

COMMENTARY

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Why Assessment Which Carries No Grades and Marks is the Key for the Future of Education?

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ABSTRACT

Formative assessments are commonly being mixed up with summative assessments which provide feedback. The ambiguity leads to a loss of distinction between the two. This blending is in direct contrast to the best practice of education, which advocates clarity of formative and summative function as a precursor to a quality assessment. In this commentary, we emphasise the non-credit bearing as the discriminatory feature, which illuminates the formative purpose of an assessment. We begin by revisiting the history from the time of the founding scholars who conceptualised formative and summative ideas. Subsequently, we compare it with the contemporary practice of assessment. Then we elucidate the philosophical underpinning of formative assessment and how the future of education relies on education, which move away from a pure exam-oriented focus of the curriculum. Finally, we relate the revolutionary concept of formative assessment with personalised education as the key curriculum design of tomorrow's education.

Keywords: *Formative assessment, Personalised education, Quality feedback*

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INTRODUCTION

The role of assessment in education perhaps has never been more critical than ever. Although competency is traditionally associated with summative assessment, emerging trends call for more emphasis on formative assessment (1–2). Unfortunately, there is an ambiguity in the definition which separates the two. The gap confuses when an assessment is regarded as summative and formative, causing a significant loss

of benefits conferred by appreciating the distinct roles and purposes of assessment. This commentary will highlight non-credit-bearing as the fundamental feature that defines formative against the summative assessment. We will then critically discuss the revolutionary concept behind formative assessment to conclude why having assessments that carry no grades and marks are paramount for the future of personalised medical education.

THE HISTORY

The concept of formative and summative was first coined by Scriven (3) in programme evaluation. The idea emphasised a separate process of an internally-motivated emancipatory endeavour to push for higher achievement, designated as formative. In contrast, the term summative defined traditional inescapable, high-stake, rigid and externally-regulated evaluation (3). Two years later, Bloom (4), one of the founding scholars of outcome-based education (OBE), adapted this revolutionary concept for educational assessment. However, introducing Scriven's idea of formative evaluation in curriculum delivery proved to be challenging. In many ways, the idea was in direct collision with the conventional practice of assessment, which was primarily understood to substantiate learning. Thus, after years of implementation, Bloom (4) established that "...we see much more effective use of formative evaluation if it is separated from the grading process and used primarily as an aid to teaching" (p. 48).

It is essential to appreciate the nature of higher education practice in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. The climate of the Cold War had influenced the demand to produce graduates who can contribute to the cause (5). Thus, eliminating scores and grades from assessment served as a protective cocoon to safeguard the revolutionary idea from being confused as another form of conventional assessment. It was revolutionary in the sense that formative assessment reinvented the purpose of assessment beyond merely being interchangeably regarded as an examination. It took almost half a century later for this idea to be fully appreciated – the vision on empowering learning, rather than judging competency, as the primary purpose of assessment (2, 6–7).

THE CURRENT PRACTICE OF FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN THE MALAYSIAN CONTEXT

It is helpful to compare this conceptualisation with the contemporary definition. Malaysia Qualification Agency (8) defines summative assessment as "The assessment of learning which summarises the student progress at a particular time and is used to assign the student a course grade" (p. vii). In comparison, the definition of formative assessment follows "The assessment of student's progress throughout a course, in which the feedback from the learning activities are used to improve student attainment" (p. iii). There is a vacuum of concept between the two definitions. While credit-bearing status defines the former, feedback-giving and longitudinal delivery define the latter. The approach creates an ambiguity, especially in continuous assessments that may have all these three elements; credit-bearing as large as 40% of the final score, incorporate feedback and assuredly run throughout the course duration (8). This gap creates space that allows stakeholders to mix the two as one. Hence, it is not uncommon to see many educators regard continuous assessments as both formative and summative. Unfortunately, the blending brings an end to the demarcation and hence losing the value of separating the two.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

The result is in direct contrast with the best practice of assessment. The landmark publication by Wass et al. (9) began with "The test of clinical competence...must be designed with respect to key issues including...clarity about their formative or summative function" (p. 945). Having a clear purpose of an assessment provides a firm foundation for that particular assessment's best conduct. For example, suppose a clinical short case is to be carried

out as a formative assessment; the quality of feedback would be the most crucial aspect of that assessment. In contrast, quality feedback must not override the ultimate emphasis on validity and reliability should the session be conducted as an examination. In both situations, the same assessment may share similar features, including feedback-giving. Yet, summative and formative function elucidate the focus and the primary intention of that assessment – and hence dictates the priority on assessment utility.

The philosophical underpinning extends beyond just guiding the best conduct of an assessment. Without bearing any credit, there is an assurance on the session's primary intention to drive learning. This security transfers the session's ownership from the examiner to the students. The safe environment is a sine-qua-non for a higher level of understanding because adults learn more effectively by being corrected for mistakes rather than being praised for achievements (10). For such powerful learning to occur, it should start from the internal locus of control, where learners take charge of their education and are not intimidated to expose their gaps and mistakes. This internally-driven course of action produces meaningful learning that differentiates adults against children learner (10).

Supporting this theory is one of the most extensive meta-analyses in educational literature by Hattie and Timperley (11). The powerful review appraised more than 500 empirical studies involving almost 25 million participants to look for the most critical factors for effective learning. They established that personalised feedback on specific tasks exerted the most significant learning effects, almost double the impact of going to school, which the reviewers took as the benchmarked standard. Hence, unlike in the setting of a high-stake examination, the formative environment is a total dedication for maximising personalised feedback. Students may capitalise on the safety profile of non-credit bearing to accelerate

learning. Norcini et al. (12) regarded this as a catalytic benefit to contrast it against educational benefit, which is the learning motivation harvested from the pressures to pass a summative assessment. This philosophy is the underpinning idea behind advocating formative as the assessment for learning.

THE CHALLENGES

Nonetheless, we recognise the steep learning curve to train educators to give quality feedback through formative assessment. From our experience of providing training on assessment for various settings and stages of curriculum delivery, educators commonly described assigning grades to assessment helped to summon students' motivation to learn. Without the pressure to pass an exam, they concerned that students might not invest a serious commitment. Compounding this concern was the perception among these educators that students tended to assign how important a subject was by how much credit the subject would contribute to their final mark. For these reasons, there were tendencies to assign credits to all assessments, even if the primary intention was for students to learn.

Paradoxically, we believe these concerns further augment the need to preserve the non-credit bearing of formative assessment. The situations in which formative assessment will appeal less favourably among teachers and staff signal a fundamental educational practice issue. It warrants a robust evaluation because the climate of education should not be synthesising an environment where students almost exclusively rely on external pressure to conjure learning motivation. Thus, in this context, formative assessment plays a vital role in ensuring the practice of education does not succumb to the exam-oriented focus. This distinctive role motivated Bloom (4) to adapt the idea of formative assessment from Scriven (3) in the first place; to ensure conforming to regulators' requirements

remain as the definition of training, but not education. Hence, assigning credits to formative assessment will camouflage as an immediate solution to motivate learning, but obliterates the fundamental opportunities to evaluate educational practice, potentially leaving the more serious concern of education left unchecked.

EDUCATION OF TOMORROW

Therefore, the recipe for moving forward lies in the robust quality appraisal to investigate and interrogate the existing educational practice, which leads to the current challenges. This journey is a long road and likely resource-consuming, warranting perseverance and long-term commitment. However, as with any educational intervention, a high price for quality education will always redeem itself in the long run. The characteristic of non-credit-bearing is fundamental to translate the revolutionary philosophy of formative assessment into practical results. Furthermore, with the significant leap in digital technology, we can assess and retrieve comprehensive data for each student, in every subject and at every milestone of their progression. The formative assessment then transforms this robust information into actionable insights, promoting a truly personalised learning plan. This personalised learning plan is the architectural design that explicitly supports the primary aim of education; to nurture the best out of an individual's potential.

Finally, it is epistemologically deficient to say our education must prepare students for tomorrow. Instead, today's education needs to equip the current generation with the ability to create tomorrow. Thus, we believe the future education should move towards championing internally-driven mastery of learning to attain growth and personalised learning. These are measures that will give birth to innovators. Nurturing one's best ability is how we envisage the education

of tomorrow. Embracing personalised education via quality feedback in a comprehensive assessment fully dedicated to empower learning holds the key to unlock the future direction of education.

CONCLUSION

In summary, we have discussed the history, philosophy, justifications and evidence behind the need to appreciate the non-credit-bearing status of formative assessments. We also acknowledge the magnitude of challenges associated with this call. However, we conclude the tasks are worth investing in the interest in quality education for tomorrow.

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