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MISSIONS AND PRACTICES OF STUDENT LEARNING ASSESSMENT: AN INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Classroom assessment of student learning is part and parcel of the educational processes that both faculty and administrators use to guide their practices, ensure program effectiveness, and use as checkpoints for student achievement (Palomba & Panta, 1999). Mission statements and articulated policies often mention varied and continuous assessment techniques of student learning. However, how much they are reflected on the educational practices varies due to different factors like government mandates, requirements of accreditation, social factors, market forces, and accountability to stake holders which can all be credited for the degree of adherence to assessment best practices (Burke, 2005). This qualitative study is an effort to explore student learning assessment techniques at an American university which adopts the active learning approach and an urban Egyptian University where efforts of adopting the comprehensive learning approach are taking place. Research questions included: What are the evaluation tools utilized to measure students learning? What are the perceptions of faculty and students about the adequacy of these evaluation techniques? To what levels are these techniques standardized? What are the efforts made to get student feedback about the efficiency of these techniques for improvement purposes? Recommendations for maximizing student success and learning outcomes included: more campus professional development initiatives, adopting a progress and developmental approach of assessment, and involvement of professors and students in designing the assessment process. The study offers valuable information for administrators of higher education institutions and education faculty focusing on assessment, accountability, administration, curriculum planning, student success, and student engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Assessment of student learning cannot be ignored as a guide for educational practice. College and university faculty and administrators use assessment to ensure course and program effectiveness. Assessment results are often looked at as checkpoints for student achievement (Palomba & Panta, 1999). Although college mission statements and articulated policies often mention varied and continuous assessment techniques of student learning, their reflection on the educational practices varies due to different factors like government mandates, requirements of accreditation, social factors, market forces, and accountability to stake holders (Burke, 2005). This qualitative study explores learning assessment techniques at an urban American university

adopting the active learning approach and an urban Egyptian University striving to adopt the comprehensive learning approach.

PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The present study is an effort to explore learning assessment techniques in two universities: Riverside State University (RSU), an American Mid-Western university which adopts the active learning approach, and Delta University (DU), an urban Egyptian University where great efforts of adopting the comprehensive learning approach are taking place. By comparing findings the researchers aimed to answer the following research questions: what evaluation tools are utilized to measure students learning at both universities, how faculty and students perceive the adequacy of these evaluation techniques, and how these techniques are standardized.

PERSPECTIVE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Higher education institutions have a commitment to student learning. Information about how well students are learning to use the plethora of skills and abilities is always essential to develop a deeper understanding of the quality of student learning in each program of study and to provide reliable answers to external evaluators like peers, policy makers, accrediting bodies, and the public (Palomba & Banta, 1999). Effective assessment information usually stems from the learning outcomes of individual courses and programs as providing feedback on individual progress toward course goals. These also generate valuable information about collective student learning outcomes. Therefore, documenting student learning is personally useful and contributes to program level assessment as well. Such processes also give educators the chance to decide whether the courses and programs are contributing their expected share to student development and growth. Moreover, assessment helps the educators to examine the efficiency of the curriculum and whether students of all their experiences have the knowledge, skills, and values that graduates should have (Palomba & Banta, 1999). Institutional missions and articulated visions are needed to establish the standards for these practices to optimized student learning outcomes and maximize the efficiency of teaching efforts.

A wide range of procedures comprises the total of classroom assessment that present systematic information about student learning (Linn & Miller, 2005). This variety of classroom assessment usually includes quantitative measures and qualitative ones (Lei, 2008). Though differing due to the complexity and varieties of educational programs, formal assessment tools usually include a combination of some of the following: tests, quizzes, class participations, group discussions, in-class activities, homework assignments, portfolios, laboratory activities, cooperative learning, learning journals, research assignments, oral presentations, group projects, field work, and peer and self evaluations (Popham, 2002). Assessment is an important component in designing any curriculum, not only measuring how students are progressing but also providing feedback on other instructional components like choice of material and faculty performance. Assessment is the basis for any later improvement effort to better the educational

services and steer teaching towards the accomplishment of desired learning goals (Diamond, 1998). The informed purposeful choice of assessment tools maximizes student learning outcomes while using insufficient or inadequate assessment tools can provide misleading information that would threat the achievement of desired goals.

METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

This study explored missions and practices of classroom assessment in two universities utilizing qualitative research tools. Participants in this study fell into three categories existing on both sides of the comparison: 1) faculty members not teaching in the education discipline, 2) graduate and undergraduate students, and 3) a faculty member from the college of education. Beginning with an *apriory* code list, a pilot study of various techniques used at both institutions was conducted. They reviewed official university documents that discussed assessment techniques, standards for assessment, and achievement goals. Synthesizing collected information with the theoretical background helped in developing protocols of various structured interviews that included college students, education faculty members, and other faculty members not teaching in the education discipline. Building on field notes, interviews, and document reviews, an emergent code list was used to develop a matrix of themes and codes that helped in chunking the data. Themes included: missions articulated, classroom practices, active learning, frequent assessment, varied assessment, utilizing student feedback, and assessment data utilization.

RESULTS

Findings showed that assessment techniques at RSU, though not perfectly reflecting best practices, were closer to the articulated policies. On the other hand, at DU, such techniques were not reflective of the articulated assessment policies of the institution. Policy makers, college administrators, and individual instructors need to consider the benefits of applying best practices at their institutions to maximize student success and enrich student learning experiences. More campus professional development initiatives are needed to communicate the importance of varying assessment techniques and using them from a progress and developmental approach rather than outcome based indicators. Involvement of professors as well as students may result in higher application rates at both campuses towards maximizing student success and learning outcomes as well.

Formative and Summative Assessment

Various forms of summative assessment were used consistently at both institutions. However, they were much more diverse at RSU than at DU. At RSU, formative assessment was often used throughout the university courses and programs. Various forms of assessment occurred along the educational practice to inform decision making. However, some courses and programs missed the value behind formative assessment, though using it as part of the educational practice. At DU, formative assessment was introduced in several programs. The

forms of formative assessment at DU always take the shape of a midterm exam that looked like the final exam. Its usage did not exceed being a ringing bell to grab the attention of students about their progress. Very few professors reported using the midterm as a way of sensing whether learning outcomes are being achieved or not.

Benchmarking

Benchmarking was institutionally integrated into RSU assessment plans of programs and colleges. Benchmarking institutions and programs were pre-identified. Efforts were continuously exerted to compare program offering and program outcomes to those at peer institutions. These comparisons were always utilized during program reviews and in the case of planning to introduce new programs. Although benchmarking was identified in the college assessment plans, it was minimally utilized because professors and department chairs argued that peer institutions are not really similar to DU. However, benchmarking was used on an informal basis by some departments when department chairs or program directors had a relationship with their peers at another institution.

Direct and Indirect Assessment

At RSU, both direct and indirect assessment forms were utilized. Indirect assessment was often used to confirm results of direct assessment data. However, the consistency of such usage was not affirmed through faculty and administrators reflections. At DU, although both methods are well articulated, there is a large divide between the data collected from direct assessment and indirect assessment. Faculty and administrators reported that both types of data are collected but at the same time did not see a relation between the data giving more weight to direct assessment data as the most reliable proof of student learning. Faculty working on the accreditation process at DU expressed an awareness of the general faculty perception about indirect assessment. They reported that they initiated some workshops and seminars to raise the awareness about the value of indirect assessment as an indicator of student learning.

CONCLUSION

The study offered an individualized insight into the assessment practices of RSU and DU from the point of views of faculty, administrators, and students. Findings of the study add to the existing assessment literature. Analysis of data offered recommended techniques to bridge the practice shortfalls and apply latest trends in classroom learning assessment. The study also offered a comparative educational glance on the different aspects influencing assessment at the two institutions studied. It also posed research questions that could be handled in future research.

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