
An Evaluation of the Implementation of Continuous Assessment (CA): The Case of St. Mary's University College

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Abstract: Students' achievement might not be fully measured through a single or a couple of written tests (examinations). Various types of assessment methods should be in place. Alternative ways of assessing students take into account variation in students' needs, interests and learning styles (Shaaban, 2001). The objective of this study is to evaluate the practices of continuous assessment at Saint Mary's University College. To this end, data were collected through questionnaire, document analysis and interview. The results of the study showed that teachers appeared to have good perceptions about CA, but they did not practise it and use various tools of CA; instead they relied on the traditional modes of measuring students' performance, testing. Upon the results obtained, conclusions were given.

Introduction

The traditional paper-and/or pencil-based tests do not any longer cover the variety of activities and tasks in the classroom situation. As a result, the field of evaluation has witnessed a major shift from strictly summative testing tools and procedures to a more humanistic approach using informal assessment techniques that stress formative evaluation (O'Neil, 1992, as cited in Shaaban, 2001).

Unlike terminal assessment which is carried out at the end of a course or a major unit for summative purpose, continuous assessment is done on an on-going basis while students are actually working their way through a course. That is, it is the process of gathering appropriate information regularly for making educational decisions (Nitko, 2004). Obviously, to make such decisions, we need to use high-quality information; information that is highly valid and highly reliable for the decisions at hand (Nitko, 2004).

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Assessment serves a variety of functions in the classroom situation. It measures students' achievements, provides a means of feedback to the teacher and students, motivates and directs students' learning, helps to evaluate teaching methods/programme, and is a useful means of overlearning (Ebel, 1979; Hopkings and Stanley, 1981).

In doing so, there are different types of continuous assessment tools or techniques. These are tests, assignments, examinations, quizzes, projects, presentations, participation in a class, group reflections, discussions, portfolio assessments, term papers, self-assessments, observations, interviews, peer assessments, attendances, role-plays, fieldwork /practical work, homework and the like.

Continuous assessment is process-oriented, learner-involved and self-referenced in nature. In other words, continuous assessment has the following characteristics (AED /BESO II, 2006). It:

- is an ongoing process of gathering information about students' learning progress;
- uses a variety of assessment techniques;
- provides timely feedback to students about what they need to improve their learning; and
- is aligned with curriculum goals and objectives.

To conduct an effective and appropriate continuous assessment, the following conditions are mandatory (Shepard, 2000).

- The teacher must be equipped with an adequate knowledge and capability about different assessment techniques;
- The assessment activity should be planned;
- The assessment procedure should be based on the actual condition, social factors of the class, and pupils' level of knowledge and the nature of instruction;
- Variety of assessment techniques should be selected and applied; and
- There should be up to date record keeping.

In line with this Singer (2003) stated the following points as advantages of continuous assessment. It:

- provides an on-going picture of how individual students develop and mature as they work their way through a course;
- places less emphasis on pure memory than terminal assessment
- encourages regular, systematic study and discourages last-minute cramming;
- provides early warnings of which students are having problems with a course;
- can provide early indicators of the likely performance of students
- renders warning of any problems or weaknesses, thus enabling them to take appropriate measures to improve matters;
- reduces the intense stress that many students experience when preparing for and sitting terminal examinations; and
- provides a more natural assessment environment that is better matched to the situations in which students will find themselves working in later life.

To this end, utilizing continuous assessment is a paramount importance to obtain reliable and valid information since traditional one-off exam leads teachers to make an erroneous decision.

In view of the points stated above the issue of continuous assessment is imperative in the educational setting as it renders regular information about the teaching process and is vital to judge the quality of individual's work.

As a result, the issue of continuous assessment like active learning and Higher Diploma Programme (HDP) has got much attention in the Ethiopia education scene. Even in the policy document, it was stated as one of the objectives of teacher education in Ethiopia (MoE, 2003). In view of this, continuous assessment has been regarded as an integral part of teaching. Owing to this, the main aim of this research is to look into the practice of continuous assessment at St. Mary's University College.

Method

At St. Mary's University College (SMUC) the total number of instructors in the regular programme has approximately been one hundred and twenty. Of the total instructors, forty instructors participated in the study. The majority of the subjects (85%) were MA holders whereas the remaining (15%) were first-degree holders. Again, the majority of the subjects (75%) have had educational profession background. In addition to the instructors, department heads took part in the study.

Open-and closed-ended Questionnaire was administered to obtain relevant data. Two interview forms were used to gather information from department heads. Document analysis was also employed as an additional source of data. Mark list and Grade Report, which was found in the Registrar Office, was taken as a source of data. Finally, the assessment guideline of the University College was also considered in analyzing the data.

All data were coded, categorized, organized and carefully analyzed. In analyzing the data both qualitative and quantitative methods were used.

Results and Discussion

Table 1: Instructors' Perceptions about CA

Items	Number of respondents and percentage				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Have no idea	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I believe that continuous assessment is beyond testing	20 50%	16 40%	2 5%	2 5%	-
I consider continuous assessment as merely giving paper and pencil tests	5 12.5%	6 15%	6 15%	18 45%	5 12.5%
Continuous assessment is given only to grade students	- -	3 7.5%	2 5%	26 65%	9 22.5%

As shown in the table most of the subjects (50% +40%) believed that continuous assessment is beyond testing. And the majority of the subjects (45%+12.5%) considered continuous assessment more than giving paper and pencil tests. These showed that the majority of the instructors seemed to have good understanding regarding the concept of continuous assessment. Contrary to this, the findings of Muluken (2006) revealed that continuous assessment was considered as simply giving series of tests for pupils to measure their performance. Furthermore, Mulu (2005) cited by Muluken (2006) found out that continuous assessment is interpreted as continuous testing.

As it can be seen in the table above, the majority of the subjects (65%) noted that continuous assessment has diverse functions in addition to grading students. However, Seyum' (2006) reported that instructors use continuous assessment results only for grading students. If learners could not consider assessment as an integral part of the learning/teaching process and if the purpose of assessment is to pass judgment on their abilities in relation to their classmate, the assessment procedure can cause students a great deal of anxiety that affects their learning and their self image (Shaaban, 2001).

In the open-ended item, the majority of the subjects (75%) felt that continuous assessment improves pupils' learning through feedback. In contrast, the findings of Seyum (2006) revealed that students receive feedback from instructors only in the form of grades; the majority of instructors have no willingness to show the results of the students. Absence of smooth interpersonal relationship between students and teachers might block the students' comfort zone and hinder their academic rights of knowing about their progress. It is a prevailing fact that providing students with regular feedback on how they are doing is an essential part of the education process.

As per the responses given in the open-ended item, the majority of instructors (80%) believed that continuous assessment motivates students' learning. It was repeatedly said that continuous assessment encourages students to do more and the instructor to work on refining the process of learning rather than its product (Shaaban, 2001). This finding also stands against the results of Seyum (2006). Seyum's respondents reported that motivating students using their assessment results is not much important because students are adult enough. Regardless of the learners' age, motivation is an internal state that arouses, directs and maintains behavior and it is important to be successful in life.

What is more, the majority of the subjects (70%) stated that continuous assessment enabled them to review their teaching methods. Assessment tools and procedures, in addition to being essential for evaluating students' progress and achievement, help in evaluating the suitability and effectiveness of the curriculum, the teaching methodology and the instruction (Shaaban, 2001).

Table 2: The Frequency of Periodic Assessment/Tests Used

Item	Response	No. of Responses	Percentage
Are you frequently measuring your students' performance?	Yes	40	100
	No	-	-

As it can be observed from the table above, all respondents (100%) stated that they have been frequently measuring their students' performance. However, the table below does not show this fact.

Table 3: Numbers of Assessments/tests Given for a Course in a Semester

Question	Responses & No. of Respondents with Percentage				
	Once in a semester	2-3 in a semester	4-5 in a semester	6-7 in a semester	More than seven
How often do you give periodic testing/assessment?	-	31 77.5%	5 12.5%	3 7.5%	1 2.5%

The table above revealed that the majority of the subjects (77.5%) gave two or three assessments for a course in a semester. The responses of the subjects given in Table two contradicted with the responses given in table three. All respondents (100% in table two) noted that they were frequently measuring their students' performance, but this is not observed in the response given in Table three. This finding was consistent with the results obtained from the document analysis. The submitted mark list and grade report collected from the Registrar Office showed that instructors on average did provide two or three tests or assessments for degree program students and they gave three to five tests for TVTE program students. Regardless of this practice, in the assessment guideline, it was stated that instructors are supposed to give six tests and/or assignments for common course, five to ten tests/assignments for supportive courses and six/eleven tests and or

assignments for major courses. The assessment guideline is not a full-fledged guideline that encompasses lots of assessment techniques or tools. But even the current practice was found to be far from what is stated in the guideline. Instructors even failed to meet the minimum requirements set in the assessment guideline. Department heads during interview session held reported that instructors did not offer more than two or three tests. Providing two or three tests might not be considered as implementing continuous assessment. Singer (2003) stated that continuous assessment can take the form of daily work (e.g. essays, quizzes, presentation, participation in class) projects/term papers and practical work. In the same vein, Muluken (2006) citing Farant (1980) contended that continuous assessment is practiced on a day-to-day basis to judge the quality of the individuals' performance. This being the case, two or three tests/number of assessment might not be looked into as continuous assessment. It should be understood that continuous assessment is an integral part of the learning process. The conceptual definition of continuous assessment is not well practiced; instead instructors defined continuous assessment operationally. Thus, it is not safe to say that instructors have a solid understanding about the concept of continuous assessment.

In the open-ended responses, most subjects reported the following as factors that hamper the implementation of continuous assessment:

- Large class size;
- Shortage of time;
- Lack of commitment;
- Tight schedule;
- Broad course content; and
- Teaching load;

All these factors might hinder instructors not to implement continuous assessment regularly.

Table 4: The Number of Techniques/tools used in Continuous Assessment

Item	Response	No. of Responses	Percentage
Have you used various techniques of CA?	Yes	40	100
	No	-	-

All the respondents (100%) reported that they used various tools or techniques of continuous assessment. Although the subjects said this, the table below might not be in line with the point at hand.

Table 5: Tools of Continuous Assessment Frequently Employed by Instructors (from more frequency to less frequency)

Techniques of CA	Ranks													
	1		2		3		4		5		6		7	
	NO.	%	NO.	%	NO.	%	NO.	%	NO.	%	NO.	%	NO.	%
Tests	38	95	2	5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Assignments	28	70	7	17.5	3	7.5	2	5	-	-	-	-	-	-
Examination	26	65	9	22.5	3	7.5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Quizzes	20	50	6	15	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Projects	20	50	8	20	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Presentations	14	35	-	-	2	5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Questioning	10	25	20	50	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Participations	8	20	-	-	1	2.5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Group reflections	6	15	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Discussions	2	5	1	2.5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Portfolio assessment	1	2.5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Term paper	1	2.5	-	-	3	7.5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

NB: It was only the first some techniques of continuous assessment properly rated by the subjects

As it was indicated above in Table 4, all the respondents (100%) stated that they employed various tools of continuous assessment. However, Table 5 showed that the subjects used few types of tools in which tests dominated the rest. The mark list and grade report form also showed that instructors nearly used two or three tests or assignments so as to evaluate the performance of the students. The interview results as well showed that instructors mostly used tests, assignments, projects and presentations. The remaining tools or techniques of assessment were hardly used.

This finding coincides with the results of Muluken (2006) and Seyum (2006). Continuous assessment was considered as simply giving series of tests for pupils to measure their performance. Needless to say, tests alone cannot measure the innermost competence of students; using one or two types of continuous assessment tools might not give the real picture of the students' performance. Teachers' reliance on testing denies many learners the opportunity to demonstrate their true potential (Papworth, 2005 as cited by Muluken, 2006). Furthermore, teachers' heavy use of tests as a measure of pupils' performance encourages rote and superficial learning (Black and William (1998) cited Muluken (2006).

According to Table five, tests assignments, examinations, quizzes, projects, presentations and questioning were the most widely used tools of continuous assessment. On the other hand, participations in the class, group reflections, discussions, portfolio assessment and term paper were rarely used tools of continuous assessment. On the other hand, self-assessment, observation, interview, peer assessment, attendance, role-playing, fieldwork /practical work and homework have never been used as tools of continuous assessment by any of the sample subjects.

Conclusions

On the basis of the data collected, the following conclusions were drawn

- Instructors at St. Mary's University College seemed to have better understanding about the concept of continuous assessment. Furthermore, majority of the subjects appeared to have a reasonable insight concerning the various functions of continuous assessment;

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- Although participants of the study reported that they frequently evaluated the students' performance, it was explored that instructors gave only two or three tests for a course in a semester. Thus, it appeared reasonable to conclude that participants of the study did not practice continuous assessment though they were aware of its importance. Along with this the subjects of the study listed down the potential factors that hamper in the implementation of continuous assessment. These are large class size, shortage of time, lack of commitment, tight schedule, broad course content and teaching load.
 - Though the participants claimed that they used various tools of continuous assessment, the data showed that they only employed the most traditional instruments such as tests and examinations. Since human competence is intricate and diversified, it cannot be easily assessed by a single form of assessment. But, the study found out that teacher dominantly used testing as a major assessment technique. In addition to this, there are certain assessment tools, which have never been used by the sample subjects. The traditional mode of assessment in which they passed through might influence teachers in practicing assessment

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