ONLINE VERSUS TRADITIONAL ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Ramona Elena, Chiţu[1]

Abstract

Assessing higher education students' knowledge has been subject to criticism for many years, hence the wide array of suggestions of evaluation methods put forward by scholars and teachers alike. The shift to online teaching has brought along the shift to online assessment, which, if carefully performed and well monitored and followed-up, can prove to be a useful means for bringing to a standstill the memorization of information in isolated and unlinked chunks, most of which were to be quickly forgotten, shortly after the exam. This paper aims to make a comparison between traditional and online assessment and to outline the benefits and drawbacks of each, based on some students' point of view. Notwithstanding the efficiency and reliability of old-paradigm, time-constrained written tests, we aim to suggest a number of ways in which assessment can be improved.

An overview on assessment

Besides other universal teaching competences, such as good knowledge of subjects and curricula, efficient lessons planning, competent mastering of technology in the classroom, the assessment process is extremely important. Assessment, in its most varied forms, has always represented a complex process in education, likely to emphasize not only the amount of knowledge learners have acquired but also the quality of such information as well as hints needed to continuously enhance learners' performance. According to Allen H. Miller et. al. the 3 main reasons assessment is undertaken in higher-education are: "to provide systematic indications of the quality of students' learning for both teachers and students; to maintain standards in professional education and higher education generally; to motivate students throughout their studies" (Allen H. Miller, 2013, p. 4). Other roles assessment plays are that of providing useful data on learners', i.e. their level of performance among the others, the learning style, the trigger in learning, also helping to improve the teaching process. Its importance in the teaching and learning process is huge, as learners' future sometimes depends on passing or failing an exam. That is why, acquired knowledge assessment has been subject to criticism for many years, one consequence thereof being a wide variety of evaluation methods implemented and used nowadays.

Either formative (at the end of a lesson or unit) or summative (at the end of a course or term), traditional classroom assessment used to include standardized time tests with one single right answer, consisting in multiple-choice tests, true/false tests, short answers and essays. Such means of assessment have already been criticised for certain drawbacks such as: focusing more on the outcome (the score) rather than on the learning process itself, lack of flexibility in designing the test format, the score itself type of feedback, the high probability of giving decontextualized information.

The emergence of world widely practiced online assessment

Involving new forms of technology and learning together, the online education, world widely imposed due to COVID 19, has also come with a new form of assessment: the online assessment or e-assessment. This new form of assessment involves new processes of examining students and new strategies of assessment. Students undergo online assessment on their own devices, basically at home. As they cannot be checked upon during the assessment, the most serious concerns occurring among teachers is the increased possibility of cheating. In their attempt to "beat the system" and pass all exams with as little effort as possible, students tend to become outcome-oriented instead of task-oriented. For such students high grades are the ultimate goal, the

---

[1] Ph. D. Lecturer, Constantin Brancoveanu University, email: ramona.chitu20@gmail.com

actual task to be done in the exam being only the necessary medium for achieving their goal. Under such circumstances, traditional methodologies of assessment are no longer valid and applicable in online assessment. With the Internet considered to be one of the catalysts for cheating[1], a common trend has emerged in the process of assessment, i.e. preparing the tasks so as to avoid, or at least to prevent cheating, thus bringing to a standstill the memorization of information in isolated and unlinked chunks, increasing to a certain extent students' benefits on a long-term basis. Consequently, task-based simulations, where students must use certain recommended resources and their thinking skills to solve tasks, have replaced the traditional forms of assessment, with students seated in a large lecture room, supervised by an invigilator.

One advantage of such task-based simulations is that the task must be as realistic as possible. Other adaptive e-assessment strategies could include open ended questions, which do not have pre-defined, theory-based tasks, or problem-solving case studies. Students' knowledge can be thus checked by encouraging learners to solve real-life cases. Moreover, by randomizing questions, using pools of questions with different variables, each student has a unique paper, reducing thus the probability of cheating. Open-book or open-notes exams could also be a valid alternative, allowing candidates to consult a standard set of resource materials and having them informed in advance – in case of hard copies – or on the spot – in case of online resources. Such a technique would mean no emphasis is put on students being required to remember facts, formulas, figures, focusing instead on their ability to look for and synthetize important information, on their ability to find their way round the contents of books or larger chunks of data from multiple online resources. Designed as such, assessment would focus on verifying students' capability of retrieving information, of responding to tasks efficiently and of selecting the best problem-solving strategies.

In an attempt to see the effectiveness of e-assessment against traditional classroom assessment, the survey conducted focused on the students' satisfaction, measured in terms of the four most important criteria of assessment, i.e. validity, reliability, authenticity and transparency[2]. The focus group consisted of 40 students, 20 freshmen and 20 seniors, including both male and female, aged 18-35. For personal information security reasons, respondents did not have to provide their names and the questionnaire was an informal one, including 4 questions.

Question 1. Type of assessment students would rather opt for

Theory-based vs. task-based assessment

■ Theory-based tests ■ Task-based assessment

---
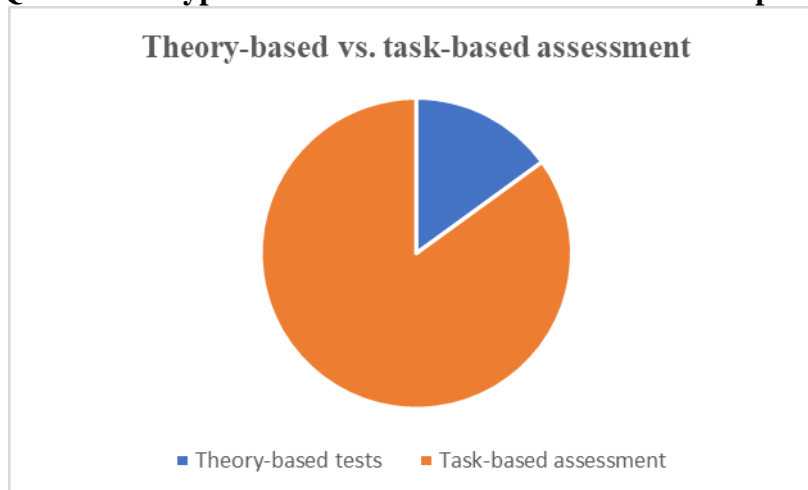
[1] Acc. to A. E. G. Roldán et al., ―Pedagogical approaches for e-assessment with authentication and authorship verification in higher education, British Journal of Educational Technology, vol. 50, no. 6, 2019, available at https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/bjet.12733.
[2] Philip Race, Sally Brown, Brenda Smith (2005), 500 Tips on Assessment, Tylor and Francis E-Library, p. 15.

Only 15% percent of respondents were in favour of traditional knowledge checking tests, so more than 50% are supporters of a more practical kind of assessment.

Depending on their choice, respondents were further asked to provide at least one advantage of their favourite form of assessment and/or one drawback of the other form of assessment. Only 17 respondents provided such answers and some of the most relevant are presented below:

"I think online assessment is more efficient as it measures how good we are at finding proper, logical answers to real problems we can face at our future jobs. When you memorize something, you cannot see the practical part in it, and when faced with actual problems, you cannot use the definitions you have learnt."

"Unfortunately, traditional written tests used to check our acquired knowledge only represent a snapshot of our performance, but they are not a reliable indicator for future stakeholders."

"With on-the-spot task-based simulations our teachers can be sure we will not cheat; they can be sure the solution found belongs to the candidate being assessed and not to someone else."

"I hate memorizing and I think it is a waste of time. I acquire lots of useful knowledge when I do research on my own and I am encouraged to think critically as it happens in on-the- spot task-based simulations we do online."

"Projects, portfolios, practical works are my favourite. I can work systematically, structure my information, do a lot of research, and more than this, take time to think about the topic as I am not time-constrained."

"If I have to sit in an exam at the end of the term I end up learning just 2-3 days before the exam. When I start learning for the next exam I will have already forgotten what I have learnt before. When it's about something more practical, surveys, giving presentations, case-studies, surveys, I make steady progress and I gain more knowledge at the end."

"Memorizing encourage surface learning, so it is good such techniques cannot be applied in e-assessments."

Based on student respondents' answers to this question, here are the main benefits of modern online assessment:
➢ The score/mark is known instantly, after a click of the mouse;
➢ Online assessment encourages independent learning;
➢ Online quizzes teach students how to manage their time efficiently;
➢ Learners become more responsible of the intended learning outcome;
➢ Students are motivated to study continuously;
➢ Critical thinking and debating skills are developed and improved.

Nevertheless, some of the respondents mentioned that exam anxiety is felt stronger, because students lack the competitive environment featuring large lecture rooms, where everybody sits in for the same test.

Question 4. Validity, reliability, authenticity and transparency

Validity, reliability, authenticity and transparency of some assessment methods
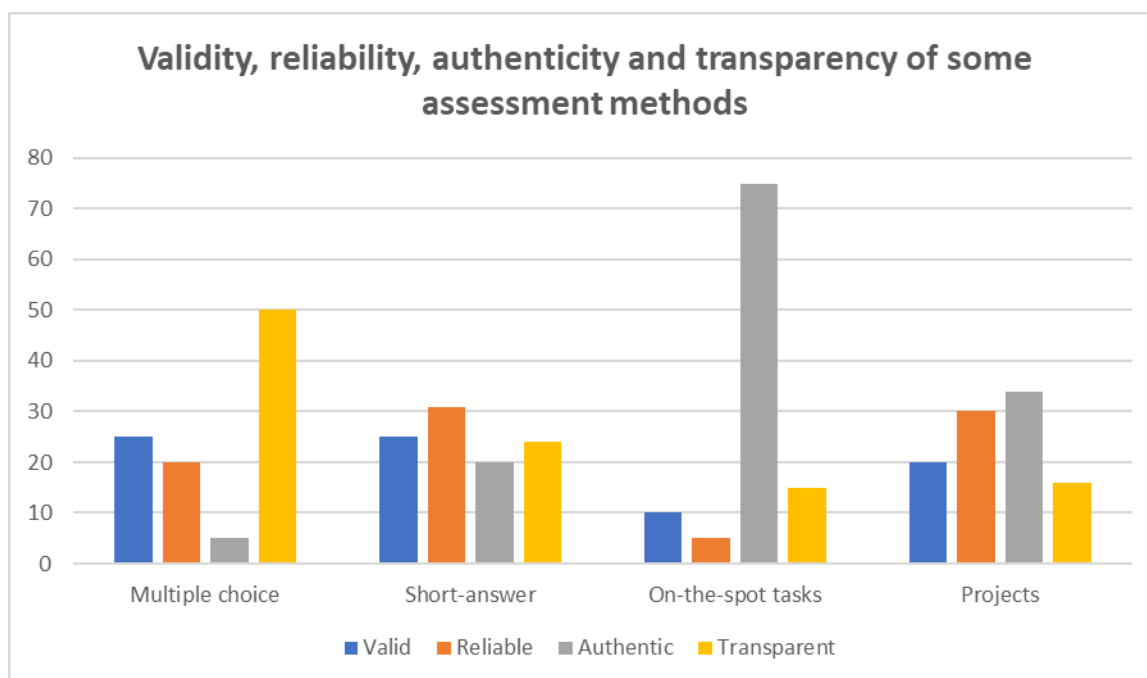
Open-book exams with on-the-spot tasks are considered by respondents as the most authentic, with 15 respondents giving the highest score. Multiple-choice tests are the most transparent for 2 respondents (although they have a total score of 50 for transparency). The presentation of projects and portfolios is considered as a most valid assessment only by one respondent.

Conclusions

Considering the recent shift in education needs and requirements, assessment should meet the 3 main purposes higher education will always have: academic, professional and social, i.e. extending and passing on knowledge in the context of an intellectual culture and subject to the government policy and labour market needs, producing qualified individuals who are fitted to enter particular professions and who have the attitudes and capabilities for lifelong learning (Allen H. Miller, 2013, p. 15). In the context of a complex overhaul of the curricula in higher-education, with a main focus on problem-based learning, assessment and course delivering will have to meet new challenges. Another aspect to be considered is the enrolment of those students who want to expand their knowledge in different fields with no particular interest in obtaining a qualification following their studies, as many of them already possess a degree.

All of the above taken into account, assessment will no longer have the only goal of verifying students' acquisition of knowledge as it will equally have to consider inquisitiveness, knowledge of where to look for information, the ability to synthesize both the knowledge already acquired and the new information, the ability to find solutions and make decisions, the ability to work in a team, communication and people skills.

Some of the most frequently encountered concepts to be considered related to learners' assessment are the accuracy, objectivity, responsibility, fairness, preparedness of those in charge with assessing. Authenticity is strongly related to students' motivation, as when students perceive an assessment as authentic, they feel more motivated to prepare, considering they have the opportunity to gain more professional skills which will benefit them in the future.

Bibliography

1. A.E.G. Roldán et al., ―Pedagogical approaches for e-assessment with authentication and authorship verification in higher education, British Journal of Educational Technology, vol. 50, no. 6, (2019), available at https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/bjet.12733 , accessed on April 30th, 2021
2. Allen H. Miller, Bradford W. Imrie, Kevin Cox (2013), Student Assessment in Higher Education, A Handbook for Assessing Performance, Routledge, New York.
3. Fulcher, Glenn (2010), Practical Language Testing, London, UK: Hodder Education.
4. Gibbs, Graham (2010), Using Assessment to Support Students' Learning, Leeds, Leeds Metropolitan University.
5. McKay, Penny (2006), Assessing Young Language Learners, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
6. Philip Race, Sally Brown, Brenda Smith (2005), 500 Tips on Assessment, London, Routledge.
7. Ramsden, Paul (1992), Learning to Teach in Higher Education, London, Routledge.
8. Trowler, Vicki, and Paul Trowler, Student Engagement Evidence Summary, York Higher Education Academy, available at https://www.heacademy.ac.uk, accessed on 2nd January 2022.

Questionnaire sample

For personal information security reasons, respondents did not have to provide their names and the questionnaire was an informal one, including 3 questions.

1. Which form of assessment do you consider to be more advantageous for you, as learners?

A. Traditional, predefined, theory-based tests
B. Modern means of assessment (e.g. task-based simulations, projects, practical work, portfolios, problem-solving case studies etc.)

2. Mention at least one advantage of your favourite assessment form (online or traditional depending on your choice above)

3. Mention at least one drawback of your favourite assessment form (online or traditional depending on your choice above)

4. Evaluate the following forms of assessment in terms of the four most important criteria of assessment, i.e. how valid, reliable, authentic and transparent they are (1 is the lowest score and 5 the highest):

	Multiple-choice questions	Theory-based short-answer tests	Open-book exams (on the spot tasks)	Projects/ Portfolios/ Presentations
Valid				
Reliable				
Authentic				
Transparent				