Chapter 40
Principles of Student Assessment in Adult Education

James B. Martin
Army's Command and General Staff College at Ft. Leavenworth, USA

ABSTRACT

Any discussion of the topic of assessment of student learning is bound to be marked by strong opinions, marked differences, or total apathy. This topic, critical anywhere in higher education, is even more important in adult learning than anywhere else. With the greater potential for non-traditional programs in adult education, the ability to show the quality of student learning is critical. This chapter examines five principles of assessment of adult learning and provides insight into viable programmatic assessment. By applying the principles, the assessment strategies provided take into account the characteristics of adult learners and design a program that is suited for assessing adult learners. While some application of classroom assessment techniques for adult learners is included, the emphasis of the chapter is on programmatic assessment.

INTRODUCTION

Few issues in Adult Education create a wider spectrum of reaction, from the very negative to the fanatically positive, than that of assessment. The literature on this topic is diverse, from the widely accepted work of Thomas Angelo and Patricia Cross (1993), which presents a myriad of ways to assess student work in the classroom, to the ongoing arguments within the British educational system concerning whether or not the use of learning outcomes is an inherent good or a terrible evil (Ecclestone, 1999). With these diverse views in mind, this chapter lays out a variety of assessment principles, at the classroom and program levels, that are critical to the long term success of adult education programs. As will be obvious by the end, it is the author's view that student assessment at all levels is necessary and important for adult education programs, particularly in light of the growing use of information technology to affect educational offerings.

BACKGROUND

"Outcome-based education" - this term, denoting the idea of basing curriculum and teaching methods on desired educational or behavioral outcomes, brings out a variety of reactions. An article in a British journal examined at length an ongoing and heated debate in their higher education community about the worth and ethical nature of outcomes-based education and the assessment program that comes with it (Ecclestone, 1999). The article swung back and forth between the individuals who believed that the creation of outcomes provided the noose with which to strangle the liberal tradition of education in British colleges and those who believed that an increased level of accountability was necessary from the higher education community.

This British argument is now ten years old, but it continues to this day in the U.S. Many a faculty member in this country would agree with those British academics who argue against setting outcomes for courses or programs because of the possibility of their intellectual freedom in the classroom being restricted due to the requirement to assess student learning. They choose to fight against what makes them uncomfortable and challenges their beliefs as to what is necessary to educate a student in their discipline. This portrayal of their stance may ring true with many administrators, but one article on the topic of assessment expressed the opinion that the problem lies elsewhere. Kurz and Banta (2004) identify the fact that faculty members are experts in their chosen field and unless that field is assessment they have little background in the creation or use of high quality assessment instruments. This lack of experience and comfort with assessment produces a reticence to use it and potentially even mistrust of it. Others, including most accrediting bodies, see a need to measure effectiveness of education through a more structured system. One of the most accepted ways to measure such effectiveness is to set identifiable and measurable learning outcomes at the course and program level and plan for the use of assessment instruments to provide evidence of student learning. Largely because of this growing need to provide some level of accountability the idea of outcomes-based education has become widely accepted in the American educational culture. This is particularly true in adult education programs, which are much more likely to use accelerated learning models to compress the time it takes working adults to complete degree programs. If these programs can demonstrate that their students can master the same learning outcomes as students in similar traditional programs, but in an accelerated schedule, then they can argue that the educations are equivalent.

One type of assessment, which has become popular in the last 15 years, is using classroom assessment as formative measures to assist faculty members to improve their teaching to better meet students' needs. The dominant book on the topic is *Classroom Assessment Techniques* by Thomas Angelo and Patricia Cross. This book has produced some of the best-known techniques for checking on student learning in quick, efficient ways that allow faculty to correct problems and ensure that students get the salient points from the class or course. If you have just covered an important component of the course and wonder how well the students understood it; a one-minute paper can produce the data for you to examine and see if you were on the mark. While you might have thought you did a masterful job, if the students did not understand the material then how effective was the instruction (Angelo & Cross, 1993)?

Cross (1998), in a later journal article, goes on to explain that such techniques are particularly valuable because they can involve students in the assessment, not just as subjects but as partners. She cites two reasons that this student involvement is critical. She indicates that "First, we can't improve student learning without the active and intelligent participation of students themselves. But second, and equally important, students as lifelong learners

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