

An Analysis of the Criteria or Guidelines Used by Teachers in Assessing Adult Learners' Achievement of Learning Outcomes (LO's)

Tebogo Mogashoa

*University of South Africa, Department of Curriculum and Instructional Studies
P. O. Box 392, 0003 Unisa, South Africa
Telephone: +2712 429 4775, Mobile: +2782 681 7934, Fax: +2786 636 9241,
E-mail: mogasti@unisa.ac.za*

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ABSTRACT The aim of the present research was to analyse the criteria or guidelines used by teachers in assessing adult learners' achievement of learning outcomes. This study was underpinned by critical discourse analysis theory. Qualitative research assisted the researcher to analyse the criteria or guidelines used by teachers in assessing adult learners' achievement of learning outcomes. Data analysis and interpretation involved the analysis and interpretation of documents related to assessment policies. It has been established in the study that most teachers were guided by the assessment policy and that reporting was done quarterly in all the Adult Learning Centres which participated in the study. Assessment should find out how much knowledge, skills and attitudes adult learners have acquired in learning, and how well they can use the knowledge and skills for better life.

INTRODUCTION

Kramer (2006: 1) viewed that, the introduction of outcomes-based education in South African schools and the advent of Curriculum 2005 marked an exciting transformation of the education system. The new curriculum was modelled according to William Spady's version of outcomes-based education, who defined it as a "comprehensive approach to organising and operating an education system that is focused on and defined by the successful demonstrations of learning outcomes sought from each other" (Spady 1994: 1). There was consensus about transforming education in South Africa by different stakeholders in education in order to change the education system and introduce a new curriculum.

Outcomes-based education emphasises that adult learners should master learning outcomes and be able to work co-operatively. Spady (1994: 19) describes "transformational outcomes" as learning "that require the highest degree of ownership, integration, synthesis, and functional application of prior learning because they (learners) must respond to the complexity of real-life performances." The emphasis in outcomes-based education is involving adult learners in learning activities that would lead them to achieve particular learning outcomes.

The Department of Education took a transformative approach to outcomes-based education with emphasis on critical outcomes. Critical outcomes are broad educational goals or a set of skills, attitudes and knowledge that all adult learners should demonstrate after being exposed to learning and teaching. Curriculum 2005 was also informed by the objectives of the South African Qualifications Authority Act 1995 (Act 58 of 1995) (RSA 1995: 1) which were to create an integrated national framework for learning achievements, to enhance the quality of education and training, to accelerate the redress of the past unfair discrimination, training and employment opportunities and thereby contribute to the full personal development of each adult learner and the social and economic development of the nation at large.

According to Samuels (2009: 1), research is designed to solve a particular existing problem so that there is a much larger audience eager to support research that is likely to be profitable or solve problems of immediate concern. Based on research, management can make intelligent and informed decisions (Moorty 2010: 1). Assessment policy can have a negative impact on teaching and learning if not appropriately implemented.

Theoretical Frameworks

Terre Blanch (2007: 20) investigated that, the refining a research problem involves identifying

a theoretical framework upon which to base the research. Theories that influence the research problem as well as the research methods that are used should be stated. The present study was underpinned by a critical discourse analysis theory in which the researcher expressed his comments or judgements based on written or spoken communications, discussions or conversations with teachers. It involved an analysis of the merits and demerits of the implementation of assessment policies in South African Adult Learning Centres. Thus, critical discourse analysis was considered an appropriate framework to engage and converse about the research problem and questions of this study.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Sridhar (2006: 3) defines the research design as a conceptual structure, a blueprint, an outline of what the researcher will do in terms of selection of a problem, formulation of the selected problem, formulation of hypothesis, conceptualisation and research design. Tompkins (2008: 4) further states that researchers can design a study to characterise a single instance of a phenomenon or take an inference about a phenomenon in a population via a sample. The research methodology of this study was qualitative and inductively based. Qualitative research was chosen to assist the researcher analyse the criteria or guidelines that teachers use to assess adult learners' achievement of learning outcomes. The advantage of this approach is that it provides rich descriptive data as observed by the researcher during the interactions with participants. It served as the principal method of analysis.

Data Collection

Voce (2005: 6) explored that, the primary methods of data collection in qualitative research are observation, interview and focus group discussion. Data collection is simply how information is gathered. In-depth formal interviewing was used as the main data collection method. Data were also collected through observing and describing the experiences of the participants. The literature review informed the researcher about the topic. The researcher interacted with the participants to get the most reliable information. To avoid manipulation, the researcher gave the participants equal opportunities to participate

in the analysis. The researcher used focus group interviews and individual interviews to collect data. Follow-up sessions were appropriate in the form of structured and unstructured interviews.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Michelle (2007: 103) pointed out that, the qualitative data analysis consists of identifying, coding and categorising patterns found in the data. Bradley (2007: 619) declared that once the data have been reviewed and there is a general understanding of the scope and contexts of the key experiences under study, coding provides the analyst with a formal system to organise data, uncovering and documenting additional links within and between concepts and experiences described in the data. Discourse analysis usually uses tapes so they can be played and replayed for several people discussing, not individual person specifically. Data analysis and interpretation involved the analysis and interpretation of documents related to assessment policies. Data were analysed by selecting, comparing, synthesising and interpreting information to provide explanation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

“An Important Aspect of Outcomes-Based Education is Assessment. Describe The Assessment Procedures You are Employing”

In responding to the question above, 20 teachers gave contradicting statements. A few of the verbatim responses affirming this observation are indicated below:

Teacher C, *“As assessment is ongoing, for instance, comprehension, you assess two things, reading and comprehending. You ask questions and they respond”*.

Teacher N, *“We get all the guidelines from our facilitators. We know exactly what needs to be done”*.

Teacher B, *“I assess my adult learners at least every second week by means of tests and letters to write”*.

Teacher M, *“We assess against learning outcomes”*.

Teacher E, *“I can't elaborate much on that”*.

To help determine how adult learners are assessed, a follow-up question to further probe this issue was asked.

“How do the Adult Learners Know About What are You Assessing?”

Twenty (20) teachers indicated that adult learners are informed of what is expected from them. This common response was followed by another question to determine how often teachers assess adult learners.

“How Often do You Assess Your Adult Learners?”

Two (2) teachers mentioned that they assess adult learners weekly, twelve (12) said monthly, while six (6) teachers indicated that they assess their adult learners quarterly. A few of the verbatim responses are indicated below:

Teacher G, “*We asses them every week*”.

Teacher T, “*We asses them quarterly*”.

Teacher B, “*We asses them monthly*”.

In an attempt to ascertain teachers’ knowledge of different forms of assessment the following question was asked.

“How are the Various Forms of Assessment Incorporated into the Planning of Learning Activities?”

All teachers who were interviewed struggled to respond to the above question; they all demonstrated uncertainty in this regard. A few of the verbatim responses are indicated below:

Teacher E, “*I don’t know how to do that*”.

Teacher L, “*I plan the activities according to what I taught the adult learners. It is difficult to explain how to incorporate assessment in my planning*”.

Teacher R, “*I really don’t know how to incorporate assessment in my planning. We were not told how to do that*”.

The next question sought to establish how teachers accommodate for different learning styles as one of the principles of outcomes-based assessment.

“How do You Accommodate Different Learning Styles?”

Twenty (20) teachers who were interviewed indicated that there are guidelines but they struggled to implement them. A few of the verbatim responses are indicated below:

Teacher B, “*There are guidelines that we must follow but it is not easy as that was not clearly explained to us*”.

Teacher J, “*The guidelines are available but the serious challenge is how to do that in class*”.

Teacher S, “*It is difficult to explain how to do that*”.

CONCLUSION

The study indicated that teachers could not interpret assessment guidelines appropriately. Most teachers could hardly mention the various methods of assessment. Further, most teachers were not recording adult learners’ achievement against learning outcomes and assessment standards. However, the study found that most teachers were guided by the assessment policy and that reporting was done quarterly in all the Adult Learning Centres which participated in the study.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The researcher recommended that the Department of Education should conduct workshops on assessment for teachers. It is further recommended that assessment be done informally during small group discussions and quarterly to compile year marks. People with expertise on assessment should be invited to workshops to share ideas with the teachers. Facilitators should do continuous follow up and support after such workshops. Teachers can only implement assessment appropriately and willingly if they can develop a sense of ownership of this kind of approach. This can be done by inviting motivational speakers during workshops.

Before planning one’s assessment strategies, one needs to set specific outcomes for one’s subject/learning area. For the purpose of integrating teaching-learning and assessment successfully, teachers should develop assessment plans during lessons. Assessment should find out how much knowledge, skills and attitudes adult learners have acquired in learning, and how well they can use the knowledge and skills for better life. Teachers should design and use various evaluative procedures to assess adult learners’ achievement of learning outcomes. Assessment should not encourage reproduction of content but should look at production of new knowledge. Assessment can be done through regular

class exercises or assignments in the adult learners' own time and submitted for control and comments.

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