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The Practice of Continuous Assessment in Teacher Training Colleges in Ghana

Emmanuel K. Bartels
Institute of Education, University of Cape Coast

Abstract

The study examined whether the Continuous Assessment (CA) programme was being practised the way it was intended in the teacher training colleges in Ghana. A descriptive survey design was used with semi-structured questionnaires and classroom observations as the modes of data collection. Three colleges were randomly selected from among the 7 teacher training colleges in the Western and Central Regions of Ghana. Eighty tutors in the selected colleges and a stratified random sample of 450 students aged between 20 and 25 years were used. The study showed that CA is not being properly practised in the teacher training colleges. The result of this was that CA marks were generated any how and were, therefore, unreliable. The participants doubted that the CA scores were being used by the examining body as a component of students' final grade. It is recommended that among others, in-service training on CA and item construction should be organized for all tutors of the colleges, and the system of external moderation should be introduced.

One of the challenges of Ghana's educational system since the 1980s has been the introduction of the educational reforms by the government of the erstwhile Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) in 1987, which introduced Continuous Assessment as a component of students' final assessment at all levels of education. Continuous assessment has been hailed to de-emphasize the hitherto terminal assessment because of various advantages that it is said to have over terminal assessment. These advantages include: (a) obtaining comprehensive and more valid information on the student; (b) the identification of the weaknesses and strengths of students at an early stage of a programme and their subsequent remediation; (c) assessing the entire personality of the student; (d) providing adequate data for the guidance of students, and (e) the minimization of students' fears and anxieties

about failure because they no longer put all their eggs in one basket, among others. (Akplu, 1989; Etsey 1992 & Ipaye, 1982).

Despite its advantages CA is not without problems. For example, there are suspicions about the validity of teacher assessment. Other issues which also arise whenever CA is mentioned are whether it should: (a) replace the entire terminal assessment (b) operate in parallel with, but separate from, terminal assessment or (c) form a component of students' final grade together with terminal assessments.

Ghana, like many other developing countries in Africa, introduced the CA scheme in 1987, based upon a recommendation made by a team of educational experts from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, which conducted an evaluation study of the educational systems in some fourteen African states, including Ghana. The experts recommended a de-emphasis on external examinations and certification at particular points in the educational system (Kellaghan & Greaney, 1992). This recommendation for improving the deteriorating quality of assessment, especially at the pre-university level, was persuasive to the Ghana government. The government, therefore, introduced the national education reform programme at all levels of school education, with the continuous assessment scheme forming part of the reform package (Ministry of Education & Culture, 1987). It was hoped that this would reduce the burden formerly imposed by external examinations on the learner. A circular issued by the then Secretary for Education read: "Assessment ... shall be by continuous assessment; 40% of the overall marks shall be based on internal marks while the remaining 60% shall be by external examinations" (Ministry of Education & Culture 1987, p. 28). Internal marks were to be generated through assignments, tests (whether oral, written or practical work) and any other method of measuring learning outcomes in school.

Tamakloe (1997) reports that, earlier on in 1986, the Special Sub-Committee on Assessment of Trainees of Teacher Training Colleges had suggested that the assessment of teacher-trainees should be a combination of CA (40%) and the final external examinations (60%) conducted by the Institute of Education (IOE) of the University of Cape Coast (UCC). In a way, the proportions adopted for combining CA scores with external examinations scores could suggest, to an extent, the degree of public

acceptance of teacher assessment. It was hoped that as teacher-assessment becomes more acceptable to the stakeholders (public), CA may be weighted against external examinations until teacher-assessment probably takes complete control of assessing and certifying students. Fifteen years after the introduction of CA in our educational system, the "hope" that the burden imposed by external examinations on students would be reduced seems to have been dashed as public confidence in teacher-assessment continues to decrease.

In fact, based on a study by the West African Examinations Council (WAEC), the Ministry of Education in 1994 reviewed the proportions for internal and external examinations for the first and second cycle institutions to 30% and 70% respectively. For the teacher training colleges, the Awards Committee, in three consecutive years: 1995, 1996 and 1997 asserted that scores obtained at the IOE's external examinations did not have any positive linear relationship with CA scores sent to the IOE from the colleges. Without any supporting study on the issue, the Professional Board of IOE accepted for implementation, with effect from 1998, the Award Committee's recommendation that:

In view of the generally high unreliability of CA scores sent in by the colleges, the weighting of CA should be reduced from 40% to 30%. The weighting for the external examinations on the other hand, should be increased to 70%. It was also recommended that for a candidate to be deemed passed, he/she must obtain a minimum of 40% in the external examination; that is, 28 out of 70 (Institute of Education, 1997, p. 2).

Mukhtar (1998), however, found out that in some selected teacher training colleges, CA scores in Basic Science and Basic Mathematics did not have any positive linear relationship with scores obtained on the IOE external examinations, and that the male students 'suffered' more than the females. In a particular instance, Mukhtar asserted that a male student who scored 15 out of 30 in CA in Basic Science obtained 62 out of 70 in the external examinations, whereas a female student who scored 25 out of 30 in the CA obtained 18 out of 70 in the external examinations. Something could have gone wrong anyway, but the study was certainly not conclusive enough.

Mukhtar merely tried to find out if there was any positive linear relationship between CA scores sent to the IOE and the external scores obtained by the students in only two out of the eighteen subjects offered at

the teacher training colleges at that time, without looking at how the scores were generated. Since then, the IOE continues to receive complaints from some of the trainees on how some tutors use the CA either to favour or victimise trainees, yet no study has so far been found to have been done on how CA is practised at the teacher training colleges in Ghana.

Since tutors and students of teacher training colleges are major players in the CA system, it is necessary to find out how CA is practised in the colleges and, in fact, any other problems that hinder the practice of CA in the colleges. Understanding the problems in the CA system in the colleges would enable appropriate measures to be taken to improve on the system. This study aimed at addressing issues using the following research questions: (a) Is the CA programme serving its intended purposes in the teacher training colleges? (b) How are CA scores generated in the colleges? (c) What are tutors and students' perceptions of what the IOE uses the CA scores for? (d) What are some of the operational problems of CA in the colleges?

Method

Participants

The target population in the study was the entire academic staff (1,835) and students (18,480) of all the 3-Year Post-Secondary Teacher Training Colleges in Ghana during the 2001/2002 academic year. It was decided, however, that first year students and academic staff who had joined the colleges during the 2000/2001 year be excluded from the study since they were relatively new in the colleges and might not be able to give the needed information. With the background information on the eligible population units, samples were selected from accessible population of students and staff of three of the colleges located in the Western and Central Regions of Ghana. The selected colleges for the study are referred to by letter codes, A, B, C in Table 1.

For the students, consideration for the gender and year groups called for stratification and so a stratified random sample of 450 representing 25% of the second and third year students of the three colleges was used. Proportional stratified random sampling was used so as to maintain the proportion of the composition of the accessible

population. The stratification enabled various analyses to be made separately for each of the colleges and also gender groups.

All the tutors of the three colleges who had joined the staff before the 2000/2001 academic year were used in the study because the size for the colleges was quite small. Table 2 shows the composition of the study sample.

Table 1
Composition of accessible population

	Students					Tutors		
	2 nd Year		3 rd Year		Total	M	F	Total
College	M	F	M	F				
A	270	100	210	120	700	15	10	25
B	0	280	0	250	530	5	25	30
C	200	100	170	100	570	20	5	25
Total	470	480	380	470	1800	40	40	80

Table 2
Composition of study sample

	Students					Tutors		
	2 nd Year		3 rd Year		Total	M	F	Total
College	M	F	M	F				
A	68	25	52	30	175	15	10	25
B	0	70	0	63	133	5	25	30
C	50	25	42	25	142	20	5	25
Total	118	120	94	118	450	40	40	80

Design

The study was essentially, a descriptive survey in which two semi-structured questionnaires were used to gather information on the practice of CA in the Teacher Training Colleges in Ghana. Judging from the main thrust of the study, this design was the most appropriate.

Apart from the questionnaires, observation of day-to-day classroom activities was used as one of the techniques for the data collection. Tutors' notebooks and students' exercise books were also inspected to reconcile some of the responses given on the questionnaires.

Questionnaires of (mainly) the Likert type in which respondents were requested to say whether they strongly agree (SA), agree (A), undecided (UD), disagree (DA) or strongly disagreed (SDA) scale were developed and used in the collection of data for the study by the researcher. Portions of the questionnaires contained open-ended items on issues, which required respondents to elaborate on. The instrument was first constructed with 45 items and pretested to improve its validity and reliability using 30 students and 10 tutors of a teacher training college in the Ashanti Region, Ghana. The responses were scored and the internal consistency reliability coefficient of each item was computed. Items with coefficient above 0.85 were selected for inclusion in the final questionnaire. The reliability coefficient of the final instrument was computed to be 0.92.

The final questionnaire was made up of 30 items. This was in two parts. Section one contained information on the demographic data of the subjects. These included items on the name of colleges, class of student, gender and for tutors, number of years taught in the college and subject taught. Section two of the questionnaire was made up of 25 items of the Likert type scale and some open-ended ones. Examples are: (a) Student-teacher relationship influences CA mark allocation (b) CA marks are used by the IOE to arrive at students' final grade (c) Write down any 3 major problems of CA in your college.

Procedure

The questionnaires were personally administered by six research assistants to the 450 students and 80 tutors after obtaining permission from the principals of the colleges. Two research assistants were assigned to each college and the questionnaires were administered at the colleges simultaneously, a day before the start of the monitoring of the 'Out Segment' of the IN-IN-OUT programme of the teacher training colleges. In fact, the period was chosen because the researcher wanted to do some observations at the colleges under the guise of supervising the monitoring of the 'Out Segment'. At each college, the students and tutors in the

study sample gathered at the Assembly Hall for the exercise, after which the questionnaires were immediately collected. All the questionnaires were completed and returned. Thus, the return rate was 100%.

After the administration of the questionnaires, the researcher under the guise of supervising the monitoring of the 'Out Segment' of the IN-IN-OUT programme, visited each of the three colleges in turn, spending one week at each college to observe the day-to-day classroom situations. Tutors' notebooks and students' exercise books were also inspected, and notes were taken and converted into a more organised form afterwards for analyses.

Data collected were analysed using proportions (percentages). For each item the proportion of subjects who responded in one direction was converted to a percentage. Thus, on the Likert scale SA and A were taken as one direction (i.e. agree) while UN, DA and SDA were also taken to be another direction (i.e. disagree). The analyses of the open-ended items consisted of grouping similar responses and computing the proportions (percentage) of subjects who gave those responses.

Results

Research Question 1

The study sought to find out whether the CA programme was serving its intended purposes in the teacher training colleges. A Majority of the tutors (85%) felt that the CA programme was not serving its intended purposes. From the observations, the evidence was that, on the average, tutors gave a maximum of two assignments per subject per term of twelve weeks. Precisely, the average number of assignments given per term in the colleges studied were 2, 2 and 3 for colleges A, B and C, respectively. In cases where some exercises had been done, they were hardly marked. In college A, for example, none of the exercises given in the five subjects, which were inspected, had been marked. In college B three exercises had been marked out of ten given in five subjects; and in college C three exercises had been given in the five subjects which were inspected but none had been marked.

There were teachers who were reluctant to change from the use of previous methods of assessment. In most of the classroom observations, the method used in teaching was the didactic model followed by an assignment, which was to be submitted to the tutor in two to four weeks' time. They felt that they could not assess on an 'ad hoc' assessment

arrangement, hence they preferred the summative assessment taking the form of giving assignments at the end of the lesson, instead of the assessment being part of the teaching-learning process.

Planning based on diagnostic assessment was rarely evident in the sampled colleges throughout the study. Most teachers (88%) were more concerned with the external examination given by the Institute of Education (IOE) and were more interested in solving past IOE examination questions than 'wasting' their time on what they termed "non-sylla" (i.e. areas of syllabus which were unlikely to be examined by the IOE).

From the students' end it was evident that not more than 2% knew the purpose of CA. To the majority of them (college A, 88%; college B, 85%; college C, 64%), CA was "a sheer waste of precious time", and the most important thing was to learn to pass the IOE's examinations. Some of the students only attended classes when they felt that the topic to be treated could attract the IOE's attention. From these observations, it was clear that both tutors and students of the study sample did not know the purpose of CA, and were still "putting all their eggs in one basket". That is, they still relied on only the terminal assessment conducted by the IOE to go through the teacher training programme. Getting marks down for CA was just to satisfy the IOE.

Research Question 2

The study examined teachers' procedures for generating the CA marks, which were submitted to the IOE. It examined, particularly, the procedures or arrangements that had been put in place to ensure that marks obtained within the colleges were uniform, consistent and fair; and also that these marks obtained across departments were relatively comparable to other subject areas in the same college and also across the other colleges in the sample.

The observation was that none of the colleges followed any specific procedures or guidelines in assessing their subject areas and that in all colleges the frequency and type of questions for assessment were left entirely at the discretion of the subject teachers. Most of the teachers (95%, 92% and 45% for colleges A, B and C respectively) gave not more than two assignments in a term of 12 weeks, and managed to mark one when school was in session, and the other one during the vacation period.

Mock examinations given at the end of the second term were about the only 'serious' assessment done in the colleges. However, in all the colleges studied, all the test items were past questions of the IOE examinations, just to ensure that the marks that would be finally generated were relatively high and acceptable to the college administration. One tutor revealed: "If your marks are low, the administration will not be happy with you; this can even cause your release from the college".

Some students (60%, 30% and 52% for colleges A, B and C respectively) felt the tutors had total control over CA scores they submitted to the college administration and so they could do anything at all they liked with the scores. According to them, a tutor could decide to use the scores from assignments or the mock examinations, or a combination of these two tests as the CA score.

It was frequently (90%, 40% and 85% for colleges A, B and C respectively) alleged that "some of the female students were selling their bodies for marks, while some male students were also being used on tutors' farms for marks". One student reported thus:

Favouritism and victimization are the order of the day;
either you danced to the master's voice or you are
condemned. We don't want continuous assessment.

Research Question 3

On the question of tutors' and students' perception of what IOE uses the CA scores for, it was evident that both tutors and students felt that the IOE just collected the CA scores and dumped them somewhere. They doubted that the IOE uses the CA scores as a component of students' final grade, and so they did not see the need to "waste their time on CA". One tutor responded thus:

After all, the Institute passes students who have failed in the continuous assessment; so how do you convince anybody that they make use of continuous assessment marks we submit to them?

To the tutors (82%, 40% and 85% for colleges A, B and C respectively), they only submitted CA scores just to satisfy the IOE requirement and not that they believed that students would benefit from them. A majority of them (83%) challenged the IOE to produce results sheets which showed columns for CA scores, IOE examinations and then the total score to convince them that the Institute of Education really made use of the CA scores. Majority of students (78%, 60% and 82% for colleges A, B and C respectively) were not bothered at all with the CA scores. According to them, some students who were awarded high CA marks failed the final examinations while those with low CA marks passed the final examinations.

Research Question 4

The study also investigated possible problems that confront the operation of CA in the colleges. Tutors and students alike felt that the CA was too stressful to operate. The workload for both tutors and students had increased and there was virtually no time for other activities (social, religious) which were equally important. Tutors, for example, complained that with large class size (an average of 5 streams of 40 per class), marking of exercises was very burdensome and that one could spend his whole time on marking at the expense of church activities, responsibility to the family, and other social activities. Students (70%, 92% and 90% from colleges A, B, C respectively) also made similar complaints about their inability to involve themselves in social activities, sports and the like due to the increased workload.

Continuous assessment involves a lot of logistics, yet students were unwilling to part with their money. They were not prepared to spend any portion of the 'allowances' paid them to purchase the needed teaching and learning materials. Some of the students (20%, 5% and 30% from colleges A, B and C respectively) claimed that they themselves were parents whose families depended on the 'allowance' they received for survival.

Discussion

The aforementioned findings show that the practice of CA in the teacher training colleges which were studied is nothing to write home about. All the sub-samples (i.e., Colleges) within the sample have problems with the practice of CA.

The evidence that assessment was not frequently done is at variance with the underlining philosophy of CA which requires that to obtain comprehensive and valid information on students, an observed score (x) be repeatedly measured to enable positive and negative errors of measurement to average out for the resulting aggregate score to be equal to the true score.

Again, since even the few exercises, which were given, were hardly marked, it was not possible to identify the weaknesses and strengths of students and tutors for subsequent remediation as required in a CA system.

That both tutors and students treated CA with disdain leaves much to be desired. The argument that some students with low CA marks rather than those with high CA marks passed the final examinations implying that the IOE did not use the CA marks, may not hold water. For, it is possible that those who scored high in CA might have relaxed in the final examination and therefore failed; and those who scored low in CA saw the final examination as their last chance to redeem themselves and so were motivated to learn more seriously to make up for the loss.

These revelations could be interpreted to mean that marks that were usually submitted to the IOE in CA did not represent the true achievement of the students. There was abundant evidence to support the present finding, particularly in most African countries, that examinations, to which high stakes are attached, exert considerable influence on what goes on in the schools/colleges. Indeed, similar observations were made in a government report in Lesotho, which pointed out, that many problems with curriculum and instruction stemmed from:

- ... the inordinate emphasis given to the preparation for terminal examinations, which undermines the attainment of certain objectives that are critical to the country's economic development.
- ... The Junior Certificate (JC) exam heavily emphasizes the accumulation of factual knowledge and neglects general reasoning

skills and problem - solving activities (Kellaghan & Greaney, 1992, p. 15).

As to why tutors did not construct their own test items but preferred to use the IOE's past questions for their mock examinations and even for assignments, the general impression was that the students preferred the IOE items to teacher-made ones. According to the tutors, the students felt that the IOE items could be repeated in the IOE examinations. From the analyses, the CA scores so generated cannot be relied upon and so ways must be found to make them valid and reliable if the IOE wants to use them in the assessment of the students.

Another problem identified by the students was the large number of subjects they offered: ten subjects at each level. Instead of assessment being part of the teaching and learning process, tutors preferred to give assignments which could take at least one week to be completed. For a 12-week term, therefore, if a student has to do two assignments in each of the ten subjects he/she will be presenting about two assignments per week. Meanwhile, a lot of teaching-hours is lost during the first term of every year because: (a) re-opening for new students is usually in the middle of the term (October) (b) the IOE releases results of continuing students very late and prospective second and third year students have to wait to know their fate before they begin classes and (c) there is movement of tutors in and out of the colleges – new recruitments, transfers and releases for further studies.

It would appear that most of the operational problems revolved around three major issues. First, the increased workload of both tutors and students which rendered assessment ineffective, hence the serious limitations of reliability in the assessment. Secondly, lack of or inadequate logistics made record keeping difficult. Finally, the frequent movement of tutors in and out of the colleges did not allow tutors to gain the much needed on-the-job experience.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Although this study is limited by the fact that, the investigation had been carried out in only three of the forty-two teacher training colleges in Ghana, some conclusions could be drawn regarding how continuous assessment is practised in the teacher training colleges. The reliability coefficient of the data collection instrument (0.92) and the 100% return rate of the questionnaire, together with observations made, lend credence to the conclusion that: continuous assessment is not being properly practised in the teacher training colleges in Ghana, and that there is the need to improve upon the practice.

To address the concerns, it is recommended that:

1. All tutors in the teacher training college system should be given intensive training on the rationale and management of CA to enable them appreciate the expected benefits to the students and the system as a whole. This should be followed up by clinical supervision and monitoring by the college authorities.
2. The module "Continuous Assessment" may be vantagefully positioned in the syllabus to ensure that students are trained in the rationale and processes of CA in their first year of college.
3. The IOE, in collaboration with the Ghana Education Service (GES), should organise an in-service training on test item construction for tutors of teacher training colleges. In the interim, the IOE may provide uniform CA schedules and test items for use by the colleges to ensure comparability of standards.
4. A team of external moderators from the IOE and the GES may do spot checks in the colleges to see how CA marks are generated.
5. The teacher training programme should be restructured to allow for some reduction in the number of subjects offered by students and thereby lessen the workload for students and tutors for more effective assessment. Students will have fewer subjects to study, and tutors will also have fewer students to deal with because they may no longer teach all the students in a class.
6. The IOE should consider producing examination results sheets which show columns for CA scores, external examinations and then the total score to prove that the CA scores are made use of.

7. College administrations should be encouraged to show commitment to the process and release or mobilise funds to provide needed logistics.
8. Colleges should device a way that will ensure that fresh students report on or before the official re-opening date for the continuing students at the beginning of the first term.
9. The IOE also should explore ways of releasing the results of continuing students before the colleges re-open to save loss of teaching hours which usually occur in the first term.

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