

# Making First-Year Tutorials Count: Operationalizing the Assessment-Learning Connection

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## Review Article

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### ABSTRACT

Making first-year tutorials count” which sole purpose was to improve the participation of students in tutorials. The factor of impetus that motivated the journal was the lack of active participation of students in subject matters, to demonstrate sufficient understanding. The authors did, among other facts, acknowledge that this lack of active demonstration of understandability could have been instigated by the actuality that course grades are solely dependent on exam achievements rather than participative tutorial performances. As such the authors purported that students’ immediate participation and feedback is always essential no matter the regime of assessment in place, whether formative or summative

## INTRODUCTION

The study tackles the discharge of a project called “Making first-year tutorials count” which sole purpose was to improve the participation of students in tutorials. The factor of impetus that motivated the journal was the lack of active participation of students in subject matters, to demonstrate sufficient understanding. The authors did, among other facts, acknowledge that this lack of active demonstration of understand ability could have been instigated by the actuality that course grades are solely dependent on exam achievements rather than participative tutorial performances. As such the authors purported that students immediate participation and feedback is always essential no matter the regime of assessment in place, whether formative or summative <sup>[1]</sup>.

## ANALYSIS OF THE ASSESSMENT REGIME PROJECT

The implementation of the project was on first year students, sampled to about a hundred. These students were given a course to be delivered in fifteen lectures. Principally for the project, a variety of assessments were used. For the first assignment the students were to produce a ‘briefing paper’ on a subject matter. This was to enhance the students’ research skills as well as ability to argue logically and present logic in eloquent writing. The second way of assessing the students was done during sessions of tutorial. The students were occupied in discussion groups to converse on their briefing papers. This was done to enable the students to develop good listening skills and the ability to accept and respect each other’s views. As they argued, the understood the subject matter better. As the discussions progressed, constructive feedbacks were given by the tutors to facilitate understanding. The students were then assessed on their self-awareness skills. This was done by requiring them to construct and submit an evaluation report based on the discussions had. Due feedback was then given to the students in due time on their performance so they could rectify errors accordingly before they were assessed again.

Though it was recognized that the role of instructor is to give feedbacks constructively to students, the authors revealed more. The instructors were to cheer the students to appreciate and respect each other’s views. Tutors were to encourage the students to argue constructively and not in a domineering and intimidating manner. Though in the old regime of assessment the ‘demonstration of knowledge of subject matter’ was assessed, which was purely done through exams, the new method undoubtedly did the assessment better. This was based on the fact that engaging the students in group discussions and having those argue and share ideas definitely enabled them to acquire more knowledge and get better understanding of the subject matter, than they did in the old regime.

In analyzing the results of the new project, it did put some outright factors into consideration. One of which was the reality that there was a possibility for the students' self-evaluation report to be misleading. This is because students in most cases are most likely to over value themselves. As such even if the aims of the project were unachieved, the students' self-evaluation reports may give the wrong impression otherwise. This risk necessitated the need for the final written assessment evaluated by the tutors. Indeed the new regime proved to enable better learning<sup>[2]</sup>. This was purported by the students, who gave positive feedback and professed they learnt subject matters in greater depth and understanding as compared to the old regime which merely assessed them through essay and exam.

### **HOLISTIC ANALYSIS OF THE JOURNAL**

Indeed the study in the paper as a whole is remarkably interesting. They made absolutely clear the fact that the assessment regime is sacrosanct in students learning and cannot be overemphasized. This was reverberated that when employed systemically, assessments can be of immense benefit to learning. It was also eluded that in any given curriculum, the teaching methods and assessment must be allied. When assessment is allied properly, appropriate learning is inevitable<sup>[3]</sup>.

It is worth noting that even the title of the journal was noteworthy in itself as it was thought provoking. 'Why first year students,' one may ask. As one then reads through the journal, the answer becomes eminent. The intrinsic idea is probably that first year students can be likened to babes. As it is necessary to give babes the right food for growth, so is it necessary that students are equipped with the paramount skills to success in their journey of learning. If this is gotten right from the onset, the student's entire lifelong learning is facilitated<sup>[2]</sup>. And so the earlier students acquired these skills the better. This explains why the assessment regime project, as addressed by the journal, chose first year students. As the assessment regime facilitated learning and understand ability in the first year students, it instilled in them the skills of independence and critical thinking. These skills are not only to benefit them for the rest of their studies but for their entire lives as well. This underlining intrinsic idea, as I understand, is simply remarkable<sup>[4]</sup>.

Furthermore, the Journal paper by Macmillan and Maclean is also eye opening in the sense that it provides answers to the common quandary that tutors face. Many at times, tutors put in their very best efforts in teaching students and when students perform poorly in exams the tutors wonder what exactly went wrong. They then tend to conclude that the students are not able to comprehend and apprehend as they should, concepts taught to them. The journal however brought in an entirely new perspective. The performance of students can be closely linked to the method of assessment used. When students are opportune to think critically and ague on a subject matter, other than just taught and expected to regurgitate knowledge, they tend to understand and retain concepts better. Not only does that enable them pass their exams, they are also equipped for life<sup>[5]</sup>.

### **AREAS OF APPLICATION OF THE JOURNAL FINDINGS**

It is unreservedly eminent that the findings from the study can be applied in any institution of academic learning. Modules taught in academic institutions are all divided into topics. These topics all have learning outcomes that describe what knowledge the students are to demonstrate on their completion. Journal on teaching in higher education suggested that all learning outcomes for modules should be assessed. They explained that this ensured gross understanding of subject matter. In most academic institutions however this is not the case. Since students are only assessed on exams, it is very difficult to access all area of syllabus. The exam structures are usually standardized and only cover certain portions of the syllabus. Students therefore tend to concentrate on the most examinable topic (which they think are more important than others) and ignore the rest. This had been alluded to who reported that students usually consider some activities of study to be more important than others. They only put energy on the activities they consider important rather than all.

Quintessential to this is what happens with the ACCA, a chartered accounting qualification. Most modules have numerous topics all of which are very important. To become a well-rounded and good chartered accountant post qualification, students must understand all areas. The ACCA exams (on which students are solely assessed) however do not cover all topics. As such students only tend to concentrate on the most examinable topics and ignore others which they consider less important. With that attitude, students are nevertheless able to pass their exams. They however lack the necessary all rounded skills to become good chartered accountants in the work industries thereafter<sup>[6]</sup>.

The study findings suggested that students be assessed not only on exam but also on their critical thinking and ability to present and ague ideas logically. If applied to the ACCA qualification tremendous results will be inevitable. As the students are engaged in discussion group, the unexamined topics can be assessed like such. By so doing the students would be well equipped for life, to become good accountants post qualification.

### **POSSIBLE BENEFITS OF THE JOURNAL FINDINGS**

Though it is undeniable that the journal findings might be incredibly tedious on both the students and tutors to implement, the benefits are immense. For the tutors, these journal findings are definitely eye opening. A clear connection has been established between the outcomes of learning with regards to students' performance and the methods of assessment used. It is therefore paramount that teachers reconsider the teaching methods they use. The findings of this journal suggest that teachers should

not only dispatch information to students but should also engage students. As the students are engaged in critical analyses and discussions, the teachers themselves are bound to learn one or two concepts from the students, which had been hitherto unknown to them. By so doing them lecturers enhance their knowledge further to become even better teachers <sup>[4,2]</sup>.

As for the students, as prior suggested, their performance can be closely linked to the method of assessment used to assess them. When students are opportune to think critically and agree on a subject matter, other than just taught and expected to regurgitate knowledge, they tend to understand and retain concepts better. Not only would that enable them to acquire the necessary knowledge to pass their exams, they are also equipped for life to become better professionals in their respective areas of expertise. Furthermore, the journal findings suggest that learning through active participation by critical thinking and logic analysis, apart from better equipping the students with the necessary knowledge and skill to excel technically in their respective areas of expertise, also equips them with good interpersonal skills to interact in perfect harmony with people of vast ideologies. This emanates from the fact that findings also suggested that as students are engaged in active discussions, the instructors' role go beyond giving constructive feedbacks on technical areas. The instructors are to also persuade the students to appreciate and respect each other's views. They are to encourage the students to agree constructively and not in domineering and intimidating manner. By so doing, as these virtues are instilled and engrained in the students from the onset, the students are equipped with the lifelong interpersonal and social skill that will benefit them immensely throughout their lives <sup>[7]</sup>.

### CONCLUSION

As recommended by James in his journal titled 'Making the Graduate: Perspectives on Student Experience of Assessment in Higher Education', for learning to produce positive outcome to the highest degree, it is paramount that teaching methods and that of assessment work in high alliance. No matter how well teaching is done in an academic institution, if the right assessment regime is not employed to assess students, great net positive outcome cannot be achieved in terms of equipping students with lifelong skills. With the adaption of the active participation method of assessment as suggested by the journal findings of MacMillan and Mclean, success can doubtlessly be achieved.

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