Post COVID-19 Challenges and Priorities of Learning Assessment

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**Abstract*

Schools around the world have closed due to Corona virus (COVID-19) pandemic leaving students, teachers, and parents to adjust to the new reality. As a result of these unexpected circumstances, teachers and parents have been forced to quickly adapt to the new reality of learning assessment in the current context. Prior to the COVID-19, all forms of learning assessment relied heavily on students' physical presence, whether for administration or to monitor their daily progress. Due to recent school closures, new techniques to fulfilling the essential feedback function of learning evaluation are needed. While all types of student learning assessment are important, formative assessment is especially important right now because learning must take place outside of the physical classroom, and teachers and parents-turned-teachers must know whether students are absorbing content delivered in formats that are different from business as usual. Present paper analyses the challenges and priorities of learning assessment in the current context.

Keywords:Post COVID-19 assessment, formative Assessment, alternative assessment, online assessment.
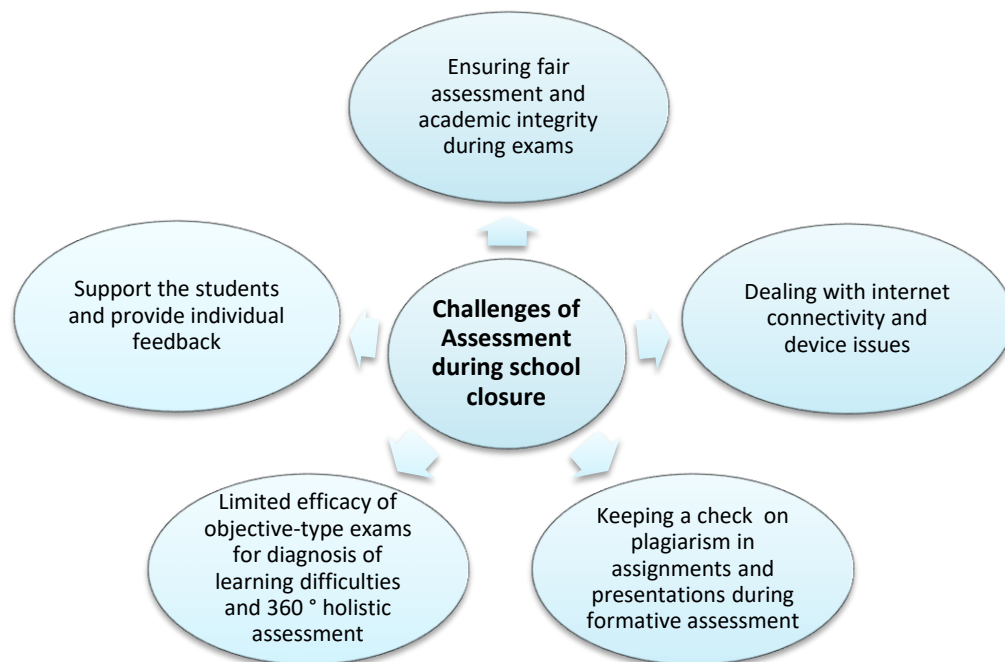
Introduction

Schools around the world have closed due to Corona virus (COVID-19) pandemic leaving students, teachers, and parents to adjust to the new reality. As a result of these unexpected circumstances, teachers and parents have been forced to quickly adapt to the new reality of

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learning assessment in the current context. "Lack of availability of the suitable infrastructure, teachers' and students' inexperience in online teaching-learning, the change in working hours and the inconvenience of working at home are additional challenges of remote teaching" (Zhang et al., 2020). Prior to the COVID-19, all forms of learning assessment relied heavily on students' physical presence, whether for administration or to monitor their daily progress. Due to recent school closures, new techniques to fulfilling the essential feedback function of learning evaluation are needed. While all types of student learning assessments are important, formative assessment is especially important right now because learning must take place outside of the physical classroom, and teachers and parents-turned-teachers must know whether students are absorbing content delivered in formats that are different from normal routine.

Challenges and priorities of learning assessment in the current context

An assessment of student learning involves gathering and evaluating his learning and then making decisions about what the student knows, understands, and can do in order to make an informed decision on where to proceed. In education, assessing learning is a fundamental mechanism for providing feedback to all stakeholders, as it allows them to see what they are learning and what resources to focus on. Assessment may take different forms depending on its purpose. Under normal circumstances, formative assessment is conducted by teachers in the classroom, alongside high-stakes exams and large-scale tests, as part of the teaching process, and it entails observations by teachers, continuous feedback, and homework. Formative assessments are especially important to understand each student's learning needs and to adjust instruction accordingly. Furthermore, teachers frequently use summative exams to gauge the extent to which students met expected learning goals and acquired important knowledge and abilities.

In spite of all the difficulties, assessment is imperative as it serves three major purposes; viz. diagnosing learning difficulties and supporting learning, providing relevant feedback and providing certification for progression, graduation, and employability. "Formative and summative assessments are conducted along with appropriate feedback systems to support learning in higher education. This means employing assessment data in a diagnostic approach to determine competence, gaps, and progress so learners may adapt their learning strategies and teachers their teaching strategies. Assessment for accountability is a function of responsibility. This is mainly achieved through providing evidence that learning is being promoted. As a means of accountability, international and national comparative and benchmark would also be established to get credibility. Assessment can also serve the purpose of offering certificate for learning of the intended outcomes, guaranteeing progress and transfer" (Archer, 2017).

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Assessment being a continuous process serves as a lighthouse to the teacher to determine the efficacy of the teaching methods being employed by him/her. Generally, formative and summative assessment feed into each other to plan and conduct teaching-learning and assessment. Thus, during the transition to online mode, difficulties were observed by the teachers and the students both during formative as well as summative assessment.

Formative and Summative Assessment in Online and Offline Modes

Before pandemic, during face-to-face teaching, formative assessment which is carried out throughout the semester used to consist of sessional tests in descriptive format, submission of handwritten assignments and power-point presentation by the students. Another important component of internal assessment was the percentage of students' attendance. Summative assessment, on the other hand is done at the end of the semester and consisted of descriptive-type exams, practical exams with viva-voce.

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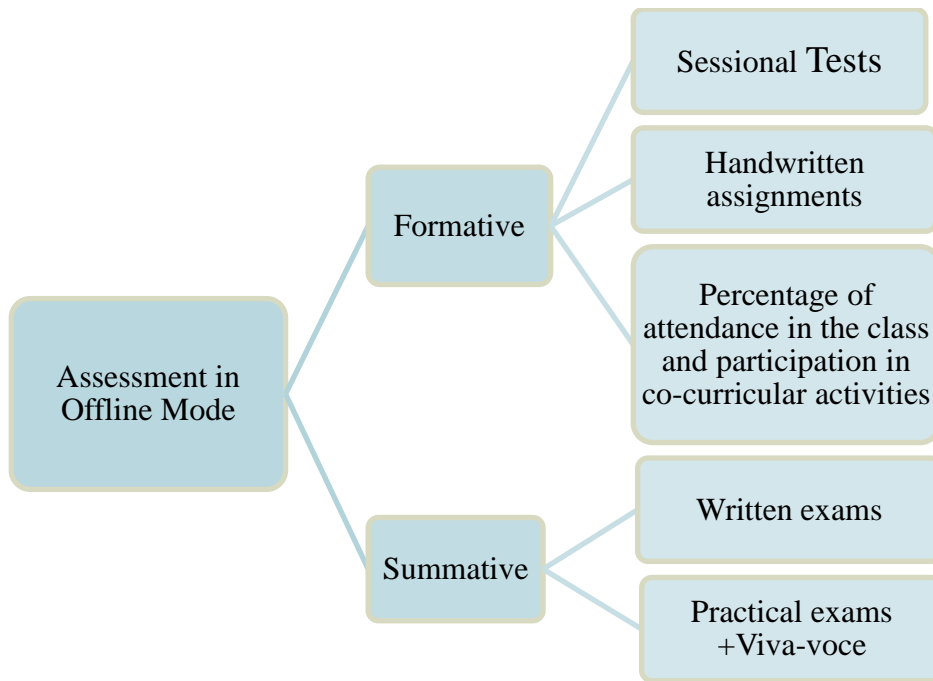
Fig. 2 Assessment in Offline Mode

During the online mode, formative assessment was done by way of submitting scanned copy of descriptive sessional tests on teacher's emails and soft copy of assignments were sent to teachers on e-mail/WhatsApp within given time or submitting on Learning Management System (LMS) such as Google Classroom/Moodle/Canvas etc. Presentations by the students were either uploaded on LMS or were presented live. Attendance part of internal assessment was foregone considering the internet issues and technical hassles.

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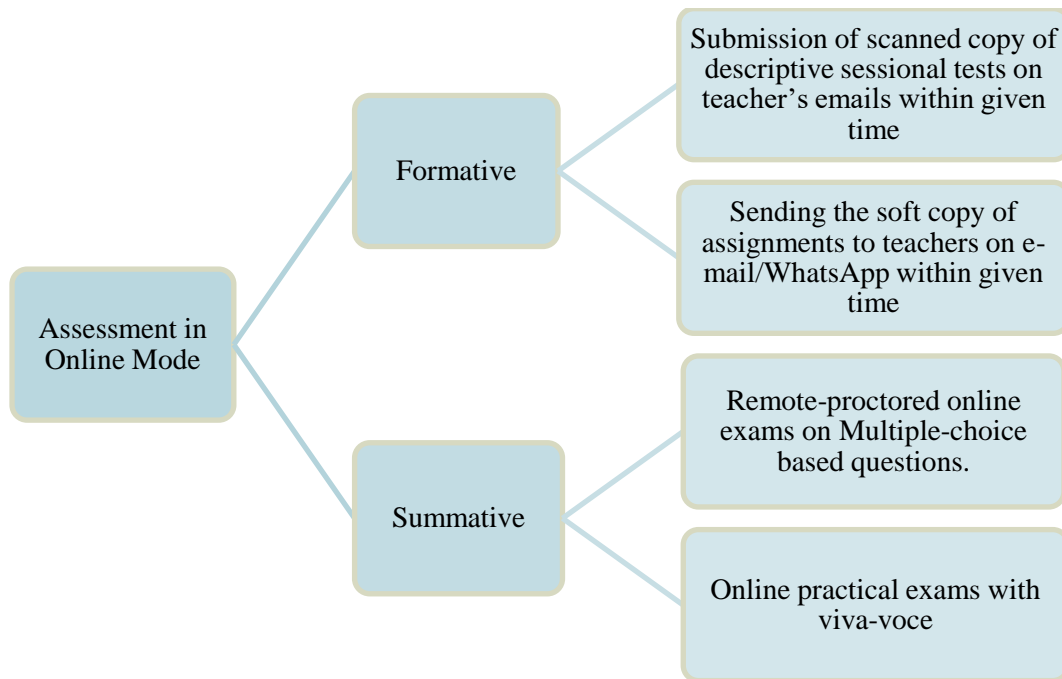
Fig. 3 Assessment in Online Mode

For summative assessment in online mode, remote-proctored online exams were conducted which required the students to have a phone/computer/laptop with a functional camera and microphone and a stable network connection. "This exam is a time bounded and proctored, and commonly used in the classrooms. Proctored exams can also be done remotely by using various learning management systems such as Canvas and Sakai. In addition, Proctortrack software can also be used for remote assessment by using webcams to track student activity during exam time to assist the instructor whenever suspicious actions are taken by the students. But Remote proctored exams are often more stressful for students than in-person proctored exams which would affect the student performance adversely. Remote proctored exam requires well-established infrastructure setup, software, and hardware, both on the instructor and student side. In addition, the application software such as ProctorTrack could create "false positive" flags that mislead the instructor. In remote proctored exam failure of software, hardware, or internet connection could be experienced. Hence, contingency plan should be designed before the exam is started. Due to personal or cultural reasons students may not be willing to stay under the camera supervision. If a student faces technical difficulties on the system during exam time, supporting the student and fixing the problem remotely will not be easy" (Rutgers, 2020).

Importance of formative assessment during school closures

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Formative evaluations can be given in both synchronous and asynchronous formats. Teachers can provide real-time feedback to students in the synchronous mode, where the teacher and the student are working together at the same time (through online platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams, as well as directly via phone). Online solutions like Google Classrooms and Moodle can assist teachers deliver feedback to students through questions, tasks, activities, and quizzes in the asynchronous mode, when students and teachers are separated by both geography and time. Web programmes can be used to record and distribute performance tasks made by students. Parents, particularly of younger pupils, require explicit instructions on how to transmit formative assessment results to teachers. These instructions should be provided in electronic and/or printed form, emailed or addressed to households, or picked up at the school or another specified site.

Formative assessments can be made during school closures, even when resources are limited and connectivity is low. Teachers can provide feedback to students about instructions and assignments sent by email or email. Messaging platforms such as Messenger and WhatsApp can also be used. Companies offer solutions that allow teachers to design, provide, and track multiple-choice and short-answer ratings via SMS. Direct phone calls between teachers, students and parents can also be used under the block.
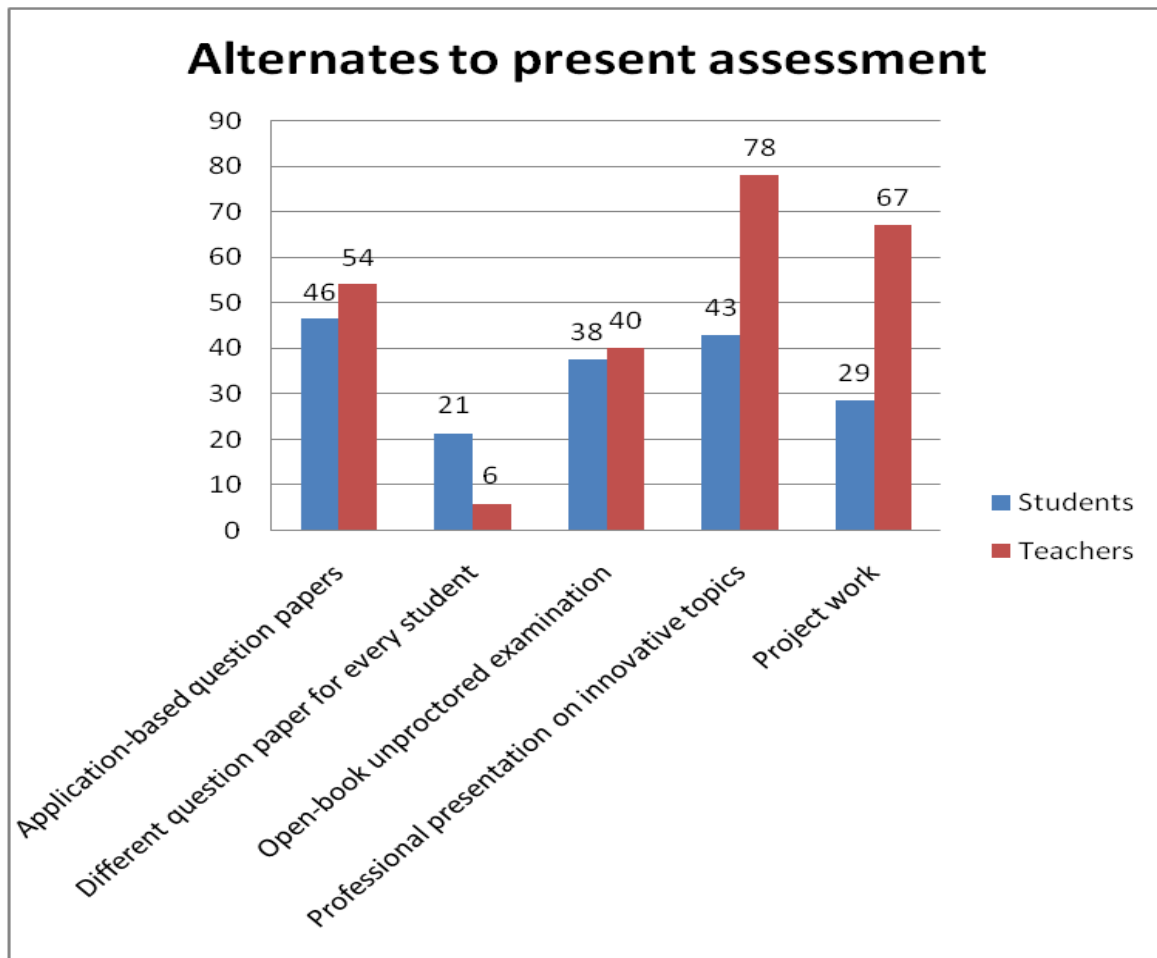
 Regardless of how formative assessments are communicated, they must be valid, timely, constructive and specific to the child's learning needs. The element of validity is linked to the adjustment of knowledge and exam content that students should acquire as part of the learning process. The recent aspects involve using assessments in a timely manner to take immediate action and take corrective action as needed. The constructive element refers to the ability of an assessment to identify misunderstandings, receive guidance for improvement, and provide feedback and information to students to help them understand the purpose of the learning process. Finally, the peculiarity of formative assessment refers to the ability to inform teachers and students as to whether certain learning goals have been achieved and what they need to do if they have not yet been achieved. Teachers and parents should be provided with the resources and tools to perform formative assessments according to these factors, even in resource-poor environments.

 Teachers and parents can use a variety of resources to support formative assessment in the context of COVID 19. In low-resource contexts where connectivity and access to smart devices are not provided, printed matter can be developed to promote early reading skills for young children and support teachers and families.

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Education and learning need to avoid learning losses and maintain a course while reducing learning poverty, even if teachers and learners are currently unable to gather in the same room in many places. Although formative assessment is remote, it helps all students continue their learning path by providing students, parents, and teachers with the information they need to support the learning process.

ALTERNATES TO PRESENT SYSTEM OF ASSESSMENT

At present, the types of questions that are given for the purpose of formative as well as summative assessment, it is possible to find direct answers from books or online resources. Power-point presentations and assignments can be directly downloaded and copied if they are on traditional topics. Thus, some innovative teachers designed such application-based question papers which can neither be searched from Google nor from books as they can be answered correctly only if a student has the right understanding of the topic. Thus, formulating application-based question papers was one of the remedies suggested by around 54% teachers as well as 46% students who participated in this study. Another solution to prevent cheating during exams was to give different question papers to every student which was prescribed by only 6% teachers and 21% students. Though this seems a less popular remedy because of practical difficulties in framing so many question papers yet it is very effective. Some such experiments were done during formative assessment by conducting multiple choice question paper using Google forms and applying the 'shuffle question order' option. The feedback received gave a clear indication that this method was effective in preventing cheating during exam. Open-book unproctored exam was also suggested as a possible remedy by 40% teachers and 38% students during a survey conducted by the researcher among her colleagues (21) and students (56) who were engaged in higher education. "These assessments are conventional and used under the traditional teaching-learning process also. However, when there is no possibility of proctored exam, take-home exam can serve as the main assessment method to cover the learning outcomes. To make sure that the assessment is done by the student, online oral presentation, and question can be included. The challenge of take-home-exam is preparing more conceptual questions that cannot be found directly and easily in any type of sources, such as the internet and textbooks".

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'Professional presentations on innovative topics' enjoyed a huge popularity among both teachers (78%) and students (48%) as a possible alternate that can prevent cheating and better reflect learning outcomes. "These assessments can be done in audiovisual and are good demonstration of the students' understanding especially when presentation is conducted online" (Guangu et al, 2020). The presentation can be done using any web based online conferencing system, such as Google Meet, ZOOM, MS Team, Webex Meet etc. Here the major challenge is to give such topics for presentations on which readymade presentations are not available on internet. Another suggestion to have fair assessment is through project work which was supported by 67% teachers as well as 29% students. Handwritten assignments were also suggested by some teachers and students. Therefore, it can be said that by applying one or more of these strategies, it can be hoped that better assessment of learning can be done.

DISCUSSION

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A research paper by Oyedotun (2020) titled "Sudden change of pedagogy in education driven by COVID-19: Perspectives and evaluation from a developing country" comes forward with similar claims such as "as students are unable to submit assignments when due, lecturers are unable to keep up with their schedules because of either power-cuts or internet problems or inability to use technological tools to get work done in a timely manner, they were compromising with deadlines and even with the standard expected of their delivery because of other constraining factors they are confronted with. Reduced student–teacher engagement" may be the major reason as many students no longer engage in class discussion as they do in the traditional face-to-face class and there is often little or no feedback when questions are asked. As a result of their lesser investment, attention or effort on their participation, they will only accomplish little in their learning".He also adds that teachers in online mode have "limited opportunity for monitoring assessments, which has restricted many lecturers/tutors to the use of multiple-choice questions (MCQ)". Further complicating the situation is the issue of "malpractices as with the online method of testing and the realities of many students' inability to utilise video services during some live class exercises and tests because of the limitation of the technological devices, students could receive assistance and help that the instructor may not be privy to".

One of the remedial measures suggested by this paper are "Alternative assessment as Traditional forms of assessment are getting criticised these days because they leave students with a crammed knowledge for marks and not the skills they need for proficiency. In the light of this current pandemic, alternative forms of assessments should be considered and embraced because of their real benefits and positive outcomes. Assessments can be in the form of virtual presentations, interaction models, oral presentations, creative projects using 3-Dimensional modelling and graphics, skits or plays, blogpost journaling, one-to-one conferencing, and so on. These forms of assessments can be used to measure authenticity and performance and could thus be a kind of a relief measure in this time of rapid pedagogical transformation" (Oyedotun, 2020).

From the above discussion, it can be safely concluded that the problems in the traditional system of assessment were felt worldwide and the concerns for devising some alternate modes of assessment are also expressed by numerous scholars time and again. The present paper confirms these global concerns and talks about possible methods of alternative assessment. Major conclusions are given briefly in the next section.

CONCLUSION

Given the paramount of formative and summative assessment and the fact that creating objective-type question papers creates additional workload for teachers and they have limited efficacy in diagnosis of learning difficulties and 360° holistic assessment, there is a need to .

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devise an alternative system of assessment. This system should be able to deal with the hindrances of online education and assessment and also the lack of commitment of students to academic integrity and check malpractices. Suggested alternatives in the survey included formulating application-based question papers, setting different question papers for every student, Open-book unproctored examination with conceptual questions, seeking professional presentations on innovative topics and project work. Other researches indicate that virtual presentations, interaction models, oral presentations, creative projects using 3-Dimensional modelling and graphics, skits or plays, blogpost journaling, one-to-one conferencing etc may be adopted as alternative assessment. It is hoped that by applying one or more of these strategies, better assessment of learning can be done during online or blended mode.

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