Assessing with Role Play: An Innovation in Assessment Practice

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ABSTRACT The paper reports on a non-experimental research conducted to explore the feasibility using role play assessment as an alternative assessment technique in Higher Education. The objectives were to report respondents' views of the role play assessment practice; including its strengths and weaknesses, and to establish whether respondents would recommend it for future use. A purposive sample of Bachelor of Education students enrolled for a Special Education module was deemed appropriate respondents for this exploratory study. An observation schedule used to assess performance. A questionnaire comprising of both close- ended and open-ended questions were used to evaluate the role play assessment practice. Quantitative and qualitative data analysis was employed. The paper informs that students view assessing with role play as exciting and thus embrace its use. The paper also informs that a few respondents have expressed a contrary view. The findings are pointers to the notion that students are receptive to innovative assessment practices. The findings suggest that the Higher Education practitioners need to bring their assessment practices to scrutiny.

INTRODUCTION

Lecturers in Higher Education have a responsibility not only to present information to students in lecture theatres, but also to measure if learning has taken place. To achieve these objectives, the lecturer has to go through a planning phase wherein one has to conceptualise the module's purpose and formulate its learning outcomes. The next step is to decide on the content (how and when it will be tested) and finally the assessment criteria against which the learning outcomes will be assessed. Basically, the process of teaching and learning is guided by four basic processes, that is, what the students are expected to be able to do at the end of the module / program, the content we teach, how we teach it and how we measure if learning has taken place or not.

Debates on Learning and Assessment in Higher Education

With the ushering of democracy in South Africa in 1994, Higher Education had to respond to the demands placed on it by globalisation and massification of education (Luckett and Sutherland 2000). This, in essence, meant that the responsibility of Higher Education Institutions had to change the manner in which they conduct their practice of teaching and learning; without excluding the process of assessment.

Mcdonnell and Curtis (2014) posit that assessment in higher education has garnered much attention in recent decades, as the quality of learning and teaching in the sector in general has come under increased scrutiny. Hodgson et al. (2014) argue that many have system in place for mapping where graduate attributes are included in the curriculum. However, assessing graduate attributes is complex and challenging. The government of the day responded to this demand by establishing the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). The NQF is a structure on which all qualifications regardless of their origin can be registered to achieve a number of goals like: equivalence, standardising quality across levels and within bands, and contributing to lifelong learning (Boughey 2009). Closely linked to the establishment of the NQF is the introduction of Outcomes Based Education (OBE). OBE requires that educators stipulate learning outcomes among other things; thus, it is now an obligation for lectures in higher education to specify learning outcomes when they design a module or a short course as a component of a degree program [including a lesson plan] (Hussey and Smith 2008).

Hussey and Smith (2008) point out that learning outcomes consist of a summary of statements roughly specifying small pieces of learning to illustrate what lecturers want their students to acquire from a given teaching event or

session. They are statements of what the learner is expected to know, understand and /or be able to demonstrate after completion of the process of learning (Kennedy et al. 2006). Trembley et al. (2012) accepted that learning outcomes are linked to a meaningful education and that focusing on learning outcomes is essential to inform diagnosis and improve teaching process and student learning. Mokhoba (2005), Hindle (2008) and Van Deventer (2009) state that outcomes of learning strive to enable learners to reach their maximum learning potential. "One of the greatest advantages of the learning outcomes is that they are clear statements of what the learner is expected to achieve and how he or she is expected to demonstrate that achievement." They are sort of a "common currency." that assist modules and programs to be more transparent at both local and international level" (Kennedy et al. 2006: 6).

What is assessment? Saddler (2005 177) defines assessment as "the process of forming judgements about the quality and the extent of student achievement or performance, and therefore, by inference a judgement about the learning that has taken place. Such judgements are usually based on information obtained by requiring students to attempt specified tasks and submit the specified task to the university teacher or tutor [lecturer] for an appraisal of its quality". Deneen and Boud (2014) emphasise that assessment serves multiple purposes, including furthering the learning of students and providing evidences of students achievements Assessment frames learning, creates learning activity and orients all aspects of behaviour (Bryan and Klegg 2006). Gibbs (1999) in his study on 'Using assessment to strategically to change the way students learns'; identified the following six prime functions of an assessment:

- Capturing student's time and attention.
- Generating appropriate students learning activity.
- Providing timely feedback which students pay attention to.
- Helping students to internalize the discipline's standards and notions of quality.
- Generating marks or grades which distinguish between students or which enable pass/ fail decisions to be made.
- Quality assurance: providing evidence for others outside the course (such as external examiners) to enable them to judge the appropriateness of the course.

The functions of assessment as expressed in literature (Gibbs 1999; Saddler 2005; Bryan and Klegg 2006) compel lecturers in higher education to align their assessments according to the functions of assessment depending on what they as assessors intend to achieve by observing student performance. In practice, though, it is not possible to use assessment to cover all the functions expressed in literature, but by employing different assessment strategies it is possible to cover some of these functions of assessment.

Techniques employed in assessment in higher education are diverse. The most common types of assessment used in higher education institutions are the formative and the summative assessments. Formative assessment is used to inform students about how to do better (Knight 2001). The central purpose of formative assessment according to Yorke (2003) is to contribute to student learning through provision of information about performance. From these definitions providing feedback appears to be a crucial component of formative assessment. The term formative which is derived from the verb 'form' is indicative of the fact that this type of assessment is action driven; meaning that the lecturer obliged to create or give to students tasks that will enable him/ her to engage with students about the outcome of their performance. The intention would be to use the outcome of the students' performance to inform students about their strengths and weaknesses. "With formative assessments, we really want to know what people have difficulty with so that we can help them - we want them to disclose what they can't do" (Knight 2001: 8). The researcher further expresses that "Good formative assessment …implies thinking about learning, teaching and assessment, not just about assessment" (Knight 2001: 8). Good formative assessment practices are characterised by good feedback practices. The criteria for evaluating the task must be shared openly with the students at the outset of the assignment and feedback must target only the pre-planned criteria (Meyer and Niven 2007). Summative assessment, on the other hand, chiefly purports to determine the extent to which the student has achieved curricular objectives (Yorke 2003). Summative assessment provides 'feed out', in the shape of a warrant of achievement or competence (such as a degree certificate), and in a form of information that can

be used as performance indicators in appraising the work of teachers, departments, colleges and national systems of education (Knight 2001).

Criterion referenced assessment is another form of assessment that can be distinguished in the field of assessment. "It aims to make explicit both for the lecturer and the students, what is required for different levels of achievement" (Carlson et al. 2000: 103). The purpose of a criterion referenced assessment (CRA) tasks is conveyed to the students by the capabilities that aims to develop (RMIT University 2008). Besides, it must be clear while designing assessment tasks that which are the domains the assessor intends to assess. It must be clear whether one would be assessing the knowledge (cognitive domain), skills (psychomotor domain), values, attitudes (affective domain), or generic capabilities (RMIT University 2008). Sadler (1998) adds that in CRA there must be strategies in place to address what the students understand by those criteria and standards. This, in essence, means there must be a common understanding between the students and lectures in terms of the assessment criteria. Common understanding of assessment criteria can be made possible by providing students with course outlines with clearly stated module outlines, assessment tasks and assessment criteria, which includes providing them with a rubric. The use of rubrics is encouraged in higher education as spelt out by (Institute of People Development 2009) that "rubrics are commonly used as part of an education and training process." The authors make us aware that rubrics can be used for observing processes, evaluating products or assessing knowledge. The authors have identified two main types of rubrics: the analytic and the holistic rubrics. They explain that analytic rubrics are those in which the outcomes can be easily assessed separately. They add that the holistic ones are those in which the criteria to be used may be seen as themes across the outcomes rather than separately. In addition, a rubric that lists grammar, spelling, punctuation and other criteria to assessing writing tend to be analytical. One which lists coherence of argument, organisation of information or persuasiveness would be holistic. As per their notion, students should be involved in developing rubrics for self or peer assessment so that they can build an understanding and ownership of the criteria.

Lecturers in higher education also use norm referenced assessment (NRA) especially when conducting summative assessment. Knight (2001) confirms that norm referencing is comparative, as it tells us that a certain student is better than the, similar to the third and not as good as the fourth. Knight (2001) adds that it is normative in a sense that the grades awarded reflect the students' expectations about the proportion of A's, B's, C's, etc. that is reasonable to award. In this way it can be argued that NRA guard against the inflation of scores , as the distribution of marks for assessment can be adjusted to the predetermined standards, such as a floating average across different cohorts of students (Bohmke 2008).

Whether we use formative or summative, CRT or NRA assessment; assessment calls for an account of concepts such as reliability and validity. Validity describes a condition where an assessment technique, such as pencil-and-paper test, assesses what it claims to assess and thus produce results that can lead to valid inferences usable in decision making (Faculty and Organisational Development: Michigan State University 2013). In fact, a test meant to measure critical thinking skills but actually assesses performance skills, lacks validity. Reliability on the other hand refers to the extent to which the assessment measure we utilise is likely to give us consistent, objective, accurate and repeatable results (Knight 2001). Reliability is a prerequisite for validity. An unreliable indicator cannot produce trustworthy results (Faculty and Organisational Development: Michigan State University 2013). Assessments administered to students have to comply with these principles. Very little attention has been paid to these by some lectures in higher education. Most of the time lecturers concern themselves with the numerical outcome of our assessment but rarely look at whether the instruments measure what we hoped to measure. According to literature, assessment also needs to be fair in that it must not present any barriers to achievement that are not related to evidence. Assessment must also be authentic. Authentic assessment has to do with students demonstrating that they know the body of knowledge, have developed a set of skills and can apply them in a 'real life' situations and can solve real problems. Authentic assessment is performance-based and requires students to exhibit the extent of their learning

through a demonstration of mastery (Authentic Assessment- Deakin University 2013).

All techniques of assessment have a place in higher education. Pressures on higher education are, however, threatening the use of formative assessment (Yorke 2003). Such pressures that are differentially salient across the world include the following:

- An increasing pressure with attainment standards, leading to a greater emphasis on (summative) assessment outcomes.
- Increasing student /staff ratios, leading to a decrease in the attention given to individuals.
- Curricular structures changing to greater unitisation, resulting to more frequent assessment of outcomes and less opportunity for feedback.
- The demands placed on the academic staff in addition to teaching, including the need to be seen as 'research active', the generation of funding, public service, and intra - institutional administration (Yorker 2003).

These pressures also encourage the misuse of summative assessment in Higher Education; particularly the one of increasing student /staff ratios and the one to be seen as "research active". Included among these pressures are the high teaching loads that some lecturers have to undergo. These pressures lead to among other things, lecturers recycling questions and question papers; above all, students studying question papers and memorizing answers. Gibbs (1999) exemplifies how lectures can sacrifice formative assessment by giving case studies of a philosophy module in the Norwegian undergraduate engineering programme. The lectures, who offer the modules, realised that students had already noticed that certain questions featured regularly in past examination question papers and that some lectures do not change their format of setting examination questions. This failure to change the assessment strategy resulted in students memorising some factual details or practicing problems on their problem sheets and their lecture notes; thus as Gibbs (1999) points out that it was easy to pass the module because students focused on predictable questions. The lectures of these two modules changed the assessment tasks. As an instance, in the philosophy module the lecturer changed the exam questions by introducing a compulsory question in a form of a 10 minute video which they would view

and answer questions on. The examiner did not change the content or teaching. As a result of this change in the assessment task, students borrowed videos and sat and discussed what they have seen with other philosophy students. The case study points to a need for higher education lecturers to consider adopting innovative approaches to student assessment in order to change the way students learn.

Gibbs (1999) has documented that using assessment strategically to change the way students learn one must pose the following kinds of questions:

- How is the students' learning behaviour influenced by the current assessment techniques and tasks?
- How well might they gain feedback quickly and cheaply enough?
- Any other questions did you ask yourself?

According to Ramsden (1992) our goals for assessment should be conditioned by our goals for student learning. Ramsden advises that the first thing to remember in selecting assessment techniques for any course is that there will be rarely one technique which satisfies all educational objectives. The author also highlights that for better assessment in higher education one must deploy a variety of assessment techniques.

Students must be stakeholders in decisions that involve how they are assessed and must have an input in assessment. This is so because higher education students have a stake in assessment. The successful engagement with assessment process is a key to achieving a qualification, and many students also value the importance of feedback on their work to support their learning (Leathwood 2005). The criteria for evaluating the task must be shared openly with the students at the outset of the [activity] and feedback must target only the pre-planned criteria (Meyer and Niven 2007). As early as 2004, Gibbs and Simpson (2004) remarked that feedback to individual students in higher education must have declined significantly as class sizes have increased.

Gibbs (1999) further suggests that assessment is the most powerful tool teachers / lecturers have to impact the way students respond to courses and behave as students. Ramsden (1992) revealed that a majority of courses and lecturers in higher education do not operate from the premise that assessment is fundamentally about helping students to learn and teachers to learn

about how best to teach. One way of learning how best to teach, is to employ creative and innovative assessment techniques. Scholars are increasingly highlighting the need for lecturers to re-evaluate and reflect on their assessment practices. Gibbs' (1999, 2010) work drew attention to the fact that it is possible to use assessment to change the nature of student-learning activities and to make students focus their effort and perform. Gibbs' (1999) work also highlighted the need not only for feedback, but timely feedback in order for students to learn.

Drawing upon the assessment debates, the researchers were keen to introduce students to assessment in a manner which engaged them fully in a task, but also impacted on how they would conduct themselves in their professional lives. The researchers were determined to introduce students to assessment that would mirror knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are used in the real life situation, in this case inclusive schools. The researchers were also eager to fast track feedback in an inexpensive manner. In an attempt to fulfil the identified needs and to be innovative in assessment practice, the researchers resorted to using a combination of formative assessment and authentic assessment task in a form of role play. Formative assessment was introduced for the purpose of knowing whether students have difficulty so that the researchers could help them. Authentic assessment was introduced to assess the demonstration of mastery by students. Van Ments (1989) argues that students exposed through role plays to situations likely encountered in their professional lives, are more likely to make the right decisions in similar cases in future. Riera et al. (2010) posit that role-playing prepares students to face real situations by giving them the skills to identify the best way to deal with situation of each individual, family or community depending on the context and culture. It is also noted that through role playing they (student teachers) can marry theory with practice to enact teaching through trial and error with the help of cooperative teachers and peers (Nyaumwe and Mtetwa 2011). Mogra (2012), states that lecturers and universities have been pursuing various ways to ensure that they could meet certain expectations to prepare their students for their workplace and future. Thomas and Jamieson-Ball (2011), reveal the importance of collaborative, student-centred learning and teaching strategies. In addition, the interaction during teaching should cater to the academic and personal development of students. It is, therefore, important for tutors to be alert to teaching methods which students enjoy to increase their engagement so that more effective learning takes place.

Conceptual Framework

Role playing is known by many names: acting, improvisation, dramatic play, pretend play, socio drama (Sajjad 2009). It can be used for teaching literature, history or science or for complex social problem demonstration (Kozma et al. 2000) and as a technique for teaching insight and empathy competence (Blatner 2005). Role play functions as a learning tool for teams and groups or individuals as they "play" online or face to face. It alters power ratios in teaching and learning relationships between students and educators, as students learn through explorations and viewpoints of the character and personality they are articulating in the environment (UNSW-Australia 2013). Barry and Trapp (2014) state that role plays provide good quality learning design, opportunities for situated and authentic learning high quality learning; further, it is referred as situated in a real life context and simulates the learning activities of the students employment area. It has been recognized as a training technique to acquire knowledge, attitudes and skills in a range of disciplines (Blatner 2009). It is a type of simulation that focuses attention on the interaction of people with one another (Van Ments 1989) as they take different roles. Role play creates a student-cantered space which can enable learner-oriented assessment, where the design of the task is created for active student learning. Illieva (2012) posits that role plays happen through communication; without the exchange of information, be it direct or indirect by technology depend on the design of the activity of the task. Students are actively involved in both self and peer assessment and obtain sustainable formative feedback (UNSW-Australia 2013). Jones (1982) recommends that participants must accept the roles and responsibilities of their roles and functions and do best in the situation in which they find themselves (be it difficult and simple situations). Role play as a strategy offers several advantages for teachers and students. Research (Poorman 2002) has shown that experiential learning activities in the

classroom lead understanding of the course content and increased involvement. The result of involvement according to Fogg (2001) is increased learning. Glass (1995) found that role play allowed students to discover insights about themselves and others, and also to express strong opinions. It increase interest instils empathy in students (Steindorf 2001; Poorman 2002; Morris 2003), improves interpersonal skills (Teahen 1975), improves communication skills (Huyack 1975), fosters autonomy, responsibility, solidarity (Bonnet 2000), students make connections between the characters they play and real situations (Morris 2003) and enhances communication. As students are directly active during role playing, it is more effective in embedding concepts (Alden 1999). Overall role play is a beneficial teaching and assessment tool as it develops practical professional skills as well as academic knowledge. Besides its advantages, literature (Nestel and Tierney 2007) highlight that introducing role play to a group always meets with resistance and / or anxiety from some students. They also reveal that interdependence in learning may prove to be a barrier to some students. It is through active involvement and therefore, personal experience that students' practical/ professional skills as well as academic knowledge are developed (Norman 2004).

Role-playing instructions require good presentation and management (Teed 2008). Factors that may facilitate a high success rate in using role play include stipulating objectives, planning the structure and implementation (Monoron and Pollock 2006). During role play the teacher observes; after role play, takes comments from observes and asks other participants to comment. The teacher should summarize, drawing out learning points, leaving participants with positive comments and feelings (Sajjad 2009).

Problem Statement

Assessment is one of the most powerful tool lecturers use to engage students and influence their level of learning. During their studies at tertiary institutions - students are mostly exposed to the same modes of assessment by lecturers; which are tests, assignment, class presentation and the examination. These techniques of assessment generate the same type of learning from students; and the same response and attitude to modules they are registered for, in that most of them assess knowledge mainly.

Relying solely on these assessment techniques deprives students of an opportunity to demonstrate that they know the body of knowledge, have developed skills and can apply them in a 'real' life situation. This, in essence, means that an assessment technique that exposes students to authentic assessment, and thus produce graduates who will perform meaningfully in tasks that replicate real world challenges should be considered. The assessment strategy which can appropriately and adequately cater for this need is role play. Considering that role play assessment engages students and influence their level of learning, the researchers felt that there is need to expose and assess students through this strategy in order to establish how they were going to experience it. The research problem of the present paper is articulated through the following research questions:

1. How do students view role play assessment?
2. What are the strengths of assessing through role play?
3. What are the weaknesses of assessing through role play?
4. Would students recommend this technique to other students?

The Significance

The significance and contribution of this paper will be enormous. Amongst other things it will reveal empirical evidence of the applicability of the authentic assessment by means of role play to students doing a module in Special Education. Such information would be useful in supporting the fact that different techniques of assessing students should be explored. Findings would hopefully influence the way in which students are taught and assessed.

A Case of Our Assessment Practice

In their career as lecturers the researchers have lectured in several modules in different programs. They have been wary of the fact that their responsibility is to lecture, assess and develop students who are not coping with the modules the researchers are responsible for. To delimit the discussion, the researchers will focus on a module Special Education. This is a first semester module offered at second year level, in the Bachelor of Education programme. The

module deals mainly with familiarizing students with different categories of children's special needs they will come across in their profession. It includes equipping students with skills on how to identify these children in a classroom situation; the assessment media they have to use to identify to confirm the existence of a problem; what to do if the problem is within their scope of practice and which specialists to refer to if the problem is out of their scope of practice. The course was taught by using direct and indirect teaching techniques. There are three lecture periods per week. The duration of a lecture period is one hour. The assessment techniques that were used in the module ranged from class presentations, individual assignment, a test and examinations. Assessment that was applied in this module included both formative and authentic strategies.

Implementation Method

Any change in an assessment strategy involves a lot of planning. The idea had to be sold to students for a buy in. The goal of the assessment activity was explained to students and understanding of goal directions was checked. Role expectations and roles were explained to students. In addition, the educator's role was to identify LSEN in class; the learner's role was to display symptoms that typify a specific category of special needs, for example epilepsy ; the classmates' role was to react as typical to what normal learners do when they see something or a behaviour that deviates from normal. Group size was determined according to the expected roles. Students were given an opportunity to choose who they would prefer to work with. They were informed that the work served as formative assessment and that students (observers) would provide feedback only, but, the lecturer will provide feedback and allocate marks. The aspect of including marks was incorporated to make students take their work seriously not for grading purposes. A key concern was whether students were able to perform roles expected in the future careers rather than grading them. After the entire exercise students were required to complete an evaluation form. The activity took place in a lecture hall during six one hour lecture periods.

METHODOLOGY

A purposive sample of 50 Bachelor of Education students enrolled for a Special Education module participated in this exploratory, non-experimental study. The participants were assessed on proficiency at performing tasks required for professional practice in dealing with Learners with Special Educational Needs (LSEN). An observation schedule used to collect primary data; as accurate information on performance and interaction of individuals could not be assessed by questioning, due to the fact that participants could not detach themselves from interaction (engaging in role play). The researchers opted for a non-participant type of observation and drew conclusions from watching and listening to the presented activities. A three - directional rating scale was developed to record observation. The scale had the following categories: competent, neutral and incompetent. They used these three categories to assess how close their performance is to the real practice. The following aspects of interaction were included: identifying learners with special educational needs/ display symptoms that typify a specific category of special needs, for example epilepsy / react as typical to what normal learners do when they watch something or a behaviour that deviates from normal. A questionnaire comprising of both close-ended and open-ended questions was used to evaluate the role play assessment practice. The rationale for including close - ended questions was to ensure that information needed about students' experiences of being assessed by means of role playing would be easily obtained. Possible responses were already classified as "exciting" and "boring" experience in the questionnaire. Another reason for including closed – ended questions was to ensure that information required on whether they would recommend it for future would be readily obtained, as possible responses were already categorised as "yes" and "no" in the instrument. The reason for including open-ended questions was to provide students with an opportunity to express themselves freely regarding the role play assessment experience; including the strengths and weaknesses of assessing with role play.

Before collecting data, participants were informed of the nature of assessment and that it would be for academic purposes. Consent was obtained from the participants, with a full view of their rights to withdraw from the data collection process if they felt uncomfortable or felt that they were being inconvenienced in any way.

Quantitative data was analysed by means of descriptive statistics while qualitative data analyses by employing the thematic approach. Information related to observations was documented in relevant sections.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

How Students View Role Play Assessment

The close-ended questions reveal that most of the students (92%) view being assessed through role play exciting while the remainder (8%) viewed being assessed through this measure as a boring experience. Adams and Mabusela (2013) argue that students' differences in experience on how they view role play might be because of variables like their individual differences, different learning styles, as well as personal issues which might impedes students from participating in a role-play activity. Finding role plays as helpful, mirror the findings of similar study (Nestel and Tierney 2007) in this area. This is also consistent with the findings of the study conducted by Dawood (2013) where almost 71.9% of the students found role-play an interesting mode of learning, and information transfer. The reason for the exciting experience might be attributed to the fact that when students are active role players in a learning situation they forget that they are learning because learning is unstructured and informal. Another reason might be that they forget about inhibitions caused by other techniques as in lecture method, and engage in creating knowledge through playing and reflecting. Research (Fogg 2001; Poorman 2002) has shown that experiential learning activities in the classroom lead to understanding of the course content and increased involvement.

Observation derived from the observation schedule revealed that the majority of participants were confident, and displayed a positive attitude towards the roles they were assessed on. This, in essence, meant that they were rated competent on the three dimensional scale with regard to displaying symptoms that typify a specific category of special needs and identifying learners with special educational needs. One could observe the skill that was displayed by all the participants as they were playing respective roles. Appropriate facial gestures, feelings and utterances were displayed by the majority of respondents. Creativity and cooperation was observed among groups. Being it a group effort, almost all students exerted themselves. The fact that students chose role and group members added to the maximum performance. This made it difficult for the researchers to figure out incompetent respondents in the groups as students who were positive from the onset tended to focus more on the activity and less on their shortcomings. The findings were akin to the statements as expressed in questionnaire and were quite in accordance as the researcher observed that the participants were actively engaged in the role play assessment.

The findings about those who reported a "boring" experience (8%) is insignificant, but is pointer that to the notion that not all teaching methods will suit all students, especially those that are novel to them. The fact that there are respondents who indicated that being assessed with role play was boring does not suggest that these participants were incompetent as they did not display incompetence during the role play assessment. This observation including the evaluation results merely suggests that students have preferences in terms of how they would like to be assessed. It also suggests that people differ in terms of response to being exposed to a novel assessment approach. This suggests that it could be pertinent for lectures to be aware of such students and thus oversee the process of feedback to instil the idea of positivism in the role play activity. At this stage of their learning a positive attitude about different types of assessments should instilled in students.

Strengths of Role Play Assessment

Almost all participants felt that the strength of the role play assessment rested on its ability to facilitate the performance skill through play. The respondents felt that role play gave them opportunity to be creators of knowledge. Most importantly it encourages active participation (Poorman 2002; Steindorf 2001; Van Ments 1989). However, in a research by Montola (2010) it was revealed that many players emphasised the intense emotional experience gained within role play games as the most valuable component of their learning. These findings confirm the researchers' observation so far as participation was concerned. Each respondent worked on his/

her role as an individual, and they also worked as collective to maximise their performance,

Most respondents perceived role play assessment as having resulted in them comprehending what Learners with Special Educational Needs (LSEN) go through, as role play assessment has forced them to feel like them and do like them; thus feelings of others' distress is increased (Poorman 2002). Employing role play assessment teaches empathy and understanding of different perspectives. Dawood (2013) found that the most important issues derived from the analysis of the role-play situation are understanding, self-disclosure and trust, respect and power and interpersonal conflicts. Respondents reported they have learnt a lot through this form of assessment as they now know how to identify learners with leaning problems by enacting the school. They also felt that it has maximised learning to the extent that they are now familiar with what the profession expects of them. These findings also in accord with those of Blank (1985) and Taylor and Drury (1999) which reported that students found the exercise valuable and enjoyable as they could practice the skills they had discussed in a 'safe' real life setting. Some students considered self-discovery as another important merit of role play assessment, as through it they learnt how to communicate freely while others got a chance of identifying their abilities. Glass (1995) found that role playing allowed students to discover insights about themselves and others and to express strong opinions. There are many other benefits of role playing which are related to self discovery.

It was observed that the participants put themselves in the shoes of the roles they were assigned and enacting and they thus understood what they would encounter in the profession. The researchers also observed that participants and the audience enjoyed the role play activity. This observation is in line with what respondents reported. In addition the respondents displayed and sustained interest in the activity. Most importantly it encouraged active participation (Van Ments 1989; Steindorf 2001; Poorman 2002). Linking the assessment exercise closely with students' future professional practice is beneficial, as this encourages them to come to terms with the reality of their profession. Dawood (2013) agree that role-play it enhance students' critical thinking ability, improve commu-

nication skills and prepare students to practice these acquired skills in real school situations.

Weaknesses of Role Play Assessment

A few respondents (8%) found role play assessment to be uncomfortable. The reason for the discomfort may be attributed to a difference in learning styles and discomfort of novelty that is unfamiliar assessment methods. The participants indicated that some of them were scared to be observed by other people. They felt that this methodology disadvantaged them in a sense that it does not accommodate individuals who are not good in fine arts and those who are shy. These findings accord with those other researchers (Mitchell 1998; Kerr et al. 2003) who found that not all students would want to be actively involved and some may, in fact, feel intimidated and unfamiliarity can lead to fear, and anxiety and students may withdraw completely. Attention is also drawn to the fact when one uses this assessment technique , one must be mindful of the fact that attributes like anxiety , shyness and interdependence can or may prove to be a barrier to effective assessment. The difference in experience also draws attention to the fact that as instructors we must be aware of attributes such as individual differences and different learning styles which might impede participating in a role play activity (Adams and Mabusela 2013). In essence it means that more probing might be necessary after the role play activity to follow up on issues which might be personal, or even emotional. Respondents also mentioned the fact that role play assessment is time-consuming as it requires one to devote time practicing roles. Notwithstanding the weaknesses, activities assessed through role play might appear challenging but they are achievable.

CONCLUSION

The case study outlined here was undertaken to explore the feasibility using role play assessment as an alternative assessment technique in Higher Education. Different approaches to assessment practice have been discussed. The researchers have focused in depth on students' responses in highlighting the need to employ alternative and authentic assessment technique. Issues raised by respondents regarding the use

of role play as an assessment technique are a spring board for future use of the role play as an assessment technique. The findings of this exploratory study suggest that role plays may be used an additional technique of assessment, particularly to assess to assess the demonstration of mastery by students. Current findings highlight that on the whole students embrace role play assessment; only a handful expressed discomfort with it. The difference in experience draws attention to instructors about issues of individual differences among students and barriers to learning and assessment. Using innovative assessment techniques in higher education appear to be a challenge, especially in this era of increasing student /staff ratios. It has become apparent in the discussion that assessment should not be only about making judgements, but it should be educational and supportive.

The paper seeks to raise issues for debate rather than providing answers to issues inherently involved in using innovative assessment methods.

RECOMMENDATIONS

An overwhelming majority of respondents (92%) were of the view that they would recommend engagements of role play assessment to other students. Seemingly, it is students who found the use of role play as an assessment technique exciting. Reasons furnished by participants revolved around the following themes: self-discovery, social interaction and understanding of other's distress. Participants felt that they would like their colleagues to experience the feeling of discovering their ability in relation to the profession they are following. They also indicated that would recommend the use of role play as an assessment approach to their peers because they wish to see them being exposed to a stress free technique of assessment. The minority of participants (8%) indicated that they would not recommend this technique of assessment to their colleagues as it exposes weaknesses. It is not surprising to find respondents who would not recommend this technique to peers, as the findings already revealed that there were participants who had indicated that this assessment technique was not appealing to them. These findings alert the researchers towards the fact that not all assessment strategies will accommo-

date all students; there are students who will deviate from others in terms preferences.

Critical Evaluation of the New Assessment Practice

The researchers confidently submit that this form of assessment had a positive effect in student learning in that it made them to be creators of knowledge and active participants in the teaching and learning situation. It also encouraged cooperation among students and resulted to an appropriate learning activity. Assessing through using role play simulator in a lecture hall creates a real school situation where students will come across learners with diverse need. This type of assessment is authentic in that students are expected to perform realistic tasks to demonstrate mastery. Through the activity students were not only able to communicate with the lecturer and other students, but also to monitor their own performance. Using this assessment strategy has enabled the lecturers to have a holistic view of student performance. Besides, being used to master skills by simulation, role play was used as a group assessment strategy to foster team work, negotiation skills, conflict management, planning for a given task whose goal had to be jointly achieved in order to achieve a stipulated incentive - that is marks.

Role play as an assessment tool can be considered valid, because it produced evidence of what the researchers intended to measure. The construct, the researchers intended to measure was performance related to identifying learners with special educational needs (LSEN) in class and to enable students to discover insights about themselves and others. The reliability issue could not be established as the assessment activity was only done once. As a result of this we could not use test – retest reliability, nor parallel forms of reliability. But, looking at the fact that role playing is a simulation; the researchers can argue that its reliability is questionable because of the artificiality of the situation. Subjecting students to role playing does not guarantee that they would perform in the same manner in the real situation. The shortcomings with this practice are that it is complicated in that it involves evaluating performance, so when individuals become aware that they are being observed, they may change their behaviour. There is also a possibility of observer bias, incomplete

observation and recording. The use of observation as tool to assess behaviour might be affected by fallible human judgements. Further, it requires additional resources and extra effort from the lecturer. In addition, it is time-consuming, but worth attempting. These limitations should not deter facilitators from exploring with alternative assessment methods.

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