Chapter 14

Technology Supported Assessment in Distance Education: Promises, Pitfalls and Prospects

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ABSTRACT

Distance educators at any stage of their career or dealing with any discipline of knowledge are required to engage into number of tasks like present and construct assessment tools, make valid judgments of the student progress in learning, facilitate the provision of feedback and support the production and delivery of mark/grade to assess their students. Assessing students in distance education is a cumbersome task and technology offers number of possibilities and opportunities for educators to make this task more enjoyable, feasible, meaningful, and reliable. In this backdrop, the present chapter focuses on defining assessment in the context of distance education; discusses about promises and on-going initiatives for using technology to assess students; underlines pitfalls of technology supported assessment in distance education; offers useful strategies for distance educators to use technology for assessment; and predicts the future of technology supported assessment in distance education.

INTRODUCTION

The word “assessment” has a variety of meanings within education system. Assessment describes the status of a phenomenon at a particular time. It describes without value judgment a prevailing situation; it attempts no explanation of underlying reasons and makes no recommendations for action. It may deal with prevailing opinion, knowledge, practices, or conditions. As it is ordinarily used in education, assessment describes the progress students have made toward educational goals at a
particular time (Best and Khan, 2006, p. 118). In sum, we can say that assessment is an important way of providing feedback to students regarding their state of learning. Therefore, assessment needs to be part of any effective course to help us to know that whether the course itself is “working” for student learning, what is going well and what is not. Besides, assessment is central to the educational reform debate for at least two reasons. First, assessment results are relied upon to document the need for change. Second, assessments are seen as critical agents of reform (Linn, 2003).

Assessment plays a central role in the educational process as it helps students, teachers, parents and educational administrators to know and deal better with the learning gaps. Assessment is said to drive student learning as it provides the motivation for learning through the provision of feedback (e.g. awarding of marks and grades). The concept of assessment for learning emphasizes integrating assessment and instruction and requires a dynamic, continuous and performance-based assessment system that emphasizes progress in learning and in becoming increasingly sophisticated learners and knowers (Moallem, 2007). Educators use assessment for a variety of reasons that range from individual student assessment to program evaluation to system-wide educational accountability (Wiggins, 1993). Good assessment provides objective information that can assist in diagnosing problems and identifying curricular areas that need improvement (Anastasi, 1988). Assessments can help an individual find his or her way in the decision-making journey or help a school system travel the road to educational excellence (Janet E, 2000). The prominent assessment types to fulfill these promises in educational settings are Formative Assessment, Summative Assessment, Norm referenced Assessment, Criterion referenced Assessment, and Authentic Assessment.

Feedback given to students to help their learning, for example, questions at the end of lectures is termed as formative assessment. Formative assessment can be self-assessment or peer-assessment as well as teacher assessment. The results which are used to grade students at the end of a course are examples of summative assessment. An individual’s performance in relation to the norms established by a peer group is termed as norm referenced assessment. Criterion referenced assessment takes place when a student is assessed on his or her ability to meet a required level of skill or competence. Whereas, Authentic assessment also called as performance assessment, appropriate assessment, alternative assessment, or direct assessment includes engaging and worthy problems or questions of importance, in which students must use knowledge to fashion performances effectively and creatively (Wiggins, 1993, p. 229). Authentic assessment includes a variety of techniques such as written products, portfolios, checklists, teacher observations, and group projects (Olfos and Zulantay, 2007).

Assessment of students in both face to face (f2f) and distance mode of education has always been a challenge before educational practitioners, as noted by Moallem (2007), “One of the most challenging issues facing educators in all levels of formal schooling particularly higher education is assessment of complex learning outcomes. The emergence of distance education in the form of online or Web-based delivery has taken this challenge further and has added to its complexity and its ambiguity.” In comparison to f2f mode, assessment in distance education is expected to diagnose and to improve the learning, to increase the adaptability of the systems and the personalization of the education, to increase the motivation and reduce the evasion rate, and to increase the quality and productivity of the learning (Pimentel and Omar, 2007). The assessment process in distance education often lacks to achieve these objectives, as noted by Ramsden (1992) that owing to an emphasis on written submitted assessment in distance education, students expect meaningful comments on their assignments and projects, and are disappointed when their efforts
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