

# Personal communication as assessment



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“ Good communication is as stimulating as black coffee and just as hard to sleep after”, Anne Morrow Lindbergh. When I read this quote I was so much fascinated by the great effect personal communication in classrooms.

Although, the question is: How can I best use my direct personal communication with my students during teaching to afford a feed back about their achievement? How can I use assessments based on personal communication to tap information and understanding, as well as evaluating critical thinking and application skills? In fact, personal communication as assessment can be fulfilled through many forms such as instructional questions and answers, class discussions, oral exams, student journals, diaries, conferences and interviews, and learning logs.

### **Instructional questions and answers:**

Throughout my explanations of different scientific topics in my classes, I watch the expressions on my student’s faces. Besides, the various questions that the students ask tell me whether they are learning the material or not. But on the other hand, I always pose questions that help me figure out how well are they really learning and, perhaps more significantly, what can I do to improve their learning? Afterwards, data on student learning are analyzed and consequently the results inform me how instruction should most effectively proceed. Therefore, throughout my lesson plan the suggested questions must be designed to serve the diverse objectives of the lesson carefully such as analysis, comparisons, classification, etc. “ The most serious mistakes are not being made as a result of wrong answers. The truly dangerous thing is asking the wrong question”, Peter Drucker. Whereas, I as a teacher need to broaden my listening so that I don’t listen only to correct

answers that I want to hear but also push further to listen to reasoning behind the answer. Moreover, sometimes correct answers mask confusions therefore I have to probe student's answers to pick up misconceptions.

Instructional questions and answers have much strength such as providing me with an ongoing feedback about my students' achievement, probe reasoning and deepen their understanding and serves to give me insights into how my students think. On the other hand, instructional questions and answers have some weakness as it is time consuming and also it needs an experienced teacher as unclear and prolonged questions can hinder students focus on a relatively narrow range of acceptable responses.

### **Conferences and interviews:**

Despite of the fact that our subject area “ science” is not a healthy media that enrich the use of this form of personal communication, sometimes I do ask my students to perform interviews. For example, I asked them to make an interview with the school doctor or any other doctors as an application on the digestive system. I together with my students plan the questions in advance where, I guide them to ask questions that help connect what we have studied to real life applications. For example, I didn't include in the list of questions “ what are the parts of the digestive system or what are the functions of each” on the other hand, I direct them to questions such as “ what is the suggested menu for a diabetic, hepatic or pregnant woman? If we have an athletic person, what do you advice him to do regarding his meals and nutritional habits?”

Of course from the strengths of conferences and interviews in classrooms is that it helps teachers to show friendship, trusts, and interest in students and also helps students to perform additional work and enjoy the class as it motivate both the teacher and the students. The main weakness of conferences and interviews is that it consumes great amount of time that is why I always perform these types of communication assessment during the activity classes. Another drawback in such way of assessment is that the teacher can't help being biased to the interview points that appeals more to her interest.

### **Class discussions:**

As cited in chapter 8 in Stiggins (2008): “ class discussions have the simultaneous effect of promoting both student learning and their ability to use what they know”. Throughout my experience, I discovered that for classroom discussions to be effective, the teacher must act like a maestro that guide and lead an orchestra. In other words, the teacher has first to illuminate the purpose of the discussion, lead the student's speech, identify the roles and prepare them for the discussion with questions, which they have to share in their preparation, and assignments. Second, the teacher has to clarify for the students the criteria or the rubric with which she is going to evaluate the discussion as this will minimize as much as possible the weakness of classroom discussions as a form of personal communication which are the difficulty in grading, avoiding being biased to one way of the conversation and students competing with one another rather than cooperate on learning tasks, as emphasized by Stiggins (2008) “ Be sure the students are aware of your focus in evaluating their contribution. Are you

judging the content of students' contribution or the form of their contribution? " On the other hand from the main strengths of class discussions are: opening a way of testing and exploring new ideas, students acquire information and insight from diverse points of view, they recognize and investigate their assumptions and consequently these conversations provide practice with problems and concepts. " A teacher who is attempting to teach, without inspiring the pupil with a desire to learn, is hammering on a cold iron", Horace Mann (1796)

### **Oral examinations:**

Despite of the precious and valuable academic and social skills that are gained by the students in practicing oral examination, not all find oral exams as easy, as to write. Some find it harder to express themselves. I believe that it is the teacher's role to train the students on this type of personal communication assessment because both the pressures and time factor can cloud the mind with stress, and it is only with practice that the mind will relax and be able to think clearly. I think this can be achieved by starting with easy questions that act as ice breaking and afterwards I as a teacher can smoothly go deeper into the subject. As cited in Stiggins (2008) " Clearly, the major argument against this assessment format is the amount of time it takes to administer oral exams". However, within my classes I overcome this problem by informing my students since the beginning of the school year that I am going to start each lesson by choosing four to five students to be asked oral questions on the previous lesson and the graded mark represent one of the three quizzes that I have to do every month. As the time passes and through the relaxing learning atmosphere the students

acquire the hidden strengths behind oral examinations such as, the practice in structuring answers and organizing the material and the understanding of it.

### **Journals and logs:**

As cited in Stiggins (2008) “ written records accumulate over time, you can use them to help students reflect on their improvement as achievers- the heart of assessment FOR learning”. In spite of the great importance of reflective journals and logs in education, I as a science teacher cannot make use of it as a helping tool in assessment as ca do the English teachers.

Whereas, I do ask my students to reflect in a very different and unique way that are related to our subject area for example, I always ask them to write down their observations, conclusions and their suggestion in various scientific topics that we go through in the lab. Putting hands on activities and reflecting on these experiences, highlights the strengths of this type of communication assessment such as: summarizing ideas, experience and opinions besides, viewing the academic and personal growth by reading past entries. On the other hand I can't see any weak points in writing journals except that I feel jealous of the English teachers because they can make perfect usage of this assessment tool. Throughout my own experience one of the merits of the AUC course is that it gives me the opportunity to go into the habit of writing reflective journals.

## **Ways in which a teacher can maintain quality control when using personal communication as assessment in the classroom**

Using personal communication in combination with other methods can deepen our perception of student learning. By exposing our students to assessments that depend on personal communication, we can set them up for dynamic and successful education. Together with other methods, assessment based on personal communication is a victim to avoidable sources of bias that can misrepresent results if we are not careful.

To circumvent the challenges of personal communication and ensure validity and reliability of the assessment, the questions must be on the spot to cover the decided achievement targets, and choose appropriate measures of evaluating answers which are clear for both the teacher and the students.

There are three problems that represent limiting factors against the usage of personal communication as assessment which are: first the problem of forgetting, second the problem of “ filters” and third the challenge of sampling. As emphasized by Stiggins (2008) in chapter 8 (Personal Communication as Assessment), to defeat the first problem “ the first reason for caution is that we must remain mindful of the fallibility of the human mind as a recording device”. I trust that the only way to overcome this problem is to keep a written record for each student that reflects his achievement in a register form. Regarding the second problem, I was really impressed by Stiggins (2008) as he said “ if we established norms of student performance according to gender, ethnic heritage, cultural backgrounds, physical appearance, linguistic experience, our knowledge of the students prior achievement, or any of a variety of other forms of prejudice – all

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potentially unrelated to actual achievement – we allow bias to creep into assessment, resulting in unreliable scores”. I think that the best way to avoid these bias problems is to set a rubric for every single detail that we are going to assess. As for the last point which is the challenge of sampling, to overcome it and ensure the reliability of personal assessments, we have to set the targets clear and create the warmth atmosphere of the classroom in which we ask clear sufficient number of questions that enhance the students the opportunity to express their thoughts and ideas in a fair way.