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An overview of the Challenges of Learning Assessment amidst COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract
The outbreak of Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic no doubt has a devastating impact on education worldwide. In order to withstand the consequences of the pandemic and live along with it, several measures were introduced by government agencies. For instance, the Federal Ministry of Education (FME) in collaboration with Federal Ministry of Health directed that all schools be closed down as a measure to contain the spread of the virus. This brought about a shift in the modes of teaching and learning in schools across the nation. Although, the directive was aimed at ensuring the wellness of citizens, it however had left behind some challenges of learning assessment which educators at all levels are battling to overcome. It is therefore imperative that such challenges need to be prioritized in order to make meaningful and effective.

Keywords: Learning Assessment, Assessment challenges, COVID-19 Pandemic

Zamfara International Journal of Education
The Official Journal of Faculty of Education
Federal University Gusau, Zamfara State, Nigeria
Maiden Edition (Volume 1, Number 1)
June, 2021

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Introduction

The Federal Ministry of Education (FME) announced the temporary closedown of all schools in Nigeria, effective March 23rd, 2020 as a response to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The closure of schools, colleges and universities by the Federal and State Government was an urgent need of the current situation which prevailed in most states in Nigeria. However, the closedown of schools has tremendous effect on the academic syllabus and calendar of the schools. Unlike other developed nations, FME school-closure directive did not come with any clear-cut measures on how to mitigate learning disruptions during the pandemic. Prolong school closures have major implications for learning, assessments and credentials which challenge the stake holders in education sector to device a coordinated response ensuring strengthened resilience in the system at the levels. This paper is aimed at describing the concept and nature of learning, leaning assessment, learning assessment challenges and priorities during COVID-19 crisis.

Concept and Nature of Learning

Learning is defined as any relatively permanent change in behavior that occurs as a result of practice and experience. Gagne (1970) defines learning as a change in human disposition or capability which can be retained but which is not simply ascribed to the process of growth. Learning not only brings about changes in the existing behaviour of an individual but also enable individuals to acquire new behavior because learning is an enduring change in behaviour produced by experience. Learning is an act of getting experience, knowledge, skills and values by understanding what to do and how to do it.

Dharmaraj (2015), defined learning as a process which occupies an important role in molding the structure of our personality and behavior. Learning involves new ways of doing things with no limit to adopt the ways and means of attaining it. It is a continuous comprehensive process which involves different method and techniques, covers cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains of human behavior. The following are the major attributes of learning as a process:

a. It is a permanent change in the behavior of an individual, but not because of change ascribed to illness, fatigue, use of intoxicants or process of growth.
b. Leaning is manifested in the behaviour or activities of an individual which could be not directly observable (Dharmaraj, 2015).
c. Learning also results in some change of persistent contact with nature.
d. Learning depends on practice and experience in a given situation.

Learning theorist and psychologist have classified learning into different types. The following are different types of learning.

i. **Formal Learning:** It is a type of learning taking place in a formal setting school or a control environment. Formal learning states learning objectives is an organized and structured form.
ii. **Informal Learning:** It is natural way of learning in which learning take place through experiences, watching, observing, training etc. This type of learning takes place outside schools and colleges and arises from the learner's involvement in activities that are not undertaken with a learning purpose in mind.
iii. **Non-Formal Learning:** This type of learning is flexible and includes intermediate concepts of formal and informal learning. It takes outside formal learning environments

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but within some kind of organization frame work. It mostly arises from the learners' conscious decision to master a particular skill or knowledge.

iv. **Remote Learning:** This is a type of learning that takes place remotely outside of a classroom setting. It involves a form of learning where the teacher and the learner are separated by distance or time. There is no minimal physical presence involved, as the lessons are conducted and transmitted through online tools and platforms.

v. **Distance Learning:** Distance learning is a form of remote leaning in which schools or colleges are providing online education through virtual classes. Distance learning is typically part of a formal education system.

vi. **Online Learning:** It is also a form of remote learning typically involves an interaction between teachers and students through online classes. Online learning involves both formal and non-formal educational institution.

vii. **E-Learning:** This type of learning is often used interchangeably with online learning, but there are differences between them. E-Learning refers to the interaction that occurs between a teacher and a student in which student learn their lessons through an online medium, even if the teacher is in the same building with them (Zote, 2020). The main difference between them is that online learning solely focuses on learning through online methods, while e-learning can be used in both a physical classroom and an online setting.

Learning Assessment

Assessment can be described as used of various methods and various sources to gather and estimate different types of information about a person, group or event in a comprehensive way. Assessment involve serous of testing, measurement and organization of information collected in a way that facilitates evaluation (Nkwocha, 2015). Encyclopedia of Educational Evaluation (1976), describes assessment as a multi-trait, multi-method and multi-source process of gathering information about the variable of internet. Assessment is said to be multi-trait in nature because it could involve gathering information about the individual on different subjects of the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domain. Assessment is multi-source because information about the learner could be supplied by different people, such as school subject teachers, peer mates, parents and counselors.

Assessment involves information-gathering for judging the work of activities embarked upon by human beings. It makes for accountability of investments in different spheres of life thereby ascertaining when set goals are achieved. Given the importance attached to education and the enormous investment put into it, the sector no doubt utilizes assessment exercises.

Learning assessment is a fundamental feedback mechanism in education, allowing all stakeholders of the learning process to understand what is being learned and where learning resources need to be focused. Assessment of learning according to Liberman et al., (2020) is the process of gathering and evaluating information on what students know, understand, and can do in order to make an informed decision about the next steps in the educational process.

Learning assessment is regularly done within the schools by the teachers themselves using different methods. The usefulness of learning assessment includes; shaping of students learning, provision of immediate and constructive feedback of students, improving teacher effectiveness, monitoring of learning progress, ranking and promotion student to the next level. Generally,

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according to Ugodulunwa (2008) learning assessment perform the purposes of formative, summative, placement and diagnostic evaluations of learners' performance. There are varieties of methods or approaches that can be used to assess students' learning outcomes e.g. quiz, students' observation, homework, peer review, informal presentations, high stake tests, midterm examination, end semester university exams, interest inventories, critical thinking tests etc.

Learning Assessment amidst COVID-19 Crisis

Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, all forms of learning assessment relied on the physical presence of learners in school, and the assessment tests administered by the teacher at every interval of instruction or at the end of term or semester. However, currently learning is happening remotely in which students and teachers are connecting through online platforms and tools. Many states in Nigeria adopting local media channels on radio and television to reach-out to students in remote communities during dedicated hours. Under these unexpected circumstances, teachers and parents have had to quickly adapt to teaching in this new reality to ensure that students engage in learning.

Considering the state of Nigeria's education sector, the following pertinent questions were asked by Hussain (2020) in her article "Education and COVID-19 in Nigeria: Tackling the digital divide".

i. Do schools in Nigeria have the technology to cater for the over 46 million students affected?
ii. Do households have the facilities to engage their children in remove learning?
iii. Do teachers have the resources to deliver live lesson or record a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) style lesson?

There is high probability and risk of leaving many learners behind over time and education in-equalities will grow as a result of the COVID-19 situation.

With the introduction to remote learning which takes place remotely outside the normal classroom setting, there is need for learning assessment. Learning assessment can be administered in synchronous and asynchronous forms. In the synchronous form, the teacher and the students are working together at the same time via online platforms like Zoom, Micro-Soft team, Phone-Based connection etc. In the asynchronous form, students and teachers are separated by both space and time, online tools such as google classrooms, moodle, messaging platforms (such as messenger and WhatsApp) etc. help teachers, to provide feedback to students through question, tasks, activities and quizzes. The following are the importance of online assessment of Learning:

1. To provide feedback of performance of learners promptly
2. Assess the three domains of learning
3. Establish strategies for monitoring of online activities on a regular basis
4. Provide remediation for learning without delay
5. Create online means of obtaining feedback from the learners in order to make adjustments in online teaching and other auxiliary activities.

Learning Assessment Challenges and Priorities during COVID-19 Crisis

The following are learning assessment challenges and their priorities:

1. **Accessibility Challenge:** Accessibility is one of the challenge students are facing in online learning and assessment. Accessibility challenge includes poor and weak internet

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connectivity, using compatible smartphones and laptops etc. A number of learners in the low-income setting or remote area where there is poor internet connectivity are likely to be left out during the assessment process. This may lead to increased stress among the learners, reduce motivation and may have a long-term impact on their academic progression.

To prevent this, compensating assessment policies must take into account and ensure the same level of access and same capability to adapt to new assessment measures among the students.

2. **Resources, Facilities and Training Challenges:** COVID-19 crisis bring about alternative and varied approaches to monitor learner's learning. Many teachers lack relevant resources at home such as smart phones, laptop or computer, web camera, good headset or microphone, screen capture/recorder and editing software and stable internet. They also lack training and experience particularly on digital learning and assessment platform, and thus have been unable to keep up with technology trends. Therefore, many teachers find it difficult to assess students' learning levels to get required feedback.

To prevent this, teacher support must be prioritized. Teachers need to be trained to use new technologies alongside their students. Teacher should be provided with necessary resources and facilities and also given the opportunities to retrain their assessment skills incorporate modern technology. A special emphasis should also place not only in developing the overall assessment competences of teacher but also on the specific competences that would enable the teacher to function in multiple learning environment, including the online learning and assessment of learning.

3. **Quality Control Challenge:** Quality control refers to activities and techniques put in place to verify that the outcomes of the teaching, learning and assessment conform with the set standards of performances. Some of online learning programs lack mechanisms for teacher to assess and provide feedback to the student. E.g. television or radio based distance learning programme are uni-directional interfaces that do not offer opportunities for teachers to assess and correct student's learning pathways. Poor feedback from teachers reduced learners' learning levels and struggle to develop new knowledge. Therefore, there is a high probability and risk of leaving many learners behind over time and the education in-equalities will grow as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

To prevent this, other assessment options such as use of WhatsApp chat groups, direct phone calls, online platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams that will provide feedback of learners' performance promptly should be explored by educationist. Time table for assessment must be developed and made available online for students to know how often tests will be conducted online per term, and when feedback will be given.

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