

Is Current Formative Assessment Still Relevant in Turning Students into Deep Learners?

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Abstract – Universities should design the assessment activities that could induce students to be deep learners instead of surface learners, and at the same time equip them with relevant soft skills. This paper aims to gain insight on students' perception on the appropriateness of the assessment activities in developing soft skills of a management accounting subject at a public university in Malaysia. 420 usable questionnaires were collected out of 686 distributed to fourth semester students taking the said subject. Descriptive statistics and Mann-Whitney U test were conducted to achieve the objective. Results revealed that students did not benefit much from test or quiz implying that such assessment does not turn students into deep learners as expected. On the other hand, group work and presentation do contribute to the development of soft skills. However, findings should not be generalized to other subjects.

Keywords – Test and quiz; Formative assessment; Traditional assessment; Group work and presentation; Soft skills.

1. Introduction

Researchers agree that assessment, especially formative assessment, is an important tool that academicians may manipulate to change and control students' approach to learning. How do they want

their students to study? Do they want their students to be surface learners, who merely memorize the material content, then pouring it all on the examination paper, and later on forgetting what they have learned? Or do they want their students to take a deep approach by attempting to make sense of what they learn, developing an understanding, and relating what they learn to the real world? These two approaches to learning would bring about graduates with two distinct qualities. Deep approach will turn students into active learners, who constantly seek to acquire new knowledge and equipped with necessary transferable skills to workplace [1]. On the other hand, surface learners may emerge as ones who most probably show good academic result, but lack of soft skills that makes getting employed become highly unlikely [1].

Researchers (like, [2],[3],[4],[5]) have strong evidence to suggest that it is the assessment activities employed that would influence the students' choice of approach. Elton and Johnston [4] strongly emphasized that changing the teaching method without changing the way the students are assessed would not change the students' learning approach. Therefore, a formative assessment that focuses on a constructivist approach with an adaptable process that emphasizes on students [6] should be employed by a university if it really wants to produce balanced graduates. Unfortunately, Rushton [6] discovered that assessment nowadays actually inhibits this objective.

To date we are still not clear as to how our students perceive the impact of assessment on their approach to learning. Are the assessment activities implemented still relevant for this new generation? Higher institutions undeniably make it their main agenda to produce balanced graduates who are academically excellent and equipped with certain transferable skills to the workplace. But are we really on the right path to achieve our aim? Kalra [7] had conducted a survey on 472 Malaysian employers which has revealed a disappointing result. 70% of them were disappointed in the quality of the "just average" graduates; 26% characterized the graduates

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as “bad” while only 6% felt that the graduates are “good”. If this result could be used as an indicator of success of the higher institutions, then it may well be concluded that we have failed to achieve our target.

Research on formative assessment in higher education is abundance. However, it is still far from comprehensive, especially with the dynamic changes in technology as well as the different characteristics of the new millennial students that we are now serving. Not much empirical evidence is available on whether formative assessment would lead to the intended educational outcomes [8], or how students perceive their learning is affected by the assessment [5]. In accounting education, even more limited materials can be found on assessment [5], specifically, management accounting [9].

Due to this, it is strongly believed that knowing students’ perception on the effect of assessment on their learning is important so that academicians may formulate the best assessment strategies to maximize students’ learning. Do they feel that the assessment activities that they have gone through have encouraged them to become deep learners, or just merely surface learners? Do they feel that the assessment enhances their soft skills? Therefore, this paper aims to gain insight on students’ perception on the appropriateness of the assessment activities of one of the management accounting subjects at a public university in Malaysia in turning them into active, deep learners.

2. Literature review

Assessment is a tool used to evaluate, measure, and document the academic readiness and performance, learning progress, skill acquisition, or educational needs of students [10]. Therefore, implementing the right and effective assessment is extremely imperative to change the student learning process [4]. Assessment can be summative or formative. However, this paper only focuses on the formative assessment (termed, ‘assessment’), as it is an in-process assessment of learning that is managed several times during academic program [10]. Therefore, it is more suitable to meet students’ needs in teaching and learning [3], while influencing how students approach learning [4].

Extant literatures have provided evidence on the effect of assessment on students learning. Basically, researchers agreed on the positive outcomes that may surface with the right and effective implementation of assessment. For example, assessment points out the important points to learn, where students know what they are lacking and where to focus, and thus increasing their motivation and enhance their achievement by enabling them to view their own competence, and determine the approach and pace of

their study, to the extent that they develop the necessary soft skills [5]. Data and feedback generated from a good assessment may also improve instructional practices, and identifies loophole in the curriculum [8] that can be used in instructional sequencing to further develop new curricula and courses [9].

Besides, such feedback would provide information to modify and improve the teaching and learning activities in which the lecturers and students are engaged in [6, 9]. In addition, it helps educators to evaluate the students’ progress and make necessary beneficial adjustment [2],[11],[12]. In a nutshell, an effective assessment would invoke students to become active learners - who keep track on their learning progress, are encouraged and directed to determine the action to be taken, and how to go about doing them. Subsequently, students become highly motivated to keep obtaining their learning goals [1]. Besides, good assessment can also help students to develop their soft skills that is vital for them to be balanced graduates and able to compete in global competitive marketplace [13],[14],[15].

Previous literatures, like [5] classified assessment into traditional and alternative assessment. Assessments that verify individual achievement fall under the traditional assessment category, like test and quiz. On the other hand, alternative assessment, such as classroom activities, presentation, case study and field study does not just focus on grades, but it emphasizes more on understanding of the subject areas [5] besides developing many soft skills that give added value to the students [16]. Each of these assessments has their own benefits and drawbacks.

Though being constantly criticized, previous literatures still demonstrate the importance of this traditional assessment. [5] noted that the new generation, which is known as Millennial, still found it relevant, similar to the findings of earlier researchers on Generation X (like, [17], [18]). Test or quiz is favoured by students as they believe that it is a fairer assessment that rewards individual effort which is based on objective grading criteria [5, 19]. Consequently, students will be more accountable for their own learning [19] and are forced to struggle hard doing revisions and practices to comprehensively understand what they learn, while avoiding the free-rider issue [5].

However, [20] strongly criticized test and quiz. They alleged that this type of traditional assessment actually pollutes the learning process, assessing students only at ‘a point of time’ instead of ‘during the process of learning’, leading to invalid learning outcome. As a result, students become surface learners, instead of deep learners as they simply learn for the purpose of assessment with little personal engagement [21]. It only involves memorization and

reproduction that will inhibit the development of soft skills, like critical thinking skill, among students [5, 20]. Test and quiz may induce students to 'learning not to learn' [5].

Alternative assessment such as presentation, role play, simulation and case study would give opportunities to students to employ higher-level thinking skills and other soft skills besides allowing their cognitive performance to be measured [15]. Working in a group would train students to be good team players who can tolerate individual differences, as well as effectively communicate and collaborate with other team members [22]. It also enhances their self-confidence and improves their interpersonal skills. Doing things collaboratively in a highly coordinated teamwork also instills a sense of responsibility leading to higher students' self-esteem [23] that best suits the nature of the millennial students.

The Millennial is socially active and work well in group that make assessment activities requiring collaboration, cooperation and interaction are particularly suitable [22]. Besides lowering the risk of personal failure [22], group work activities also encourage teamwork collaboration that suits their highly interconnected nature [24] and expose them to challenges and difficulties arising in working in a team [5]. Such experience may constitute an essential transferable skill in workplace [20]. Understanding the nature of the Millennial would certainly help academicians in designing most effective assessment activities for them.

Therefore, it is hard to deny that assessments which are exam-oriented usually ignore the elements of soft skills development among the students. A good and effective assessment should comprise of a combination of both traditional and alternative assessment so as to maximize its effect on the students. In light of graduate employability issue nowadays, it would enlighten academicians to discover if assessment activities implemented do contribute to the development of balanced graduates who excel in both academic performance and equipped with various soft skills aspired by potential employers. The next section explains how the study was conducted.

3. Method and material

Sampling - The population consisted of a total of all 950 fourth-semester accounting students taking the last of the three subjects of Cost and Management Accounting (CMA) from eight branch campuses of a public university in Malaysia. Out of these eight campuses, five campuses were randomly selected with a total of 686 students. These students have just completed all the three Cost and Management

Accounting subjects to obtain a Diploma in Accountancy. As they had undergone the learning and assessment process for all the three subjects, they could provide a better view on how they perceive the continuous assessment they had gone through.

Data Collection - Data was collected via two ways - using a questionnaire and also interviews. The questionnaires were distributed to the students from the five branch campuses via the respective Lecturer-In-Charge (LIC). 686 questionnaires were distributed to the students during the last class of the semester after all assessment activities had been completed. Out of 686, only 446 were returned. However, 26 were discarded due to various reasons, like incomplete or straight-lining, thus generating 420 usable responses (61% response rate). The interview was conducted on ten students. This process is considered vital as it will give some crucial input in explaining some ambiguous issues as well as obtaining additional information that could not be tapped via the questionnaire.

Instrument - The questionnaire consisted of two parts: Part A covered demographic information of the respondents, while Part B elicited information on the respondents' perception on current assessment activities of the subject. They were asked to recall their experience going through the formative assessment process, which carries a mark of 40%. This 40% marks consist of 35% marks allocated for tests and quiz; while only 5% is allocated for group work and presentation (which is to be considered as one assessment activity). As such, test and quiz represent 87.5% and work group and presentation represent 12.5% of the total formative assessment marks. They were to rate the extent to which each of the statement describes their attitude or perception towards the current assessment by circling number 1 to indicate "Strongly Disagree" to 6 or to indicate "Strongly Agree".

There were twenty items related to students' perception on current assessment. Nine items were used to measure students' perception on test and quiz, where five items were adapted from [5] and the other four items were extracted from Assessment Experience Questionnaire (AEQ) initially developed by [25]. On the other hand, out of 11 items to measure students' perception on group work and presentation, nine items were adapted from [5], while another two were self-developed to achieve the study objective.

Data Analysis - Data was analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 24. To fulfill the study objective, the mean values and standard deviation (SD) were employed. Reliability test has been conducted on the self-developed instrument.

Mann-Whitney U test was also conducted to see if there was any significant difference in how groups of students view the effect of test or quiz on their learning.

4. Results and discussion

a. Respondents' profile

Respondents consisted of 420 students. Majority of the students were female (73.1%) and 62.9% were those who scored the CGPA of 3.5 and above. Most of them also preferred management accounting to financial accounting subject with half of the students admitted to putting high (50.7%) and moderate (46.3%) effort into the subject. Table 1. depicts this information.

Table 1. Respondents' profile

Characteristics		Frequency	%
Gender	Male	113	26.9
	Female	307	73.1
CGPA	3.49 and below	144	37.1
	3.50 and above	264	62.9
More interest	Management Accounting	271	64.5
	Financial Accounting	116	27.6
	Both	14	3.3
Effort put	Moderate	195	46.4
	High	213	50.7

b. Students' perception on test or quiz

This section elaborates on how students perceived the impact of test and quiz that they had gone through. For the purpose of analysis, the scale of 1 to 6 was divided into two categories, agree or disagree. A cut off point of 3.5 is used to separate these two categories. Scores of less than 3.5 indicate disagreement, while scores exceeding this value indicate agreement. The farther the scores form 3.5 denote the higher the extent of agreement or disagreement.

Table 2. lists the items pertaining to the students' perception on test or quiz. Basically, they agreed on most of the items, except for items 5 and 7. However, mean values which indicate agreement are only slightly above 3.5 (ranging from 3.89 to 4.75) denoting that there was only a slight agreement. Further analysis (Mann-Whitney U test) was conducted to see if there was any significant difference on how two groups of students: (i) those who claim to exert high effort on this subject and those with moderate effort; and (ii) the two groups of CGPA (those above 3.50 and below 3.50), evaluated these items.

Overall, the table gives a rather disparaging picture of how students view test or quiz. It somehow confirms the negative outcomes of test or quiz discussed in the extant literatures. Disappointedly, students believed that preparing for the tests or quiz was mainly a matter of memorizing ($m=4.25$). Due to that, all groups of students slightly disagreed ($m=3.3$) when asked if they would still remember most of what they had learnt after the test or quiz. Therefore, it is not surprising when they somewhat felt that they could still get good marks without really understanding what they had learnt ($m=4.10$). This finding somehow provides a proof that test or quiz does encourage memorization and reproduction of the lesson content that is in line with previous literatures [5, 20]. Obviously, test or quiz encourages students to 'learning not to learn', turning students into surface learners. When asked if they still remember what they have learned during the previous semester, a student simply said, "I can't really recall what I have learned. That was last semester's subject..."

Somehow, they only very slightly agreed that they understood the lecture material when they sat down and studied for tests/quiz ($m=3.89$). This is somewhat expected as students are forced to struggle hard doing revisions and practices to understand what they learn when a test or quiz is anticipated [5], which further supports the earlier argument. When interviewed, one student expressed that "I will certainly study when test or quiz is coming. I have no choice, coz I have to score this subject."

However, students moderately disagreed that it is worth skipping any lectures to focus on tests or quiz ($m=2.28$). Mann-Whitney U test conducted indicated a significant difference between the two groups (p -value=0.024), where those with moderate effort showed a higher tendency to skip lectures as compared to those exerting high effort. Interviews conducted revealed that students putting last minute effort have a higher tendency to skip class to prepare for the test or quiz, but those who have been studying consistently throughout the semester were less likely to do so. One student explained, "I couldn't cover all topics to be tested, so I have no choice but to skip classes." When asked of the level of effort exerted, the same student just described herself as a last-minute person.

However, they admitted to learning new things while studying for the tests or quiz ($m=4.64$) that resulted in better understanding of subject matter ($m=4.65$). This is highly expected as these students would only put more effort to study and understand things better when test or quiz was approaching as there was no other assessment, except the group presentation that contributes only 5% marks. Therefore, as they are forced to struggle hard doing

revisions and practices to comprehensively understand what they learn [5], they would learn new things and had a better understanding

However, students exerting moderate effort rated the first statement (Item 3) significantly lower than those with high effort (p-value=0.00). This is also similar to the second statement (Item 4), where for both categories, students exerting high effort (p-value=0.00) and those with CGPA of 3.50 and above (p-value=0.00), reported a significantly higher values than another category. Hence, these groups of students significantly believed that the marks they get from the tests or quiz motivated them to understand what they had learnt (m=4.75). This explains why they felt that test or quiz is a fair method of assessment (m=4.58).

Table 2. Students' perception on test or quiz

No	Items	Mean	SD
1	For me, preparing for the tests or quiz is a matter of memorizing.	4.25	1.16
2	It's only when I sit down and study for tests/quiz that I understand the lecture material.	3.89	1.27
3	I learnt new things while studying for the tests or quiz.	4.64	0.93
4	I understand things better as a result of the test or quiz.	4.65	0.95
5	I'll probably still remember most of what I have learnt after the test or quiz.	3.30	1.26
6	In the tests or quiz, I can still get good marks without really understanding what I have learnt.	4.10	1.18
7	To me, it's worth skipping any lectures to focus on tests or quiz.	2.28	1.42
8	The marks that I get from the tests or quiz motivate me to understand what I have learnt.	4.75	1.02
9	I feel that test or quiz is a fair method of assessment.	4.58	1.04

Based on the above table, it can be concluded that though test or quiz does contribute to students' learning, it does little to turning students into deep learners. It may be favoured by students and serves its purpose in rewarding individual effort [5, 19], but it should not be a stand-alone assessment activity if we were to produce balanced graduates as it tends to encourage students to be surface learners.

c. Students' perception on group work and presentation

Table 3. lists the items pertaining to students' perception on group work and presentation. Basically, they at least moderately agreed on all items. Students strongly believed that group work and presentation has made them participated in an

interesting activity (m=4.47), which necessitated them to study beyond the course requirements (m=4.00). Thus, they did agree that group work and presentation has trained them to be effective team members (m=4.67). Hence, working in group undeniably enables students to acquire certain soft skills such as ability to lead, to communicate, to work as a team and develop interpersonal relationship, which are perceived to be useful in producing balanced graduates [5, 24].

However, when asked if group work and presentation require them to really work together to complete the tasks and not just to divide the tasks among them, they seemed to only slightly agree (m=3.62) with a high standard deviation (sd=1.25). This indicates that they were not of the same opinion, implying that there were students who do divide tasks and later on combine them to complete the assignment without really collaborating with one another. This is somewhat disappointing as these students are supposed to collaborate, but in reality, they work individually in a group.

One student interviewed commented that they only met twice - first to distribute the tasks and later to combine the tasks and to discuss about the flow of the presentation. When asked if two meetings were sufficient, the student said, "Of course that's enough. It's only 5 marks and we were all busy. So we just want to complete it."

Table 3. Students' perception on group work and presentation

No	Items	Mean	SD
1	Group work and presentation has made me participate in an interesting activity.	4.47	.94
2	Group work and presentation require students to study beyond the course requirements (like, finding related real-life information, visiting real business premises).	4.00	1.22
3	Group work and presentation has trained me to be an effective team member.	4.67	.87
4	Group work and presentation require the members to really work together to complete the task, and NOT just to divide the tasks and combine them.	3.62	1.25
5	Group work and presentation has helped me building the skills needed in the workplace.	4.74	.85
6	Group work and presentation is designed to encourage me to apply knowledge into the real-world situation.	4.66	.89
7	Group work and presentation has forced me to improve my communication skills.	4.57	.93

8	Group work and presentation has improved my critical thinking skills.	4.80	.85
9	Presentation is designed to improve my ability to present information.	4.67	.91
10	Presentation is designed to strengthen my ability to analyze information.	4.75	.87
11	Presentation has encouraged me to keep seeking for related information.	4.79	.84

In addition, students also strongly agreed that group work and presentation has forced them to improve their communication skills ($m=4.57$) and critical thinking skills ($m=4.80$). This is due to the nature of this activity that has somehow improved their ability in seeking ($m=4.79$), analyzing ($m=4.75$) and presenting ($m=4.67$) related information. Previous literature agree that group work and presentation could equip students with various soft skills like critical thinking, decision making, and problem solving skills, communication skills that boost their self confidence in public speaking [5], [26]. However, sufficient mark should be allocated to make it works.

Therefore, students agreed that group work and presentation has helped them to apply knowledge into real-world situation ($m=4.66$) and build the skills needed ($m=4.74$), like communication skills, critical thinking skills and leadership skills in the workplace. Previous researchers [like, 20, 27] discovered that when students could clearly perceive the relevance of their knowledge in the workplace, they would be able to apply their knowledge in the real-world context.

In a nutshell, respondents indicated that 5% mark allocated for this work group activity is considered too small that students felt is not worth their effort. In an interview, one student commented, "When we want to present, we have to read, to prepare for the materials, slides for presentation, etc. We also have to understand the topic, or else we cannot answer the questions during the Q&A session. But, with the 5% mark, we feel that it's not worth it. So, some of us just do it for the sake of doing. We don't really take it seriously."

Therefore, when designing assessment activities, attention should be given to the allocation of marks where reasonable marks should be awarded to the given task [20] so that it matches the effort and study time which represent its importance in the syllabus content [27], [28].

5. Conclusions and recommendations

From the findings above, students seemed to agree that current assessment mainly consisting of test or quiz does not encourage deep learning among them where they could even score high marks without really understanding what they have learned. However, students agreed that group work and presentation do encourage them to become active learners besides contributing to the development of soft skills needed in the workplace. It somehow also enables them to apply knowledge into the real-world situation, though the effect is quite minimal due to the low marks allocated. In support of previous literatures, current practice of test and quiz only encourages students to memorize and reproduce information which leads them to become surface learners. Due to the high portion of marks, students tend to exert high effort to score the test or quiz to the extent of skipping other classes.

To produce balanced graduate, students need to be furnished with good academic achievement and equipped with a variety of soft skills. However, current assessment with less proportion of marks allocated to group work and presentation was found to be inappropriate and was not aligned to this aim since it is more exam-oriented. As such, there is a lack of soft skills development being imparted, that leads the students to be surface learners instead of deep learners. Therefore, it is suggested that alternative assessment such as classroom activities, field study, or simulated enterprise should be added on to the current assessment activities which emphasize group work and presentation activities with higher proportion of marks. This will ensure the high quality balanced graduates being produced.

Findings of this study cannot be generalized to other subjects as it only considers one subject. Similarly, it would not be fair to infer the finding to the whole assessment system of the university being studied. Future research may look at other subjects or faculty so that comparison could be made that would enrich the finding towards the development of a better assessment activities.

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