

Continuous Assessment, Practicum, and the Quality of Business Education Programmes in Nigeria

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Abstract

Periodic assessment of students in the process of teaching the curriculum content, otherwise known as Continuous Assessment, was introduced into the Nigerian educational system in 1981 through the National Policy on Education. The method seeks to even out academic effort by ensuring that students do not wait for end of semester or certificate examinations to exert study effort but rather sustain learning throughout a period, for instance, a term or a semester. This method of assessment is very good for a practical programme such as Business Education and should be magnified. This paper reviews the philosophy and current practice in Business Education in the College of Education system in Nigeria and submits that a higher weight should be accorded Continuous Assessment rather than the current practice of emphasizing end of semester examinations. The paper also advocates more emphasis on practicum by way of more contact hours for practical work and very importantly, more attention to industrial attachment. These measures, it is hoped, would ensure higher quality of the Business Education programme.

Introduction

Torrance (2004) in discussing educational assessment, defines **assessment** as making a judgment on a person or a situation based on available evidence. Specifically, he holds the opinion that educational assessment is concerned with making judgments about student achievement and progress. Assessment in a formal setting is very useful, in spite of the arguments of the proponents of the concept of **deschooling** and abandonment of examinations (Maduka, 1994). It is much more useful in vocational courses where practicum is critical and is best achieved through continuous exposure to real life situations and assessment of the degree of learner intake of instruction. One of the nine principles of good practice for assessing student learning enunciated by the American Association for Higher Education (2003) is that assessment works best when it is on going rather than periodic. The Association states that "assessment is a process whose power is cumulative," that "improvement (of students) is best

fostered when assessment entails a linked series of activities undertaken over time,” and that “the point is to monitor progress toward intended goals in a spirit of continuous improvement.”

One of the vocational courses offered in Nigerian Colleges of Education, Polytechnics, and Universities is Business Education. In Colleges of Education (COE), the Business Education programme trains students for vocations in teaching (of business subjects) and business management, as well as for work as employees in organizations. The methods of assessment in Colleges of Education are two – Continuous Assessment (CA) and semester examinations that take place at the end of each semester. Both the CA and end of semester examination (ESE) scores contribute to the final result or grade to be earned by the student under a system of Cumulative Grade Points Average (CGPA). CA is not only useful as a component of the final grade, but very importantly, it is a tool for assessing the progress of students and motivating them in the process of learning.

At present, the recognized weights attached to CA and ESE are 40% and 60% respectively. One common observable fact is that students do not give as much attention to class work for CA scores as they give to ESE. In a number of cases, students, particularly those that are carrying over failed courses, do not attend any lecture, they take tests sporadically, and only carry out assignments, if at all, by proxy. This negates the philosophy of CA which is sustained and committed learning as class tests and assignments force students to keep abreast with studies as against ‘bullet’ reading - often rote learning - for ESE.

For practical programmes such as Business Education, CA is not only necessary but should be regarded as crucial because it provides a forum for more practical, hands-on training since the program is practical in nature. CA should therefore be emphasized, preferably above ESE. It is based on above reasons that this paper argues that the weight attached to CA should be reviewed in the Minimum Standards for the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE). NCE is the certificate awarded to students on completion of their programme in the College of Education system. It should range from 40% to 60%, the weight depending on individual courses. Also, the Minimum Standards (academic guidelines for the NCE programme issued every four years by the supervising agency for the College of Education system in Nigeria – the National Commission for Colleges of Education - NCCE) should revert to a 2-year industrial attachment (IT) rather than one year as provided in the current Minimum Standards. Students should serve in different establishments during the two years, should be posted to reflect their areas of specialization, and performance should be strictly monitored.

Continuous Assessment in Nigeria

The Nigerian Federal Ministry of Education (FME, 1985) defines Continuous Assessment (CA) as a mechanism whereby the final grades of a student in the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains of behaviour are based on the student’s performance

during a given period of schooling. Combinations of techniques are used in this exercise. However Lyons (1989) writing on CA in the American system, is of the opinion that it may likely be “formative, process-oriented, informal, internal, learner-involved, and/or self-referenced in nature. It can take the form of daily work (e.g. essays, quizzes, presentation and participation in class), projects/term papers and practical work (e.g. laboratory work, fieldwork, clinical procedures, drawing practice).”

To Awotunde and Ugodulunwa (2001) the objectives of CA include giving teachers greater involvement in the total assessment of learners, providing a basis for more effective guidance of the learners, reducing examination malpractice, and providing a basis for teachers to improve their instructional methods.

The goals of CA in the opinion of Awotua-Efebo (1999) include the enhancement of assessment by not depending on a one-shot transaction (for example ESE) as an indicator of student achievement, the integration of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, and the focus of assessment on the potentials of each student rather than on a discriminatory summative evaluation. Sustained evaluation through CA can lead to early detection of problem areas that each student encounters with a view to designing and implementing corrective measures for them.

Awotunde and Ugodulunwa (2001) also indicate that studies have been carried out to ascertain the extent of achievement of the objectives of CA in Nigeria since the idea was mooted in the National Policy on Education (NPE) in 1981. In one such study, they conclude among other things that:

- (a) The objectives of improving teaching, guidance of students, and learning have been largely achieved.
- (b) The objective of reducing examination malpractice through CA has not been achieved.
- (c) Teachers surveyed are more familiar with the use of tests in CA in the cognitive domain and less so in the affective and psychomotor domains.
- (d) There is no uniformity in the instruments used for CA (tests and assignments or a combination of the two). Wokocha and Ubong (2003) confirm that there is no uniformity in CA in the different states of Nigeria.
- (e) There is no uniformity in weights attached to CA instruments used in secondary schools.

In a study by Attah and Binda (2001) it was established that there is a strong positive correlation between CA and end of term examinations in mathematics among secondary school students in

selected secondary schools in Nassarawa State of Nigeria. This emphasizes the need for CA in schools and justifies the emphasis on it by the Federal Government. However, Olandunni (1998) is not comfortable with the variability in test scores across states and calls for a model that would ensure that scores are uniform such that CA scores in one state would have the same value in all other states and thus make for instance, the junior secondary school certificate to have the same value across the nation.

Other studies on the implementation of CA in schools appear to point to the same direction – that the system is yet to be standardized in Nigerian schools. Olandunni (2001) found in a study of secondary schools in four Western States of Nigeria – Oyo, Osun, Ogun, and Ondo – that the practice of CA needs improvement with respect to test construction, test administration, and item scoring. A study of secondary schools in Benue State also shows that implementation varies not just from school to school but even from teacher to teacher! (Abakpa & Adegbe, 2001). The most disturbing should be the case of Kaduna State where Hassan and Adeyanju (1998) found in a survey that some secondary schools even award CA scores without actually carrying out any assessment.

An interesting scenario can be seen in the case of the relative importance of entry qualification and type of certificate used for admission vis-à-vis continuous assessment as they impact on results. In a study of these three parameters, Durotolu (1994) concluded that periodic assessment showed the highest predictive power with respect to academic performance when compared with entry qualification and type of certificate used for admission.

Nwana (2003) sees CA as one of the three mechanisms instituted in the Nigerian education system to ensure accountability of educational institutions and their operations. The other two mechanisms are certificate examinations (at the end of every major level in the education system), and national assessment that focuses on the extent to which the whole educational system is achieving set objectives. An activity under this heading is the Monitoring of Learning Achievement – MLA – carried out in 1996 by the Federal Ministry of Education and supported by United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

Continuous assessment is expected to guide classroom teaching, motivate learners, improve mastery and guide progress from one class to the next (Nwana, 2003). Nwana however states that many teachers are yet to fully appreciate the philosophy and techniques of CA. He also criticizes the use of CA to favor non-performing students and calls for review of weights attached to CA and Certificate Examinations (CE). CA weights he deposes, should be lowered at the lower levels (primary and secondary schools), while CE should be increased at the higher levels. The writers of this paper do not agree with this recommendation, particularly for practical

courses such as Business Education. The weight for CE should actually be lowered for Business Education at higher levels.

Some Country Experiences

Ghana has been practicing continuous assessment in the school system but as earlier noted in the case of Nigeria, the problem of uniformity particularly at the basic education level at on a national basis necessitated review assisted by the United States Agency for International Development in 2005 (USAID, 2008). The review under the umbrella of the Ghana Basic Education Comprehensive Assessment System (BECAS) aimed at systematizing measures of achievement at different levels and different times. The programme has three components: the National Educational Assessment (NEA) to ensure uniformity across regions; the School Educational Assessment (SEA) for schools and for Grades 2, 4, and 6, that is on a biennial basis; and the Continuous Assessment (CA) for Grades 1 to 3.

As should be expected, continuous assessment in the United States of America is largely determined on a local than on a national basis. This is because issues on education revolve more around school districts and even in the districts, there could be variations on the basis of locality. Thus for instance, the University of Kentucky College of Education (1998) had its own “continuous assessment concept.” It has three focus areas: Program-Specific Continuous Assessment Plan for elementary schools; Program-Specific Continuous Assessment Plan for middle school; and the Program-Specific Continuous Assessment Plan for all other programme levels.

Business Education – Philosophy and Objectives

Business studies have to do with the business aspects of organizations within their economic, political, and social contexts. It involves the investigation of how enterprises add value by organizing the production of goods and services (Encarta, 2004). Business education therefore provides an opportunity for individuals to be exposed to business studies. For the NCE level, individuals are prepared for careers in teaching, employment, and self-employment.

The 2002 edition of the Minimum Standards for the NCE in Business Education as published by the NCCE (FRN, 2002) states that the philosophy of the programme “is to make business educators understand the concept and philosophy of the National Policy on Education as regards Business Education in national development” (p. 21). The National Policy on Education (FRN, 2004) outlines the country’s philosophy of education as follows:

- (a) education is an instrument for national development; to this end, the formulation of ideas, their integration for national development, and the interaction of persons and ideas are all aspects of education;
- (b) education fosters the worth and development of the individual, for each individual's sake, and for the general development of the society;
- (c) there is need for equality of educational opportunities to all Nigerian children, irrespective of any real or imagined disabilities, each according to his or her ability;
- (d) there is need for functional education for the promotion of a progressive, united Nigeria; to this end, school programmes need to be relevant, practical and comprehensive, while interest and ability should determine individuals' direction in education.

Items (a), (b) and (d) above in essence, indicate that education is an instrument of national development. In the introduction, the National Policy unabashedly states, "education in Nigeria is an instrument *par excellence* for effecting national development" (p. 4). This means that the primary focus of the education enterprise is the state – the whole – and her development, with the individual citizen as a component of that whole. This philosophy of objectification and viewing the teleology of education from a societal rather than from individual perspective appears to inform the orientation of government in funding the sector. Education is therefore seen as 'government business' and as it obtains in general government businesses, it is handled with less than appropriate care. Ubong (1999) has argued that education should focus more on the individual as is the case in the United States of America and Japan. The society becomes a beneficiary of the development of her citizens rather than the other way round.

It is however important to state that for the individual, the philosophy of Nigerian education revolves around 'self-reliance.' This is why objective (d) above emphasizes functional education, and that "school programs need to be relevant, practical and comprehensive" (p. 7), while the quality of instruction should focus on "acquisition of competencies necessary for self-reliance" (p. 8). This is also one of the goals of vocational education in Section 7, sub-section 42 (c) of the NPE, which is that students will be given skills that will ensure economic self-reliance. Specifically, Section 5, sub-section 43 (d) states that trainees at the technical college level will have three options on completion of their studies – secure employment, go for further training, or set up their own businesses and become self employed, in the process employing others.

At the tertiary education level, the NPE states as one of the goals of education at that level, the acquisition of physical and intellectual skills that will make individuals self-reliant and useful members of the society. This posture is also stated in the cases of polytechnics and monotchnics.

From the foregoing, it is evident that one of the goals of education in Nigeria is to make the individual self-reliant, with the thrust being self-employment. This is undoubtedly more easily realized when the programme content is weighted more heavily on practice rather than on theory. Business education is one of those programmes where practice should be emphasized, for the world of business, as much as it depends to a large extent on theory, is a world of practice. This is more poignant with such breathtaking and rapid changes in information and communication technology, transportation, production technology, and consumer tastes and incomes.

CA in Business Education – Theory versus Practice

The Minimum Standards issued by the NCCE (FRN, 2002) in the introductory section on Business Education specifies the mode of teaching to include lectures, tutorials, case studies, practical work, simulations, excursions, and other appropriate methods. Industrial training may be seen as falling under ‘practicals’ or ‘other appropriate methods.’ Continuous assessment is mentioned in the general summary and not in the individual (school) booklets. It is one of the two methods of student assessment.

As in other programmes, CA in Business Education carries a weight of 40% while the end of semester examination carries 60%. The breakdown of the 40% depends to some extent on the individual lecturer and his/her perception of the importance of each component of the CA. Generally, the following weights obtain: -

Test (one or two)	-	10 – 20 marks
Assignment (one or two)	-	5 – 10 marks
Term Paper (one or none, if there are two assignments)	-	10 marks
Attendance	-	5 marks

Some lecturers could give up to 5 tests in the course of the semester if such lecturer is not comfortable with the level of performance of the students and he or she believes that more tests, scored and returned to the student would improve their performance as well as give a clearer indication of progress. The scores would also be rearranged if methods other than those listed above are used. Nwana (2003) lists CA methods to include oral quizzes, tests, take-home assignments, group work, hands-on practicals, and self cum peer assessment. However, the methods more commonly used are tests, take-home assignments, term paper, and attendance at lectures.

Business Education in the NCE programme is a double major. There are two specialization areas by Year III – Accounting Education and Secretarial Education. These are

fundamentally practical courses that require a considerable dose of practice at the school level because of the practice expectations in the work situation. For Secretarial Education, the Minimum Standards recognizes its practical nature and emphasizes in the 2002 edition that “practicals in Shorthand and Typewriting/Word Processing are compulsory as stipulated” (p. 24). The contact hours for the two courses are generally 2-0-4, that is, every one hour of theory lecture must be followed by two hours of practical work. The weights for final grading however remain at 60% to 40% for sessional examination and CA respectively, even when the actual practice sessions when performance can be better monitored and determined should be at the classroom during instruction.

Another key aspect of practice in Business Education is industrial training. This is carried out during the Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES). In the 1996 edition of the Minimum Standards, SIWES took place in Years I and II divided into 8 weeks of industrial attachment (IT) and having one credit unit each. The 2002 edition provides for 16 weeks of IT in Year II only. The credit load is 2. The document has not explained the reason for the change. One can however speculate that the reason has to do with logistics. Organizing and paying students in IT is a very tedious and expensive venture. While the cost and effort will be reduced with a one-shot IT engagement, the students obviously lose in terms of experience. There can be no doubt that two exposures (students were usually expected to serve at different establishments in the two years) would be better for those involved, particularly the serious ones.

With respect to final grading in the SIWES programme, the CA component is evidently higher, that is, if the technical report (10%) can be regarded as somehow distinct from the day to day scoring by Industrial-based Supervisor and the periodic scoring by Institution-based Supervisor (90%). The grading in IT is therefore better weighted in favor of CA.

In summary, the grading system in the NCE programme in which semester examination takes a disproportionately high score vis-à-vis CA for Business Education which is a practice-based course, does not appear to be very appropriate. Emphasis on CA by way of changing the weight attached to it would undoubtedly force students to be more serious with CA. The current situation is that some students particularly those carrying over courses, do not attend lectures, submit assignments by proxy, and rush in for tests if they care, only to prepare well for the semester examinations. A student can possibly read for a 40% score out of the 60% available in the examination. This would give the student an E, the minimum level of pass at the NCE level although some institutions insist that a zero score in CA implies an incomplete result.

The Way Forward

To ensure that there is quality teaching and learning which would make graduates of tertiary educational institutions self-reliant for the good of themselves and the nation, more

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emphasis should be placed on continuous assessment with practice as the focus in programs such as Business Education. The following are specifically recommended:

1. Weights on CA to be discriminated according to the practical nature of each course. This means that a blanket score level of 40% for CA should be dropped in favor of a range of 40% - 60%.
2. There is the need to get students to be more serious with class work. Change in the weighting of CA could ensure this. Institutions that are not currently operating the “Incomplete” format should be made to do so as a matter of policy. This means that a student who does not participate in say, a certain minimum number of continuous assessment activities should be given “Incomplete” irrespective of the final score level after examinations. For example, a student who participates in less than 50% of the activities in a course during a semester should not be allowed to have a pass in the course.
3. The practicum for the Business Education programme is very important. Institutions and the Industrial Training Fund (ITF) should allow Business Education students to continue with the 2 outings that were practiced before. There should be strict monitoring to ensure that:
 - A student serves in an organization where the student’s area of specialization is relevant. Deploying a Secretarial student to sell gasoline at a filling station is no more than fulfilling all righteousness sans cognate experience.
 - The students serve in different establishments during the two years.

Conclusion

Educational institutions in line with the requirements of government policy should ensure that students are assessed throughout the semester so as to determine their level of understanding of the courses being taught. Continuous assessment has several uses including the fact that it facilitates practical knowledge. For a programme such as Business Education that requires a large dose of practical knowledge, it is suggested that the current weighting of continuous assessment be changed in its favor vis-à-vis end of semester examinations. This will ensure that students show more interest in sustained study of theory and practice. Also, the practicum, particularly the industrial attachment, should be emphasized so as to ensure the actualization of the dream of self-reliance for graduates of tertiary educational institutions.

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