoring. McLoone (2007) who used multiple class tests as a formative assessment to facilitate student learning recommended that “alternative assessments to class tests could be used … ensuring that the assessments are individualised and/or properly supervised.”

LEARNING BY INTERACTING WITH THE WORLD: 4 CASES

The four cases analysed below were chosen because they exemplify the role of differentiated assessment in improving student learning by increasing engagement with the task, gaining higher grades and achieving holistic improvement. These are a representative sample of the major benefits reaped by using differentiated assessments.

Case 1

Students learn best when they are actively engaged in the learning process. To actively engage in a learning activity it should be interesting to them and also promote unconscious learning. Learners of all ages are motivated by interesting learning environments. The instructor must therefore strive to create interesting learning environments which motivate students to interact with the world. This will encourage both acquiring and application of information. As Biggs (2000:13) confirms it is not the assimilation of information but its application that brings about a “conceptual change”.

One mode of assessment, for instance, encouraged students to produce videos on job search and career guidance focusing on local requirements. These could be uploaded on the university website and were intended for current and future students of the university and the general public. Students were instructed not to duplicate information easily available in the mass media but to identify relevant and specific information on the topic which would be valuable and beneficial for the community. Many students chose this assessment activity and produced highly valuable videos.

A male Emirati student, whose family has multiple businesses, was encouraged to interview human resource managers of four major local companies to find out what they expected to see on CVs of prospective employees in their respective industries. Unlike expatriate students this student had easy access to executives of large companies and was happy to engage in the task. The student was a consistently poor achiever and had failed several courses due to poor study habits and lack of interest. However, he had his own web site and active blog on arts and music which had attracted over 60,000 visitors in the span of a few months. The student had also uploaded several amateur videos and enthusiastically shared it with the lecturer. The lecturer therefore gathered that it would be an ideal activity for the student. The student interviewed HR managers of four diverse industries including aluminium production, healthcare, premium car franchise and a local bank. Unlike assignments which involve only arm chair research here the student had to identify four different industries where graduates could find employment, get appointments with the HR managers of the companies, prepare a set of interview questions that would utilise the time allotted for the interview beneficially, prepare a video of the interview and present it to the class. This involved much more work and skills than would a report or oral presentation. However, the student confirmed that he enjoyed the work, was excited to do it and commented that it was easy. He had started work on the project the day after he chose the topic and shared the video and the “best grades I ever got” with his proud family. The output was exceptional and he scored a high distinction for the same. What the student learned from engaging in the learning activity was varied and valuable and the community benefit of the assessment was high. The full-fledged interaction with the learning activity at every stage led to deep learning. He proudly shared the high profile interviews with the class and commented “this was such a fun assessment. I love this subject.”

The student remarked that he was motivated by the uniqueness of the assignment, the fun in doing it as well as the outcome which would be appreciated by an external audience (when displayed on the university career department web site). As Biggs says “Motivation is a product of good teaching not its prerequisite” (2000:13). The onus is on the instructor to create a learning environment which inspires an efficient learning style.

A holistic change - Case 2

This student was a peculiarly timid 24 year old non-local Arab male whose younger sister was also a student at the university. The student’s sister had approached the lecturer several times for information about the course. The lecturer soon learned that the student was too nervous to approach her. The student was encouraged to meet the lecturer and when information was not passed through
the sister, he did. It took several sessions for him to decide on a topic and his extreme intimidation and nervousness was worrying. He was very quiet in class too and had few friends. However, with continued support he improved and chose to present a poster on ‘active listening’.

The poster presentation involved interaction with peers individually and in groups as well as with the lecturer. The presenter was expected to respond to visitor’s questions on the content of the poster. This format was ideal for a student with fear of public speaking.

On the day of the presentation he chose the remotest corner of the class to display his poster. He started slow, speaking to one visitor at a time and by the time the lecturer approached to discuss his work a few students had gathered around and he spoke confidently. The lecturer expected him to be uneasy was amazed at the transformation. The student later said that the course and his interactions with the lecturer and students had changed his personality and boosted his confidence. The poster format was the right choice for him. The course and his interactions with the lecturer and students had changed his personality and boosted his confidence. The Business Communication course covers a diverse range of topics pertaining to written and oral communication, gender differences, non-verbal communication, preparing for meetings, interviews and presentations, social behaviour etc aimed to bring a holistic change in students’ personality and outlook. It was rewarding that many students had similar experiences.

Motivated by challenging work-Case3

This girl student chose to contribute a 500 word well-researched article which would be of use to job seekers; if shortlisted it would be featured in a proposed career guide. During the first consultation the student confirmed that she would through primary and secondary research identify industries with the highest recruitment rates. This was intended to help job seekers including current students, Alumni of the university and the general public. During the second consultation the student submitted the draft of her work - weeks before it was due. She had put together a 20 page document that would serve as a comprehensive guide to job seekers in the region. The lecturer inferred that the student had misunderstood the activity assigned to her. She had spent three whole weeks researching, interviewing potential employers and collating and presenting the information in a booklet formatted with attractive graphics, catchy headings etc. The topics covered included -

- UAE’s Job Market – a description of the economy, public and private sector jobs, unemployment rates, projections for the future, expected salary for fresh graduates...
- What type of Applicant are you? Tips for expats and locals
- Interview Tips - How to introduce yourself? How to Dress for an Interview? Sample Thank You letter...
- Career tips for Graduates v/s Undergraduates
- UAE’s Top recruiters
- Counsellor’s Advice...
- Students’ Corner
- Useful websites

All content was specific to the region and this could easily be one of the only local career guides catering to fresh graduates.

The student clarified that she had not misunderstood the activity but was inspired to work extra as it would be beneficial to her and fellow students. The fact that it would be made available on the university website and a hard copy would be released officially was added motivation. She enjoyed the activity and was happy to have done extra work for no extra marks. Encountering students who put in extra effort due to intrinsic motivation is extremely rare and rewarding.

Seizing opportunities-Case 4

This is the case of two conservative covered female students and their choice of role play for the assessment activity. As they were not outgoing and did not volunteer to participate in class activities the lecturer was apprehensive about their choice of assessment format. They chose to present a role play on interviewing to the whole lecture cohort of 150 students. During the second consultation they said they had scripted the play and it involved humour. They were advised that humour was difficult to
pull off as it required histrionic skills and perfect timing. They reassured the lecturer that they had completed the script and that it was quite entertaining.

They surprised the whole class on the day of their presentation acting naturally to a humorous script. They effectively conveyed to the students’ the necessity of both interviewee and interviewer practising and preparing for interviews. Several students commented that they would not go unprepared for an interview. The visual presentation was effective and members of the audience were asked to volunteer to participate. This added interest, engagement and a better learning experience. The students were asked if they were seasoned actors and the reply was “this is a first in our life experience” and wished every subject had this option for assessment. They enjoyed writing the script, incorporating the humour elements and practising for it. Shortly after the role play the students volunteered to participate in a poster display for academics as part of the activities of the professional development centre. They were nervous and met with the lecturer several times to ensure that a poor performance would not cost them anything.

On the day of the poster display they presented themselves well and confidently communicated to senior professors. They later thanked the lecturer for what they thought was “the opportunity of a life time” and volunteered to work with the Students’ Speaking Club.

OBSERVED BENEFITS OF DIFFERENTIATED ASSESSMENTS

The sample cases delineated above throw light on the benefits of differentiated assessments and how it creates an inclusive classroom. The differentiated assessment activities offered experiences which were enjoyable and extremely beneficial for all these students and it is a wake-up call to educators to offer a broad spectrum of platforms for students to work on.

The table below compares the performance of the students mentioned in the cases in a standard assessment, differentiated assessment and summative final exam in the same subject. All students have performed better in the differentiated assessment and this has helped them to score high grades.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Standard Assessment</th>
<th>Differentiated Assessment</th>
<th>Final Exam</th>
<th>Total score</th>
<th>Comparison to grades in other subjects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Case 1</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>Highest grade in qualitative subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case 2</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>Highest grade in qualitative subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case 3</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>Highest grade in qualitative subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case 4 Students</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>Second highest grade in qualitative subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 and 2</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>Highest grade in qualitative subject</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 – Comparison of grades for standard and differentiated assessments

The performance of the whole cohort was also significantly better for the differentiated assessment with an average of 70% while it was 54% in the final exam. 90% students scored higher grades in the differentiated assessment than in the final exam. Along with enriching the learning experience differentiated assignments also helped students to score better grades.

It was observed that differentiated assessments reduced the boredom (for both instructor and students) of observing the same mode of assessment throughout a 13 week semester. The class participated better and were involved and interested in the activities. These assessments also improved interaction between students. The most important outcome from the instructor’s point of view was the improved performance of hitherto mediocre students; this reflected on their grades too. All students enjoyed the activities and were actively involved leading to deep learning. Students could show their full potential as the activities catered to different learning styles - visual, auditory and kinaesthetic. Students in general were motivated by the success and it is hoped that they would use
the experience to improve performance in other subjects also. Richard Stiggins (2002) believes that students become more confident learners as they watch themselves succeed and teachers, parents, school administrators all win in the process.

The experiences gathered from this exercise also informed the instructor’s teaching philosophy and was beneficial for other courses taught too. Reflective teaching that improves practice is a characteristic of the ‘Level 3’ theory of teaching postulated by Biggs. The focus here is on “What the student does” and “on teaching that leads to learning” (Biggs, 2001: 224).

Another important benefit of using differentiated assessment was that it helped to modify teaching to suit student learning needs better. The process of designing, monitoring and assessing differentiated assessments gave the lecturer clear and in-depth understanding of students’ diverse needs. Instructors do not have to cater to every student but can create a portfolio of assessments that will suit a broad spectrum.

FURTHER APPLICATIONS

Differentiated assessments can be successfully used in several subjects especially as a formative assignment. However, its application in a practical, experience based course like Business Communication was easy because of the flexibility offered. The practice of using differentiated assessments warrants reflection, planning, preparation, consultation with students and on the whole much more dedication and time investment from the instructor. The benefits of time and effort invested are many and all stakeholders - primarily students – stand to gain. Instructors should be encouraged to experiment with this assessment format at the tertiary level as it has been successfully used to enhance quality in schools.

REFERENCE LIST


Chapman, C. & R. King (2005), Differentiated Assessment Strategies: One Tool Doesn't Fit All, Crown, CA.


Differentiated Assessments
