IMPROVING LEARNING THROUGH FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT: THE LECTURER'S DILEMMA

Y. A. Ankomah
University of Cape Coast,

G. K.T. Oduro
University of Cambridge, U.K,

Abstract
This article explores some of the challenges that lecturers grapple with in their attempt to promote learning among students through formative assessment. It discusses how large class sizes and over-emphasis on examination results as criteria for determining the effectiveness of a department and the lecturers tend to narrow lecturers' practice of student assessment. It argues that lecture room leadership for promoting student learning cannot be meaningfully exercised in the university unless lecturers embrace and use feedback as a tool for enhancing student learning rather than focusing on meeting externally set targets and accountability standards.

Introduction

Today, in both developed and developing countries, higher educational institutions at all levels face an array of challenges. Key to these challenges is a rising level of government and public expectations regarding outcomes. These expectations have increasingly required universities to develop organisational structures, processes and strategies that would promote a high standard of professional performance among lecturers leading eventually towards high academic achievement among lecturers and subsequently among students. In this light, the notion of "learning" has become a significant leadership issue in universities. The university is expected to function as a learning organisation in order to continue to improve performance and build capacity to manage change (Corcoran and Goertz, 1995). It is not only required to develop shared goals to guide the behaviour of lecturers and learners in departments but also to establish collaborative teaching and learning environments that encourage a regular review of all aspects related to the work of departments; recognise and reinforce good work (Sillins, Zarlins and Mulford, 2002).

Central to the numerous challenges facing leadership in the university is how to ensure that quality learning takes place among students. This challenge is located within a very complex situation where instructional leaders are expected to:

> Deeply know their subject areas, understand how students learn, use modern learning technologies effectively, and work closely with their colleagues to create rich learning environments that produce high-quality learning experiences for every student (Fulton, 2003:2).

Underpinning this complexity is the lecturers' task of meeting public demand for high academic performance of students against standardised grades. As Stiggins (202:1) explains, over the
last five decades there has been the strongly held view that "school improvement requires the articulation of high achievement standards, the transformation of those

expectations into rigorous assessments, and expectation that educators will be held accountable for student achievement as reflected in student rest scores". Although Stiggins focuses on school education, we find the view applicable to the university as well.

In Ghana today, "assessment of learning for public accountability" (Stiggins, 2002:2) through standardised testing of students has increasingly become the basis upon which universities are judged as being "successful" or "failing". This translated in the number of first class honours universities are able to declare during congregations. The more first classes students of a particular department obtain the higher its recognition within the university community. It is by the same measure that the university's academic placement is determined by the public. The more low classes students obtain, the lower the prestige the university wins from the public. Some parents tend to use performance announced during graduation ceremonies as a yardstick for choosing departments for their children. This makes a department's examination performance a major determining factor in the level of respect that the public accords to a lecturer (Oduro and MacBeath, 2003).

Another dimension of the learning-related challenge is the paradigm of assessment for learning (Stiggins, 2002) by which instructional leaders are expected to move beyond the practice of using assessment as a means of providing evidence of achievement for public reporting to the practice of using assessment to assist students to improve upon their learning. Lecturer's in this sense are required to use "the classroom-assessment process and the continuous flow of information about student achievement it provides to advance, not merely check on, student progress" (Stiggins, p. 2). Following from this expectation, lecturers in university departments ;grapple with the task of adopting an assessment strategy that would reflect the learning needs of students, and which has the capacity of providing the needed data upon which values added to the learning performance of individual students can be progressively monitored and improved.

One assessment strategy that, in recent times, has gained much currency as a tool for promoting student assessment for learning in the classroom is formative assessment. Writers like Black and William (1998),. Harlen and James (1997), and Gipps (1990) have, for example, ;written extensively on the nature of formative assessment and have emphasised its importance in the classroom. Tunstall and Gipps ('1995:186) define formative assessment as a process by which a teacher appraises, judges or evaluates the work or the performance of students and uses the results to "shape students' competence". This makes the understanding lecturers have of the scheme and the attitude they show towards its implementation of crucial importance. A major question that the literature has left unanswered is, whether lecturers understand and practice the term formative assessment the same way as the experts define it. We argue to this paper that the way teachers at all levels of the educational sector (primary, secondary or university) conceptualise formative assessment and the extent to which they utilise this mode of assessment have implications for leadership in their learning expectation among their students.

Empirical Context

Our article draws on, firstly, the results of an MPhil thesis (Oduro, 1999) which explored English teachers' perspectives about, and practice of formative assessment and, secondly, on Ankomah's personal experiences as Faculty and Departmental Examinations Officer (USCC) in the University of Cape Coast (since 1997). On the one hand, Oduro's study was the focus of an MPhil degree thesis he presented to the Cambridge University's School of Education 1998, and involved 13 primary school teachers. His study sought to gather first hand information from the teachers on which

they, as classroom practitioners, thought about formative assessment and what they themselves said about their practical experiences in using the scheme in the classroom.

The data were interpretively collected through semi-structured interviews involving 20 open-ended questions. They were designed to elicit from the teachers their working vocabulary for assessment in relation to the identification of students' learning needs and the difficulties they faced (if any) in the use of formative assessment in the classroom. For the purpose of stimulating discussion and ensuring that respondents did not deviate from the main thrust of the interview, a flashcard containing samples of classroom assessment types with corresponding definitions extracted from a reviewed literature was prepared and used as a prompting device during the interviews. The flashcard was particularly helpful in finding out whether respondents who did not show at the outset that "formative assessment" was part of their working vocabulary, could recognise them when displayed. Each interview session took about 45 minutes and, with the consent of the interviewees, tape-recorders were used in recoding the interviews.

On the other hand, Ankomah's experiential account indicates that there are two main components lecturers of the University of Cape Coast conduct on their students every academic semester, namely, continuous assessment and final examinations. The continuous assessment component which takes 40% of the total scores of assessment on a student, takes a combination of take-home assessment and quizzers or class tests. Very often the take-home assignments are essay-types that are quite elaborate. They may also require extensive library search to execute. The quizzes or class tests are often taken during the lecture hours and take the form of short essays, or short answers made up of short phrases, or even single words. The final examinations of the semester carry 60% of the assessment scores. The policy of the university regarding student assessment has been that, a minimum of two and a maximum of four major continuous assessments are to be conducted during the semester session for any particular courses taught by a lecturer (or group of lecturers) to any group of students. In principle, the continuous assessments are to be scored and discussed with the students, or the scores and scripts shown them before the commencement of the semester's final examinations.

Formative Assessment: It's Place in Lecturers' Discourse

Our data suggests that "formative assessment" is not commonly used by both lecturers and teachers in the normal description of their assessment techniques in the classroom. Out of the thirteen teachers interviewed by Oduro, only five mentioned the term spontaneously. This comprised one, out of six primary school teachers and four out of seven secondary school teachers. The most common assessment vocabulary used by the teachers were: written test, marking, recording, baseline assessment, written comments, report writing, observation, teacher assessment, summative assessment and feedback. The size of assessment vocabulary used by the secondary school teachers was found to be greater than that of the primary school teachers. Whilst the mean for the categories mentioned by the secondary school teachers was approximately 5.7, that of the primary school teachers was 7.6. Further questions posed to ascertain whether the eight remaining teachers who did not mention "formative assessment" extemporaneously, had a hidden idea of the term, proved that they either had a latent view about the term or could recognise the term when it was introduced to them.

Similarly, Ankomah's interaction with lecturers of UCC suggests that formative assessment does not form an integral part of their day-to-day vocabulary. The most common term used by the lecturers is continuous assessment which, as explained earlier, involves take-home assignments lecturers give to the students, and quizzes or class tests that the students take during lecture periods. Thus, it is common to hear lecturers talk about assignments, quizzes, mid-semester quizzes or class tests. While almost all the

lecturers interacted with showed some understanding of formative assessment as being applicable to their continuous assessment due to their exposure to the term "formative" in other contexts, the concept is generally not part of their currency. With continuous assessment being an institution-wide policy mandate, the lecturers were always concerned about making sure that they give "assignments" to their students, set "quizzes" or "class tests", do their "marking and record" student scores in appropriate formats.

In respondent's explanation of the concept of formative assessment, three distinct types emerged. These are the sophisticated type which represents the view of those who see formative assessment as involving feedback on students' work and adjusting learning and/or teaching; the Complex Type which represents the perception that formative assessment involves feedback on achievement and dialogue with students but without reference to changes in teaching or learning, and the Simple Type which is the perception of those who simply see formative assessment as an "on-going activity", emphasising that any form of teachers assessment that is continuous is formative. Thus neither the teachers nor lecturers showed any homogeneity in their notion of formative assessment. They did not also conceptualise the term as Black and William (1998) explain it to be.

Black and William (1998) prescribe a definition of the term formative assessment as involving all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, which provide information to be used to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged. As reflected in the three typologies explained earlier, some teachers were of the view that once assessment involves dialogue and the student is frequently informed about his/her performance, it is formative. Some viewed the concept purely as informal or unofficial teacher assessment, while others viewed it in terms of continuous and systematic written tests.

Contrasting formative with summative assessment, the teachers' conceptions in Oduro's (1999) study were found not to be as simple as the literature suggests. Five teachers saw formative assessment either as complementary to or as a subset of summative assessment. This is reflected in statements such as the following:

I see the relationship between them as being that formative assessment is much about the stuff on the ground – the day- to- day work. Summative, I see as a kind of record achievement at the end of the year. Formative assessment prepares the child for summative assessment; they go hand in hand (a secondary school teacher).

Three of the teachers expressed uncertainty about the connection between formative and summative assessment, with one articulating that "basically, formative and summative get confused but in the end both inform; so the boundary between them is unclear". Two others saw both formative and summative assessment as performing the same function. One primary school teacher illuminated, "in my opinion, there's nothing distinct between summative and what some people call formative. Both are the same". In contrast, three teachers saw formative and summative assessments as two separate entities. They saw formative assessment as purely a teacher controlled form of assessment and summative as externally controlled, with one secondary teacher explaining, "there's value in summative in terms of school target setting but I can't see the link it has with my continuous assessment in the classroom".

In spite of the divergent and confused opinions expressed by the 131 teachers in terms of concept and the relations between formative and summative assessment, they unanimously agreed that formative assessment provides immense help to the teacher in terms of identifying students' learning needs and altering teaching methods. In the words of one female teacher.

You need to have the building blocks that will allow children to be able to understand and achieve what you want them to achieve. Formative

assessment provides the building blocks so it really helps the teacher to identify chidlren's learning needs and allows her to reconsider the teaching methods being used.

The teachers were, however, divided as to the place of summative assessment in the identification of students' learning needs. Ten of them felt that summative assessment helps the teacher to identify the overall learning needs of the individual student. Through summative assessment, they explained, the teacher is able to get an overall picture of the student's learning needs after she or he has summarised the results of all that the student has done over the years. Once the overall learning needs of the student have been identified, the teacher is able to modify his/her teaching techniques in order that the student could be taught better. Two of them were, however, quick to add that such modification in the fhere's teaching technique did not benefit the particular students whose results are used as basis for the review: the students would have moved to another class and thereby making it impossible for the teacher to have the chance of teaching the same students again. This argument raises an issue for the practice of collaborative and shared leadership for learning practices in schools, which we discuss later..

Three other teachers did not see how summative assessments could in any way help the teacher in identifying children's learning needs. As an example, one secondary teacher argued, "if my understanding of summative assessment is that it comes at the end summing up all that has come before, then it cannot be used in identifying learning needs". This was corroborated by a primary school teacher who argued, "well, I don't think summative assessment as a whole is of much benefit to the child because we don't share enough with the child about what we assess them for". Pointing to a pile of pupil assessment record files in a corner of her classroom, she lamented,

Those blue files are confidential; the children know that they're assessed but they don't really have any feedback. Summative assessment is useful to the pupil's learning needs in so far as the teacher will use the information, as it were, to pick up holes in their knowledge.

The University of Cape Cost experience indicates that generally the lecturers viewed both formative and summative assessments as being two parts of a whole, with formative assessment being necessarily the first part which culminates and ends in the summative assessment. Apparently, this understanding they show is influenced by the specific percentage weights of 40% and 60% given to continuous assessment and final semester examinations respectively in their student assessments. Clearly, the lecturers viewed both assessments as basically their fulfilment of a university policy mandate. They did not immediately link student assessment to improvement in teaching and learning, but as an indication of the academic standing of the particular students. However, they agreed after further probe that especially formative assessment has the potential of influencing students to improve their performance. But for the majority of them, assessment would have little to do with their own approach to teaching.

The Problem of Utilising Formative Assessment in the Lecture Room

From our data, two major classroom-related problems emerge: time constraint and large class size.

Time constraint

Time constraint is common between pre-tertiary teachers and university lecturers. It emerges as the most challenging hurdle needed to be cleared in order that lecturers and teachers could carry out formative assessment successfully in the classroom. On the one hand, teachers attributed this to pressure emanating from paper work and other non-academic commitments. They expounded the time pressure with reference to stress emanating from the preparation of children for national examinations, which they found very involving and tiring. They found the pressure from national examinations to be a hindrance to their attempts to use formative assessment effectively. This is reflected in the following comment from one primary teacher:

What I believe in or not believe in is beyond my controls a teacher now, I don't have any choice but to put my year six children into this national test. If I had my own will, I would concentrate on formative assessment. We've got children who can't cope with it and must not be forced to do it. They need formative assessment but I have no choice. I have to prepare all of them for national testing.

In the context of the University, lecturers expressed their experience of time constraint in relation to other responsibilities they undertake in addition to their normal teaching assignments. These other responsibilities include serving on committees, academic and hall counselling, hall tutorship, attending workshops and seminars, conducting field and library research-all these in addition to marking of student examination scripts, assignments as well as supervising student projects, dissertations and theses.

Class Size

Large class size was another inhibitor in the implementation of formataive assessment. This is critical in the case of lecturing in the University of Cape Coast. Ankomah's observation suggests that with the mounting pressure of high student enrolments in recent years, most lecturers on the average, handle a student class of about 120, with some rising to about 500. In extreme cases class sizes reach to between 900 and 1000 students as in such courses as Educational Technology, Information retrieval, and Communicative Skills. Lectures were honest in conceding that with such pressures of large class sizes coupled with the extra heavy responsibilities on them, the continuous assessment they conducted did not go beyond merely fulfilling a policy mandate of the university.

Discussion

Lecturer's proper understanding of the concept formative assessment and their ability to establish clearly the relationship between formative assessment, continuous assessment and summative assessment is very significant for effective classroom learning. Without clear understanding of these concepts, lecturers will continue to find it difficult to effectively provide leadership in students' learning efforts and develop classroom assessment principles to guide their professional practice. Black and William (1998) have proposed a short cut solution to the problem: escaping the dominance of external summative testing. The question, however is, will doing away with external assessment per se solve the problem? Whether we like it or not, external examinations have become an indispensable feature of classroom practice: teachers will have to meet the challenges they post so long as the public continues to demand academic excellence. What we need therefore is a professional development practice that will offer teachers adequate training in assessment to enable them internalise the two concepts properly and see how these approaches can be integrated to enhance teaching and learning. This is very essential because as observed by some scholars like Airasian (1991), inadequate assessment training for teachers, accounts for most of the confusion associated with teachers' understanding of assessment techniques.

Implications for Instrumental Leadership

Challenges relating to assessing stints for learning can be surmounted if a high quality of sustained instructional leadership is put in place. It is also essential that policy guidelines for lecturers' practice of formative assessment in the lecturer theatre takes into consideration the different individual perceptions they have about the principle. This will require a policy that will create the opportunity for lecturers to share with their colleagues and policy makers how they perceive formative assessment and its use in the classroom. Such discussions should of course go beyond the mere practice of recording marks and reporting. It calls for shared knowledge in which individual lecturers are willing to share their best and weak practices with their colleagues. This can succeed when individual lecturers trust each other in a spirit of professional collegiality, an environment in which everyone feels free to develop and share innovative ideas in relation to formative feedback, among other things. The central goal for shared knowledge is for individuals to succeed in a climate of shared purpose, teamwork, and respect – an

atmosphere in which lectures can reach out to help one another and feel free to turn and ask for help. This will provide the means for discovering valuable new approaches to solving formative assessment-related problems encountered by lecturers.

It is also essential that lecturers use results of student assessment in providing feedback to students and to facilitate their understanding of the phenomenon to be learnt. Feedback, according to Bangert-Drowns, Kulik, and Morgan (1991), has the potential of increasing student learning. Studies in education suggest strongly that feedback is a teacher's best tool for assisting students to learn. It goes beyond more marking and giving out marked scripts to students. It encompasses remedial and tutorial interactions between the lecturer and the student in which the lecturer employs different learning, facilitating approaches to assist the stu dent to discover his/her learning problems and working towards an improvement

Features of Good Feedback

The following are identified as essential factors for achieving good feedback in formative assessment:

- *Learning goals for courses are clearly established, understood and shared by a lecturer and his students.* Goals should be clear, specific, and challenging. Students need to participate in setting goals for further learning. In this way, they are more likely to internalise the learning goals and thereby become more highly motivated. Assessment tasks should be appropriate to the stated goals.
- *Help students to understand and recognise the desired standards.* Students need to know what level of achievement is expected of them. Clear guidelines are very important: the criteria for assessment should clearly communicate how students' work is ultimately assessed. Guidelines should serve to clarify the learning task, communicate performance expectations, offer milestones from which students gauge their progress, and provide benchmarks linking task achievement with grade achievement. Clear guidelines provide a helpful framework for providing feedback.
- *Encourage student reflection.* Feedback on assessment will be much more effective when students recognise that they can improve and identify what aspects of their work to address. To help accomplish this, lecturers need to go beyond making corrections to express feedback in a way that challenges students to think critically, perhaps by encouraging them to view their work from different perspectives. If students are encouraged to critically examine and comment on their work, assessment can become more dialogue than monologue and can contribute powerfully to their learning.
- *Help students to recognise how they can improve.* Quality feedback does not only involve comment on how well a student is doing at a particular point in time, but also provides advice on what to do next. This guidance might include identifying specific issues that the student should work on, providing a list of references for the student to read, or posing a question that challenges the student's current way of thinking. Feedback becomes especially powerful if the assessor can refer to feed back that has previously been given to the student.
- *Build student confidence.* Lectures are to avoid "negative, overly critical, condescending or dismissive feedback". When lecturers fail to balance criticism with support, students tend to disregard the feedback. Emphasis needs to be placed on nurturing student learning by reinforcing their strengths and guiding them to improve upon their mistakes.
- *Provide prompt feedback*: Feedback is most effective when the work it assesses is fresh in the learner's mind. At a minimum, feedback must be given in sufficient time to benefit students' subsequent work. Prompt feedback increases student learning.

Conclusion

Effective use of feedback in making assessmsent more formative will be elusive unless unvieristiy authorities find ways of reducing the large class sizes that lecturers are compelled to handle. The tutorial system, which used to characterise learning activities in universities in the 1970s and 1980s may need to

be revisited. This is likely to enable lectures reduce their workloads by engaging their teaching assistants in carrying out formative assessment.

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Dr. Y. A. Ankomah is a lecturer of Educational Policy Analysis and Human Resources Development in the Institute for Educational Planning and administration at the University of Cape Coast. His research interests include managing human resources in educational institutions and educational supervision . He has also been working in the area of female participation in eduction and management. Please address correspondence to:Institute for Educational Planning and Administration, University of Cape Coast,Cape Coast, Ghana (e-mail: yankomah@yahoo.com).

Dr. George K. T. Oduro is a research associate at Cambridge University. His research interests lie in the cultural and political dimensions of school leadership, school leadership for peace building and social cohesion and the professional development for headteachers in Africa. Please address future correspondence to: The Institute for Educational Planning and Administration (IEPA), University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast, Ghana. (e-mail:gkto2@yahoo.co.uk).