

A STUDY OF ACTIVITY BASED ASSIGNMENTS IN THE POST GRADUATE DIPLOMA IN EDUCATION PROGRAMME

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INTRODUCTION

A variety of assessment methods are used at the Open University of Sri Lanka to provide feedback to students and to assess their performance. In Open and Distance Learning, assessment has many dimensions; it can be formal or informal carried out by the learners themselves or by lecturers. In the Faculty of Education the main types of formative assessments that are being carried out are: presentations, home assignments and activity-based assignments (ABAs). Students who follow the Post Graduate Diploma in Education Programme have to complete 08 ABAs during their programme of study. Each assignment covers at least two sessions of the respective module. Students have to complete these assignments at the day schools and also have to engage in group activities and make presentations to complete these assignments. At the same time lecturers evaluate their performance individually and as a group.

“Assessment methods and requirements probably have a greater influence on how and what students learn than any other single factor” (Boud, 1988). Further, many studies stress the educational value of students learning together (e.g. Barnett 1994; Boud, Cohen & Sampson 1999; Jacques 1991; Johnson & Johnson 1999) such as improved analytical abilities, development of higher order cognitive skills, fostering deeper learning as a result of pooling of labour and peer teaching. Some studies refer to more pragmatic reasons such as increased staff workloads, fewer resources available for academics structuring their units, subjects and courses around group projects (James, McInnis & Devlin 2002; Morris & Hayes 1997).

According to Slater (1992) the benefit of assignments for student teachers can be listed as follows. First of all, they force student teachers to think professionally because in order to do assignments, student teachers have to gather data and then think about this data and process it. Also, they have to draw conclusions from the data gathered. This means that they have to work to meet high academic standards. In other words, they have to demonstrate that they are thinking professionally in answering the assignments, which is important for a teacher because thinking professionally and expressing ideas professionally is a crucial feature of an effective educator.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

There were four objectives in this study. They were: to examine both lecturers and students' perceptions of activity based assignments, to examine the problems related to activity based assignments and to make suggestions to develop the activity based assignment (ABAs) process further.

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METHODOLOGY

The survey research design was used and the sample consisted of 120 Sinhala medium students in the 2010/2011 academic year in 3 Open University regional/study centres (Colombo, Kaluthara and Ambalangoda) and 06 lecturers who have evaluated ABAs in those centres. Since this was a minor study a purposive sample was used (40 students from each centre). The students' questionnaire was the main data collection instrument used and focus group discussions with both lecturers (06) and students (24) were also used to triangulate the data. Eight students from each centre were used to conduct 3 focus group discussions and the researcher took notes at the same time. The data analysis was done using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Limitations of this study were: selecting only 3 centres, only 120 Sinhala students enrolled in 2010/11 academic year and 06 lecturers

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Almost all the lecturers stated that ABAs were very interactive. Further, 2 lecturers stated that they also learnt some new facts through students presentations. Moreover, 95% of lecturers mentioned that students seemed to be active learners throughout the activities. Most of them stated that they were able to give immediate feedback to the students.. They noted that some students asked several questions relating to their day to day teaching. For example, at the Educational Management ABA students had asked about the solutions for the problems faced by them at schools in relation to Educational management. Further, they stated that earlier they had to mark a number of assignments and it was very difficult with their busy work schedules and now they can manage the work load. And also, according to them team work, higher order cognitive skills, organizational and presentation skills have been increased due to this type of assignments. Further, all lecturers mentioned that the students attendance for the day schools had increased due to these type of assignments.

When considering students' perceptions of ABAs, the following conclusions can be drawn. Most of students (95%) noted that ABAs were more active and interactive. At the focus group discussions with students this fact could be proved. They mentioned that they were able to interact with both students and the lecturers. One student said that "We are inactive most of the times at the day schools where as in ABAs we are always active". Almost 91% of students agreed that, their active participation has increased due to ABAs. But only 78% students agreed totally that they received immediate feedback from the lecturers. At the focus group discussions most of students mentioned that when they engaged in group activities most of the lecturers facilitated them. But after making the presentations such feedback was not received as they had expected. It seems that lecturers have engaged in putting marks rather than giving feedback. Almost all students stated that all ABAs have covered more than two sessions in the modules and because of that they were able to get more information about those sessions.

All students agreed that ABAs were not time consuming. At the focus group discussions they mentioned that they had to spend a number of days to write a take home assignment. But within one day they were able to complete the ABA. Further, all respondents mentioned that their workload has been reduced due to ABAs if not they would have written 20 assignments. A majority(85%)of the respondents revealed that their team work abilities have improved due to ABAs. At the focus group discussions also they stated that they were able to get peers ideas through group work, because the members of a team represented different types of schools and back grounds. One student mentioned that "I'm teaching in a very rural, type 2 school. Therefore, my experience was very limited. However, due to ABAs I was able to extend my knowledge to other types of schools also, because I met a number of peers in ABAs."

Meanwhile, 80% of students agreed that ABAs were practical. It seems that most of them were satisfied with the activities included in ABAs. At the focus group discussions most of the students told that due to ABAs they were able to apply the theories in practical situations. One student noted that “After preparing a Blue print in Measurement and Evaluation I was able to prepare question papers for my own students properly”. Further she mentioned that she was able to understand it clearly rather than going through the module.

Nearly 85% students agreed that due to ABAs they were able to know peers’ views on different aspects of the subjects. Since there were students from different schools and different subject streams they were able to do so.

A majority of (90%) students have agreed that their motivation to learn has been increased due to ABAs. But 10% responded to ‘cannot say’. It seems that some students were not motivated by ABAs. According to lecturers they might have not participated in ABAs actively.

Almost 95% students had agreed that they were able to get a high grade from ABAs than in written assignments. Focus group discussions also confirmed that idea (91%). Because they were able to get high marks for group activities than for individual written assignments.

Under problems related to ABAs most of the lecturers’ (05) have mentioned that the majority of students have not been prepared well for the ABAs. At the assignment instructions book students were asked to refer some selected study sessions and come prepared with those. But they did not do that. Therefore, expected outcomes of the ABAs may not have been achieved fully. Further, they have stated that some students have not been engaged in group activities. Moreover, a considerable number of lecturers mentioned that some activities and marking schemes provided were not suitable to the task to some extent. According to them in some marking schemes there were no proper marks allocation among the activities. Moreover, according to them in some, there were no places to state the lecturer’s name, centre, grades etc.

A considerable percentage of the students (69%) expressed the view that some students who did not participate actively in their groups got the same marks as the active participants. According to the students about 90% have stated that they were not given proper prior instructions in relation to ABAs. It seems that they were not satisfied with the instructions given in the assignment book. According to them instructions should be detailed.

As suggestions, a majority of lecturers stated that the faculty should give more detailed instructions in the assignment book, rather than just mentioning the sessions that they have to refer to. Further, they suggested that activities and marking schemes should be clearer and marks should be allocated in line with individual and group activities. It seems that they prefer to have more individual activities at the ABAs. Further, they mentioned that marking schemes should be more comprehensive including all aspects.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

On the whole, it could be concluded that according to both lecturers and students’ ABAs is a good mechanism for evaluating students’ performance. But there were some problems. Therefore, the Faculty should take steps to enhance the ABAs. Especially, the activities should be formed to address all students. As far as possible, individual activities also should be included. Further, ABAs marking schemes should be more precise and comprehensive. Instructions for ABAs should be given to students in advance in an organized manner.

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