

A Practical Rationale for Classroom Assessment: The SWOT Approach

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Abstract

The classroom assessment process can have encouraging results when it begins with "early assessment" that addresses student learning, as well as the social and emotional needs of student(s) in the classroom. This paper presents a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis for classroom assessment. It will review literature and other research documents citing contributing factors to inadequate classroom assessment and suggest solutions to this pervasive problem.

The SWOT analysis is a commonly employed framework in the business world for analyzing the factors that influence a company's competitive position in the marketplace with an eye to the future (Rizzo, Kim, 2005). However, the SWOT paradigm can also be usefully applied outside of the business domain and is here used to analyze the academic activity of the classroom. It should become obvious in this paper how SWOT can be usefully applied to assess and guide classroom organization and outcomes.

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Introduction

It should be the objective of the educator in a classroom to assess the effectiveness of their teaching by evaluating their students effectively by first observing the students behavior, academic work, attitude and relationships within the school environment. In order to generate an instrument that will prove the interaction between the educator and student was successful and that the student has indeed learned the classroom objectives set at the beginning of the school term from the educator, the educator has to monitor the student's learning early (Angelo, Cross, 2009). The educator must observe the student and use formal and informal sources, such as, school records and standardized test for the former and personal observations and maybe comments from other educators for the latter (Chapter Assessment, 2009).

The informal assessments require strategic planning and clear understanding of one's assessment goals. What needs to be assessed and why? When planning instructional strategies, educators should keep their learning goals in mind, and by all means consider assessment strategies, and lastly determine what would constitute evidence that students have reached the learning goals (ETS, 2009). The educator must use multiple types of instruments or interactions between methods which are an issue of assessing classroom effectiveness (McKnight, Paugh, 2003). There is no single form of assessment that will work well in all situations and for all purposes it really depends on the nature of the information being taught, the purpose of the instruction and what the educator wants to learn from the assessment (ETS, 2009).

The students are the focus and the assessment should most of all benefit the student and they should understand the learning objectives, goals and understand what criteria they are responsible to know and understand how they will be evaluated. It should not be a secret how student(s) will be scored, on the contrary the scoring guidelines should be defined at the beginning of the school term and establish a clear and defined level of what learning outcomes should be attained by the student.

Angelo and Cross suggest that an educator should avoid unhappy surprises, in so doing, monitor a student throughout the semester. The educator needs a continuous flow of accurate information on their students learning. This will assist the educator in checking how well their students are learning at those initial and intermediate points, and for providing information for improvement when learning is less than satisfactory.

Classroom assessment also requires the active participation of students and the cooperation of the educator when they evaluate the student that there is a clear understanding what is expected. The assessment gives opportunity to correct misconceptions and discuss any issues early when the educator is accurately discussing the material covered with the student.

Methodology

The method of SWOT analysis is to take the information from an environmental analysis and separate it into internal (strengths and weaknesses) and external issues (opportunities and threats). Once this is completed, SWOT analysis determines what may assist the educator in

accomplishing their objectives, and what obstacles must be overcome or minimized to achieve desired results.

Hill and Westbrook (1997) state that when using SWOT analysis, be realistic about the strengths and weaknesses of your classroom assessment, distinguish between where your students are today, and where they could be in the future. Also remember to be specific by avoiding gray areas and always analyze in relation to the different assessments. Finally, keep the SWOT analysis short and simple, and avoid complexity and over-analysis since much of the information is subjective. Thus, use it as a guide and not a prescription.

Discussion

When weighing assessment options the strengths of a classroom assessment are not always obvious because when it comes to education, times have changed. The previous ways of teaching and assessing student comprehension seems no longer to be as effective. There are many components that play a vital role in this picture. As times have changed, it is imperative that today's educators are flexible enough to adapt and change as well. It is not enough to just teach a particular objective, but it is even more important that teachers are able to adequately and effectively assess their students to see how much of that particular objective the students have mastered. As this paper progresses, there are some important questions that will be asked. First of all, why is it so important that classroom instructor(s) assess their students on a regular basis? Another question that one might ask is, what purposes do these assessments serve? According to an article written by Peter W. Airasian and Ann M. Jones, classroom teachers are the ultimate purveyors of applied measurement, and they rely on measurement and assessment-based processes to help them make decisions every hour of the day.

Airasian and Jones postulate in their article that there are fundamental purposes for which they conducted their research. Their purposes include such things as (a) to provide a general description of the classroom context within which teachers' function; (b) to identify the range and interactions among measurement and assessment decisions teachers make each day; and (c) to critique existing approaches to teaching classroom measurement and assessment. Their intents were to broaden the current perspectives of what constitutes classroom measurement and assessment and to identify the contextual parameters within which these are applied. So from the research, it is obvious that there are some vital strengths of classroom assessment. By conducting these assessments, the teachers are able to see where their students fall short on an objective. These assessments also enable the teachers to look closely at the strategies that they used to convey their lesson and critique or perhaps, change their strategies altogether in order to attain a higher percentage of student achievement.

Another point of classroom assessment is that it allows the teachers an opportunity to observe their students closely to see how they respond to test-taking. Needless to say, not all students are "good test-takers". In fact, some students have become so nervous when the time came to be assessed that they shut down and would not even attempt to complete the test. Therefore, upon observing and reaching a conclusion about his or her students, the teacher is able to derive the types of tests that are best suited for their students. In an article written by Susan M. Brookhart and Jarol G. DeVoge, they discussed a theoretical framework describing the role of classroom assessment in student effort and achievement. This framework expected positive relations among perceived characteristics of the assessment task, perceived self-efficacy to do the task, amount of effort invested in the task, and achievement for each classroom assessment within the classroom

assessment environment. Furthermore, they explained, the classroom assessment environment and the particular assessment events themselves were hypothesized to make a difference. These are just a few of the strengths that can be drawn from classroom assessments. They help both the teachers as well as the students to evaluate themselves and perform at their highest levels in their respective positions.

When weighing assessment options there are several potential weaknesses concerning selected-response assessments (multiple-choice, true/false, and matching) cannot be measured, oral communication and social skills. This may penalize students who do not read well this will make students susceptible to guessing and communicate the inaccurate message that recognizing the "right answer" is the primary goal of education. Which will also may encourage a student to focus on learning facts rather than on understanding concepts and on thoughtful application of knowledge. The constructed-response assessment (short-answer; labeling diagrams, "show your work") according to the ETS organization this will be time consuming to score, limited in their ability to assess complex thinking. Also, scoring may be subjective and susceptible to evaluator bias, which can affect fairness and validity.

Angelo and Cross (2009) suggest that a weakness in classroom assessment is when the assessment does not respond to the particular needs and characteristics of the teachers, students, and disciplines to which they are applied. What works in one classroom many not necessarily work in another classroom. Too often, students have not learned as much or as well as was expected. Angelo and Cross deem that there are gaps sometimes considerable ones, between what was taught and what has been learned. By the time faculty notice these gaps in knowledge or understanding, it is frequently too late to remedy the problems. Another weakness Angelo and Cross site is when useful information on student learning through questions, quizzes, homework, and exams are collected too late—at least from the students' perspective—to affect their learning. It is very difficult to "de-program" students they postulate that students are accustom to thinking of anything they have been tested and graded on as being "over and done with".

Some of the opportunities to improve classroom assessments although there are weaknesses with any aspects of the educational arena, those weaknesses can serve as an opportunity to improve the overall perspective of the classroom, especially in the area of assessments. If these improvements are going to be made, those involved must be open-minded and willing to embrace these changes. Instead of griping about the many problems that are invading the classroom, teachers should focus more on using there issues in a positive way. Airasian and Jones believe that there are two main consequences for instruction in classroom measurement and assessment. They believe that those components should encourage instructors to broaden their conception of what are important classroom measurement and assessment activities. They also believe that from those valuable resources, instructors should recognize that classroom decision making is tempered by teachers' practical knowledge of their pupils and social context. It would be quite difficult for a teacher to measure and assess his or her students without first taking into consideration who is being measured and assessed. In addition to Airasian and Jones, there is also an enormous amount of research that has been conducted, especially in the area of classroom assessment, to try to come up with ways to help students feel more comfortable when they are being assessed. First and foremost, it is important that teachers understand that they do have some limits as it relates to their knowledge and practice of classroom measurement and assessment (Marso and Pigge, 1992; Stiggins and Bridgeford, 1985). They continued to say that teachers can benefit from appropriate instruction. One of the greatest opportunities that lie within the parameters of the study on

the effectiveness of classroom assessment is the simple fact that it allows instructors to collaborate with each other. They can share ideas about what works and what does not work as it relates to classroom assessments. This is so vital, especially when it comes to new teachers and veteran teachers. According to Airasian and Jones, one way to enhance that communication with teachers and to improve classroom measurement and assessment practice is to recognize the many interacting and competing forces that teachers face in the classroom. They believed it required a perspective on the classroom context, the teachers' measurement and assessment roles in this context, and the ways these roles interact. The authors stated that all classroom applications of measurement and assessment are means to an end; helping teachers make decisions. When measurement and assessment are viewed in terms of teachers' decision making, the writers have come to three clear and basic conclusions: (1) decision making is an essential and ubiquitous feature of classroom life; (2) the teacher is at the center of these activities, and (3) many of the important measurement and assessment methods used by teachers are not always formal and overt. It is important to remember that, whether they are formal or informal, meaningful decisions are based on valid and reliable information.

Crooks, Kane, Cohen (1996) affirmed that validity is the most important quality of classroom assessment, but its evaluation is often neglected. Assessment is depicted as a chain of eight linked stages: administration, scoring, aggregation, generalization, extrapolation, evaluation, decision and impact. Evaluating validity requires careful consideration of threats to validity associated with each link. Several threats are described and exemplified for each link. These sets of threats are intended to be illustrative rather than comprehensive. The validity will be limited by the weakest link and that efforts to make other links particularly strong may be wasteful or even harmful.

Validity is concerned with the collection of appropriate evidence that certifies trustworthiness and relevance. The threat in administering assessments an instructor can make is prejudging students by prior information, initial impressions and personal theories and beliefs. McKnight and Paugh contend that early input can change the direction of making these judgments which as an observer, can stem from prior knowledge, first impressions, or personal prejudices, and often interferes with fair and valid assessments of students. If and when the focus is on early or mid-semester assessments too few observations may prevent learning about students' effectiveness if the assessment does not articulate the specific goals and objectives clearly and explicitly for efficient learning.

The teacher must be careful in scoring because the threat in scoring cannot be based on a single assessment style. Cashin (1995) stressed that in grading, the teacher should include multiple types of instruments. This approach will reduce the planning or preparation time and energy of the teacher. This will also, in turn, minimize the planning and organization for the teacher. The threat in aggregation may come when only one or two classroom assessment techniques are tried in only one class. This risk will prove as a disadvantage in developing a test to accurately measure more complex, and higher-level thinking skills from the student. The threat in generalization would not be beneficial to students as well. The disadvantage there would not be a true informative evaluation outcome to understand if the student benefited from a single assessment or a few assessments to prove any achievement of the learning goals. The threat in extrapolation Marsh and Roche (1997) document similar concerns and included the validity of many assessment instruments would be an improvement on the quality of instruction and should give the teacher a more multidimensional outlook of their teaching and evaluation of their students. The evaluation threat can produce

misconceptions, when the assessment should contain the material that the assessment covered. Students should not be asked to use any classroom assessment technique that a teacher has not previously tried on themselves. This is why it is imperative that students receive feedback and know how the teacher will use the feedback information to improve their learning. If not, the strengths and weaknesses should be discussed in a different way to enable the student to respond correctly. In making decisions the threat may be questionable if the assessment does not give an equal chance to all the students to show what they know and can do. In addition, the assessments should only measure knowledge and skills related to the objectives discussed in class. The assessment should not be as a self-inflicted chore or burden. Teachers should in the early stages identify and develop plans that would be apparent should they have students that have special needs. These students are increasingly placed in the same classroom as their peers and teachers, counselors, parents and others should work together to support their achievement. Lastly, the threat of impact cannot be based on a single piece of information of a student by labeling a student negatively. This is a logical error and may occur when a teacher selects the wrong indicators to assess desired student outcomes. A teacher must give students the benefit of the doubt, and remember specifically where their observations came from to lead them to label a student. This must be handled carefully when focusing on placing a student in a restrictive environment and prescribing an individual education plan (IEP). These plans are made specifically for a student with special needs that will describe a student's current level of educational performance, goals, prescribed services, degree of inclusion in regular education programs and which type of assessment criteria will be used for the student.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Northeastern University's Center for Effective University Teaching (2001), states that using classroom assessment will prove benefits to both students and faculty. Having an ongoing emerging picture of how students learn and what they are learning will provide valuable information to inform curriculum decisions. Analysis of student data has shown that while students may be hesitant to try something new, they readily admit that the value of assessment comes from their ability to use the data to become more efficient students. Saginor (2008) states that assessment means more than checking to make sure students are on task, understand their assignment and are not stuck. This must be done as well and can certainly be achieved simultaneously with actual assessment. However, Saginor, continues in stating, while circulating around the room is a way in which some kinds of assessment can take place, a few elements are necessary to qualify this activity as assessment. The No Child Left Behind Act guarantees yearly data from mandatory, large-scale testing. To avoid momentous decisions that rest on a single test score, many districts choose additional assessments that may be norm-referenced.

Saginor further states that assessment means different things to different people. Assessment is a task that distinguishes between those who have an identified skill, piece of knowledge or conceptual understanding and those who do not. Assessment is an integral part of teaching and should be used to inform and enhance the instruction and learning that goes on in an everyday classroom.

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