



FEEDBACK ON ASSESSMENT: A DYNAMIC FACTOR IN AN ITERATIVE EDUCATIONAL CYCLE

Rola Jadayel, Amal Iaaly and Florence Tawk

University of Balamand, Lebanon

With the move to a student-centered educational system, constructive feedback on learners assessment is becoming more of an important factor in the learning cycle at all levels. This work is an analysis of the assessment component in the educational system. It aims to present this particular component as the most dynamic factor in the iterative learning process. It will detail the results of focus groups conducted at the Counseling Center at the University of Balamand in Lebanon which will project the point of view of university students on the importance and effectiveness of the feedback they are given on any form of assessment. Additionally, the work presents views of educators in that respect, reflecting on whether feedback on assessment is seen as an iterative component in the learning cycle or is it viewed as the end of a path converging towards a focused educational goal. The work aims to reflect on the efficiency, role, and satisfaction of all stakeholders in that respect.

Keywords: Student centered, Assessment for learning, Feedback on assessment, Learning cycle.

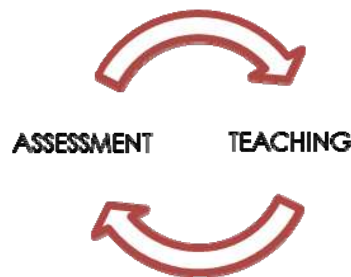
Background

Ever since the adoption of Modern University model (1980), a new era in university education has emerged. Universities nowadays aim at preparing well-rounded individuals. It has become vital to develop new skills beyond academic achievements in order to succeed in a highly competitive global job market (Jadayel et al., 2012). Moreover, with globalization and free access to information, the educational environment is now seen as creating situations and forging relationships of apprenticeship between newcomers and experts via ongoing engagement in social situations (Sambell, 2011). Now more than ever, learners need ongoing dialogue, feedback, and participatory relationships to gradually come to *feel* any cognitive domain under study (Sambell, 2011). From that perspective, during the last few decades, we have been experiencing a move towards a multidisciplinary integrated learning in all levels of education, a shift from teaching to learning, from inputs to outcomes, from rote learning to integrated learning, a move to a more student-centered educational system to enhance lifelong learning and face the challenges of this era. New roles towards society and students have been assumed and new objectives in research and teaching have been developed and adopted. Modern educational methodologies such as service learning, problem-based learning, project-based learning, and many others, were developed in order to complement classical teaching (Jadayel et al., 2012). Alongside aforementioned methodologies, new assessment strategies, and new evaluation techniques have emerged. Those are seen as effective tools to serve a student-centered educational system which foresees the student as an active partner in his/her education and a prime responsible for his/her learning.

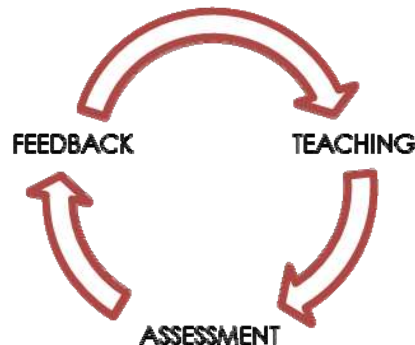
Briefing and Objective

Assessment for Learning (AFL), also known as Formative Assessment, is a process that instructors and students use as part of instruction that provides feedback to adjust ongoing teaching and learning. The goal is to improve students' comprehension of core content. It provides students with clear learning targets, examples and models of strong and weak work, regular descriptive feedback and the ability to self-assess, track learning, and set goals (Stiggins , 2007). Research has shown that effective AFL practices have the potential to significantly increase both student achievement and motivation (Stiggins , 2007).

The AFL model emphasizes the necessity of identifying aspects of assessment that can support and enhance the learning as opposed to evaluation for placement or ranking purposes solely. The AFL model has therefore incurred a transformation in the learning components dynamics thus creating an iterative cycle between teaching and testing.



With the move to a student-centered educational system, constructive feedback on learners' assessment has become an increasingly significant factor. Students nowadays need a detailed, practical, and beneficial pointer on any form of assessment. This is because such practice is now considered an integral part of the educational cycle which will reiterate into a deeper comprehension of covered concepts. Hence, there is a need to re-engineer our feedback practices in the context of AFL considering feedback on assessment as an essential dynamic factor in the learning process. Accordingly, a new component in the learning cycle is to be considered.



This work will present the viewpoints of university students on the importance and effectiveness of feedback given to them on any form of assessment. Its variation based on the topic and discipline is also considered. Furthermore, views of educators in that respect will also be shared.

Methodology

The Counseling Center at the University of Balamand aims to act as a support unit for the student body and to provide services that address their social, educational, and emotional development needs (Jadayel et al., 2014). Realizing the sensitivity of the service, the center has, over the last six years, adopted an alternative approach to student counseling through the development of a strategic plan aiming to optimize student outreach. The core of the plan was to shift to an active action in student counseling rather than passive support and reactive service. The center, therefore, aimed to address issues of common interest to the community and outreach students as a group and therefore initiate guidance and support on selected topics (Jadayel et al., 2014). Consequently, special attention was given to student learning, academic achievement, and educational satisfaction during university years. Over the past year, the counseling center initiated dialogue with a number of students and educators in order to learn more about students' experiences related to feedback on assessment practices at the University of Balamand.

Focus Groups

Four focus groups were conducted in a meeting room at the building of student activities. A pleasant relaxed environment was set up in order to ensure reliable input from participants. The focus groups that averaged ten students per group were managed by the assistant dean of student affairs in the presence of the student counselor. Participants were chosen at random to represent diverse disciplines and on voluntary basis. The discussion was conducted to project their general experience on feedback given to them on any form of assessment in any course they have taken without focusing on major related courses. Each focus group started with a five-minute introduction emphasizing the confidentiality of participants' personal information and contributions. Participants were clearly informed that we are seeking input from youth to better understand types of feedback they were given in terms of quality, quantity, and receiver satisfaction. The focus groups were divided into two phases twenty minutes each. The first phase was intended to learn about the different types of feedback a student might obtain, in relation to the types of assessment they are given. Four open-ended questions were orally administered to participants opening the floor for discussion. The second phase intended to learn about the ways to improve feedback practices in terms of their quantity, quality, and form. The concepts of peer feedback and self-evaluation were also tackled. Each focus group was closed with a five-minute wrap-up summarizing all discussions and opening the floor for further input or recommendations from the student body.

Interviews with Educators

Ten one-to-one interviews were conducted with educators from various departments at the university. The interviews were based on the focus groups conducted and were run by the student counselor. Each interview consisted of five questions about the feedback practices, their quality, and quantity. Educators were then asked about their personal view of the importance of such a practice to the student learning and whether or not it is systemized within their respective departments.

All discussions were audio recorded and later on transcribed accurately for referencing and record keeping.

Analysis

The focus groups discussions reflected non-homogeneity between the various disciplines participants corresponded to. While some courses, professors, or departments offered several ways of constructive feedback on assessment, others reflected poor practice in that respect and showed another opposite extreme for the same practice.

When asked to describe the forms of feedback they receive on different assessment students replied:

- *"We get full comprehensive written feedback on some exams in a particular course".*
- *"For some courses, we have individual meetings for better understanding on the feedback given".*
- *"We just get the grade".*
- *"Sometimes we get a strikethrough with no explanation at all".*

When discussing the quantity of feedback offered, participants remarked that they always lack proper feedback, except in very few courses where individual meetings are assigned to learn more about performance. To quote:

- *"We always lack commenting".*
- *"It is not detailed, so we cannot rely on it to ameliorate our performance".*
- *"When we have individual meetings, we feel that we get enough feedback to build on".*

Additionally, when asked to describe the level of satisfaction on the feedback they get participants, in general, reflected negatively:

- *"I am never satisfied because we do not understand our mistake, if we do not get the explanation".*

On another note, many of the responses demonstrated insecurity and confusion among students. It was realized that many of them are not sure whether or not it is their right to obtain thorough feedback on their assessment. Moreover, some regard the practice of obtaining proper feedback as an added value that they may obtain in some courses, depending on the instructor.

- *"Sometimes we are obliged to adapt to the mood of the instructor in order to get the proper feedback on a particular assessment".*
- *"For some courses, we have no feedback whatsoever until we see the last grade; we do not receive any grade through the course".*
- *"You cannot give detailed feedback on a scientific exam; there is no way to improve it is either wrong or right".*

Furthermore, throughout the discussion and repeatedly a problem of trust and personal influence was noted. Participants indirectly stated that if they do not trust the instructor they would not take any input from him or her:

- *"When given a negative offensive oral feedback, I train myself not to listen".*
- *"Some instructors label students from day one".*
- *"We believe that their feedback and grading is subjective".*

Finally touching on the concepts of peer feedback and self-evaluation revealed lack of understanding and appreciation of the educational value of such practices, we quote:

- *"We are not even qualified to assess ourselves".*
- *"We do not give honest peer feedback".*
- *"We prefer that the professors assess us because they know how we can improve better than we do".*
- *"We fear to assess ourselves because we think this might affect negatively our grade so we assess ourselves in a positive way and ignore any negative comment we might receive in our performance."*

Interviews with educators thereafter came to confirm many of the points revealed by the focus groups and reflected a high correlation with the views of students on the topic. While all of the instructors confirmed the importance of the feedback on assessment as a learning component, their practices varied from highly systematic to random, from documented and reported to occasional and based on a personal

effort. Following are extracts from various interviews reflecting the diversified practices within the University:

- “Feedback on any assessment is a necessary part of education”.
- “We use feedback as a teaching strategy, we write lots of constructive comments, and we do one to one meetings, group discussions and peer evaluation”.
- “We have a common format for feedback at the department”.
- “Our students expect feedback, and build on it”.
- “Feedback on any assessment is a necessary part of education, yet we don’t give it much attention”.
- “We don’t write any comments, it is totally up to the instructor”.
- “I give feedback because it helps students to improve. I think the students are interested in this”.
- “We don’t have a common format for feedback at the department and we do not discuss feedback given to students”.

Conclusion

Through the interactive methodology adopted, the study revealed a consensus amongst stakeholders underlining feedback on assessment as an instrumental component of the learning cycle. However, it was noted that this practice has not yet been formally integrated into the educational system subject of this study. The student body does not expect it as an integral part of their education, and therefore regards it as an “additional service”, an “added value”, that helps them better understand academic concepts. On the other hand, educators in general do not consider it as important as delivering instruction and administering assessment. Therefore, they do not see a three component diagram for the learning cycle, although they admit its high value to student education. Commonly, less time and effort is directed towards feedback in comparison to the time and effort dedicated to the other two components. Educational institutions do not enforce it so far it as a teaching/learning component and in many places, it is left loose and is regarded as a personal initiative of high educational value.

The work, therefore, intends to trigger thinking in answer to the following: *Is feedback on assessment seen as an important dynamic component in an iterative learning cycle or is it the end of a path converging towards a focused educational goal?*

References

1. Jadayel, R., Iaaly, A. , Tawk, F. & Adra, M. (2015).A Comparative Analysis: The Impact of Awareness Campaigns on Students’ Concerns at University Level. *Humanities and Social Sciences Review*, 4 (2), 2015.
2. Jadayel, R. , Iaaly, A. & Jadayel, O. (2014).An Alternative Approach for Student Counseling At University Level: An Empirical Experience from UOB. *Journal of Teaching and Education (JTE)*, Vol 3, Issue 1.
3. Jadayel, R., Iaaly, A., & Jadayel, O. (2012).Multidisciplinary Projects Supported By Modern Educational Techniques: The Case of “UOB Recycles”. *Journal of Teaching and Education (JTE)*, Vol 1, Issue 6.
4. Jadayel, R., Iaaly, A. & Jadayel, O. (2010).Service Learning and Scholarship: Experimental Learning and Community Partnership for Common Good .Joint International IGIP- SEFI Annual Conference 2010, “Diversity unifies - Diversity in Engineering Education”, Trnava, Slovakia, 19-22 September.
5. Sambell, K. (2011). *Rethinking feedback in higher education*. Bristol: ESCalate. 52.
6. Stiggings, R. (2007). Assessment through the Student 'Eye. *Educational Leadership* May 2007,Vol.64 Issue 8, p22-26.