LEARNING PROMOTED BY CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION OF BANGLADESH: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The fundamental question explored in this article is related to the type of learning currently promoted in higher education classrooms of Bangladesh. The essay starts with a brief discussion on why it is important to do research in this area. Then existing literatures related to Assessment for Learning (AfL) are discussed. Finally, activities of a Bangladeshi higher education classroom are studied to understand what type of learning was encouraged through the AfL practices there. Videotaped classroom activities were examined for this purpose. In addition, a description collected from the teacher was analyzed. The findings indicate an overemphasis on ‘assessment as measurement’ and ‘assessment as procedure’ paradigms. In addition, features of second generation of assessment are also identified in the current practice.


Background:

Assessment has always been a part of education and is perceived to play a significant role in shaping the participants’ learning. This role is more prominent in current educational practices than ever before. Researchers have argued that different forms of assessment encourage different styles of learning (Gipps, 1996). Teachers’ works in classroom are affected by the ways in which assessments are constructed and the ways in which certain types of knowledge are valued and tested for (Fautley & Savage, 2008). James (2008) suggests that in recent years our understanding of how people learn has been developing apace as a result of applying concepts and methods from a range of different fields of research: from anthropology to neuroscience. However, not much research is available on the link of learning and assessment. Researchers (e.g. Abell & Siegel, 2011; Shepard, 2000) argue that concepts of teaching and assessment ought to change as views of learning changes. Otherwise, by using borrowed models of assessment, teachers often risk subscribing, uncritically or unwittingly, to the theories of learning on which they are based (James, 2006). This may result in a chaotic situation where learning and assessment are misaligned. Significant learning opportunities might be lost due to the lack of understanding on what type of learning the practiced assessment promotes.

Concepts now regarded as components of Assessment for Learning (AfL) has been a
part of the education scenario for a long time (e.g. self and peer assessment). But the recent emphasis on AFL can be traced back to Black and Wiliam’s (1998) article ‘Inside the Black Box’ where the authors argue about the efficacy of AFL in improving learning. AFL has enjoyed a considerable focus and integration in various education improvement programs worldwide since then. However, some researchers (e.g. Sebantane, 1998) have highlighted the Anglo-European context of the studies showing the worth of AFL in improving learning and called for identifying how AFL relates to learning in other contexts. Others (e.g. Dunn & Mulvenon, 2009; Kingston & Nash, 2011) have questioned the studies that illustrate AFL as a tool for improved learning and suggest further exploration of its role in promoting learning.

These theoretical underpinnings serve as the impetus for my interest in understanding what type of learning assessment for learning promotes in the form of classroom assessment in a Bangladeshi context. However, it should be noted that this is not a large-scale research study. At best, it can be considered as a case study and the findings should not be generalized to any other classrooms. Even so, this discussion pursues to be thought provoking enough for future researchers to encourage them in exploring these ideas and for classroom teachers to be more reflective about the AFL practices they adopt. It should be mentioned that, in this essay, I focus on the learning of students only. Though teachers often cultivate significant learning from AFL practices; that will not be discussed here due to the limited nature of this work.

Review of Literature:

Before furthering this article, a brief overview of what different authors say about various forms of learning being promoted through various assessment practices is presented here:

Serafini (2000) illustrates three paradigms of assessment and describes the forms of learning that can be associated with each of them. These paradigms are:

i) Assessment as measurement,
ii) Assessment as procedure, and
iii) Assessment as inquiry

The first paradigm, assessment as measurement, perceives learning as transmission of knowledge from teacher to students. Knowledge is believed to exist independently from the learner and students work to acquire it, not construct it. Hargreaves (2005) suggests that assessment in this paradigm is usually carried out by the teacher for the pupil, though self or peer assessment with reference to a marking key or predetermined set of criteria is also possible. Large-scale, norm-referenced standardized tests are often used as the primary instrument of assessment in this paradigm (Serafini, 2000) but other methods (e.g. observation, informal chat, self assessment or portfolio collection) can also be used to summarize students’ learning in terms of numeric quantity (Hargreaves, 2005). This type of measurement of ability and achievement can be linked with behaviorist and associationist theories where learning is seen as conditioned response to external stimuli with motivation based on positive reinforcement (non-specific praises mostly) of little steps (James, 2006; Shepard, 2000). Assessment as procedure, the second paradigm, is closely related to the first one epistemologically. The only difference is its emphasis on utilization of qualitative procedures for assessment of student instead of standardized tests (Serafini, 2000). Both these paradigms have external authorities as the audience of the assessment results.
The third paradigm depicted by Serafini (2000), the assessment as inquiry paradigm, is based on constructivist theories of knowledge, student-centered learning, and the inquiry process. Assessment based on this view will address learning outcomes as well as learning processes, will include explicit expectations, challenging tasks and student responsibility (Shepard, 2000) and will provide useful evidence for teachers to adapt their teaching and for students to improve their learning (Abell & Siegel, 2011; Serafini, 2000). Learning is perceived as individuals constructing knowledge within the social context of the learning event instead of acquiring that through transmission or direct instructional techniques. Hargreaves (2005) describes this paradigm of assessment as ‘an exploratory and sensitive venture, with no clear end-points except a heightened awareness of current developments’ (p. 218) where, instead of considering them as performers, a deeper understanding of individuals as learners is valued. She further elaborates that in addition to the techniques of assessing being different from the assessment as measurement paradigm, beliefs about how the required knowledge comes about is also distinctive. The view of learning in this paradigm resembles the social-constructivist framework posited by Shepard (2000) where learning is more than associations and recall, and includes higher-order thinking.

It also has features similar to what James (2006) calls socio-cultural theories of learning. In this view learning occurs in an interaction between the individual and the social environment. According to James (ibid.), socio-cultural approaches imply that the teachers need to create an environment where pupils can be stimulated to think and act in authentic tasks beyond their current level of competence.

In addition to Serafini’s (2000) articulation of assessment paradigms, another theoretician’s depiction of existing assessment practices is significant to the current discussion. Elaborating on the different views of learning presented by Watkins (2003), James (2008) presents three generations of ideas about links between assessment and learning:

i) First generation- assessing learning of what is taught
ii) Second generation- assessing learning as individual sense-making
iii) Third generation- assessing learning as building knowledge as part of doing things with others

James (2008) gives a brief overview of these three assessment practices and outlines the types of learning that can be linked with each of them. Furthermore, she lists features of assessment in each generation that can be of help in exploring the assessment practice of the classroom in question.

The first and third generations of James’ (2008) model are quite similar to Serafini’s (2000) ‘assessment as measurement’ and ‘assessment as inquiry’ paradigms respectively. To avoid repetition of the discussion above, I will focus on the second generation now.

The second generation of learning depicted by James (2008) has features comparable to some of the features in ‘assessment as measurement’ and ‘assessment as inquiry’ paradigms and some unique features. It focuses on the individual learner’s acquisition of knowledge and skills but goes beyond testing factual recall to tap into deeper understandings. The author has linked this assessment to cognitive constructivist views of learning where learning is not simply absorbing information but an active process of meaning making and involves individuals making sense of the world by constructing mental models of how the world.
works so they can make sense of new information. Experts and novices differ in their mental models as experts organize knowledge in structures that make it more retrievable and useful. The task of education is to help novices acquire the ways of thinking possessed by experts (James, 2006, 2008). Learning requires the active engagement of learners and is determined by what goes on in peoples’ heads. In addition, the two components of metacognition, self-monitoring and self-regulation, are also important dimensions of learning (James, 2006).

Interactions between people, and mediating tools such as language plays a crucial role in learning (James, 2006). James (2008) argues that the metaphors people use when talking about learning can be very revealing of the way they think about it. Sfard (1998) in her article described two key metaphors of learning which can be helpful in studying the types of learning promoted through the observed AfL activity. These are named acquisition metaphor (AM) and participation metaphor (PM). Sfard (1998) suggests that the AM stresses the individual mind and what goes into it while PM shifts the focus to the evolving bonds between the individual and others. Furthermore, PM makes salient the dialectic nature of the learning interaction: the whole and the parts affect and inform each other. James (2008) connects these metaphors with the theories of learning. She suggests that behaviorist theories and constructivist theories are concerned with the individual’s acquisition of skills, knowledge and understanding. On the other hand socio-cultural theories see learning as embodied in and through participation in social and cultural activities. That is, ‘assessment as measurement’ and ‘assessment as procedure’ paradigms can be paralleled with the acquisition metaphor and ‘assessment as inquiry’ with the participation metaphor.

**Methodology:**

This is a case study of Higher Education classroom in Bangladesh. The collection and analysis of data were exclusively qualitative here as open-ended classroom observation and document analysis were conducted. Approximately five hours of classroom video was collected in which students taking a research course were learning to use Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) as a tool for data collection through an Assessment for Learning (AfL) activity. In addition, to understand the teacher’s view of AfL, detailed descriptions of the activities (which were kindly provided by the teacher) were collected. Both the classroom observation and the description of the activity were analyzed thematically.

**Findings and Discussions:**

Though the theories discussed in the Review of Literature section divides the assessment practices into definitive paradigms or generations, the actual practice in classrooms does not always conform to one singular theory. They often co-exist in any given classroom.

In the activities observed, students were studying various methods & instruments of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) through role-play where in different students played the role of researchers or participants for different methods/tools. This was conducted as an Assessment for Learning Activity. In the very beginning of the assessment, the teacher makes it clear how the result from this activity will be quantified and how the numeric score will contribute to the students’ final grade. The teacher then asks few questions concerning the theory of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). He seems to prefer set answers (e.g. definitions students have learned previously instead of them explaining in their own way) and simple recall of facts. In addition, he kept asking one question till getting the answer he preferred. These practices seem to align with the assessment as measurement paradigm.
Afterwards, the teacher asked the students to develop assessment criteria for the AFL activity they are going to do. This is done just before the actual tasks start, not giving students any time to reflect on the assessment criteria before performing the tasks. In addition, the teacher rephrases criteria suggested by the students and repeatedly asks students to give one more criterion till they come up with the criterion he prefers. It seems he had a pre-determined set of criteria in his mind and just wanted to validate it with the students’ participation. However, the way he explains the criteria with examples is really praiseworthy. The events observed seem to depict an over emphasis on procedures and a considerable amount of teacher control.

The students playing the role of ‘researchers’ in PRA start the task by introducing the ones playing ‘participants’ with the activity. They show the materials (posters) to the participants and explain how to use it. Participants (posing as secondary school students) describe their daily life activities through picture cards on the poster. The researchers facilitate the session and clarify any arising confusion. The teacher also plays a participant’s role actively. All of the students immerse in their roles with great enthusiasm. The researchers conclude their part of the activity by sharing the information they have gathered from the activity. Assessment here seems to go beyond factual recall and encourage higher order learning such as application and synthesis. This resembles the second-generation assessment practices mentioned by James (2008).

After the role-play is over, the teacher encourages students to engage in self and peer assessment of the activity. However, apart from one student’s comment about the materials, the remarks are mostly non-specific praise and do not provide any substantial evidence of students bearing the responsibility of a reflective assessor. The students are going to give a numerical score for their peers’ performance though. The teacher assumes control again by explaining some technical issues with the activity (how the average hours spend on something did not need to be precise hours) before concluding the session.

**The Teacher’s Description:** Upon request, the teacher of this AFL activity was kind enough to provide a written description of what he did. In writing the intentions of this task he frequently used phrases like ‘will be able to grasp’, ‘will have an insight’, ‘will be able to form the norms or criteria’, etc. These can be regarded to be related with the acquisition metaphor described by Sfard (1998). As mentioned before, acquisition metaphor can be linked with the ‘assessment as measurement’ and ‘assessment as procedure’ paradigm. Furthermore, the steps mentioned in the description depict a significant attention towards the procedures though they were only superficially followed in reality (e.g. some parts were done without any regard to assessment rubrics). This again reaffirms the notion that this AFL activity might fall within the ‘assessment as procedure’ paradigm.

**Learning Promoted by this Assessment:** An overview of this activity suggests its overemphasis on the ‘assessment as measurement’ and ‘assessment as procedure’ paradigms mentioned by Serafini (2000). In addition, it accommodated features of the second generation of assessment depicted by James (2008).

Theories discussed before elaborately illustrate the form of learning we might expect from ‘assessment as measurement’ and ‘assessment as procedure’. Students might be encouraged to remember isolated facts. Atomization of knowledge, learning complex
ideas through small bits and pieces and other traits of behaviorist learning might all come into play. Overall, learning can become conditioned response to external stimuli. In addition, extrapolation of this knowledge in other contexts in future might seem troublesome for the students.

Existence of the second-generation assessment practices signifies the presence of a different aspect of learning in this AFL activity. This generation of assessment does promote cognitive constructivist views of learning. At least some parts of this activity have the potential to encourage students to go beyond simply acquiring knowledge and towards an active process of meaning making. They might also be able to reconstruct their mental models with new information gathered from this activity.

Unfortunately this AFL activity did not dwell on ‘assessment as inquiry’ paradigm (Hargreaves, 2005; Serafini, 2000) or the third generation of assessment (James, 2008). That could have induced socially constructed (socially situated) learning among students. In fact, what the teacher was teaching through AFL in this particular instance could have been taught a lot better in the ‘Assessment as inquiry’ paradigm. The teacher could explain the background they are going to go for data collection, give them some idea about what they are researching and which data are required, and then ask them to come up with a method to appropriately collect those data. Then he could guide them when necessary so they can develop the required procedures by themselves. When they have a skeleton of a procedure with his guidance, he could tell them this thing in a more organized form is called PRA and this is how it is done in reality. Such a design will let the students learn in a social constructivist situation and enable them to extrapolate this learning to different contexts in future.

**Concluding Remarks:**

Though this inquiry cannot be regarded as a conclusive proof about the reality of what type of learning is promoted through assessment in the higher education scene of Bangladesh, it endeavors to be thought provoking enough for teachers and researchers to be reflective on the traditional classroom assessment. Further studies including larger samples and more in-depth analysis are required to elicit a more detailed understanding of what is happening in our higher education classrooms in terms of classroom assessment. Furthermore, such studies need to be conducted in other levels of education as well. Particularly in primary education where the learning structures/systems of learning are developed among young learners, such studies can be of great help in understanding the changes required in our classroom assessment.

**Acknowledgement:** In order to adhere to the code of ethics for educational researchers, best efforts were given to protect the identity of the participants in this research. However, I want to express my sincerest gratitude to the participants for their cooperation. I am particularly grateful to the teacher for providing the description of the activities and for agreeing to participate in this study.
References:


