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EDITORIAL

Programmatic Assessment– an Answer to What Teachers Can Communicate on Students' Learning, Besides Unveiling of Grades Only

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In the realm of education, a transformative shift has occurred, moving away from traditional discipline-based teaching and learning towards an integrated approach. This transition has been accompanied by innovations. A number of assessment tools have also been designed and innovated. The ultimate goal of these changes is to empower learners to attain desired level of competency. Talking about assessment, we need to focus on two important aspects. We have to find the relevance of when (at what time of learning) are we assessing and what tools are we using to assess our students. Both of these are vital, as the purpose of assessment is to find out if the students have reached the desired competency and if not, what can we as teachers offer to assist them in their learning [1].

Let us take a minute to reflect upon the timing and frequency of our assessment. Our current practice is to teach for a period of time and assess after several months. When we assess our students after several months, what is our assessment offering our students, besides grades and perhaps rote learning? Unfortunately, the present exam system has also led students to embrace rote learning solely for the purpose of passing exams. Does revealing of grades to the students after an intermediate or a high-stake exam, allow students enough time to improve upon themselves? The answer is no, because by then the stakes are judged and revealed!

As educators, we must reflect upon our purpose as teachers, and upon the purpose of assessment. The purpose of both is beyond assigning of grades. We are not simply meant to label students as pass or fail. We, as teachers, are meant to be involved in guiding students in understanding their progress and aiding them in their journey of self-directed learning. If we conduct assessment after several months, it will not allow us to fulfill the above purpose.

Similarly, when we just conduct few high-stake exams, how much flexibility does it allow us to use a combination of assessment tools? We know that a single assessment tool is not adequate by itself. Each tool possesses a unique reliability, validity, educational impact, feasibility and cost effectiveness in terms of its utility to contribute to a good assessment of the learning.

An innovative assessment approach that can address the above concerns is programmatic assessment [2-3]. Programmatic assessment is only an approach to assessment, not an assessment tool. It is a continuous

form of assessment which involves conducting multiple assessments throughout the learning journey, closely intertwined with the learning activities themselves. These assessments do not render a pass or a fail verdict but are documented for future reference on decision of stakes. Each of these assessments are known as data points and their purpose besides learning is to gather information on the progress of learning of the students. Each data point emphasizes on helping students understand their position on the learning. Learning becomes meaningful as feedback is provided and there is an opportunity to utilize various assessment tools tailored to specific learning needs. Since it occurs during the teaching learning phase itself, learners get an opportunity to actively engage themselves in self-improvement. Programmatic assessment shifts the teacher's role from mere grading to actively guiding students in constructing their knowledge. The 'data points' are one of the most robust evidence of learning, thus a more valid indicator for high stake decision. By incorporating programmatic assessment, we distribute the stakes of decision making across multiple data points rather than relying on few or a single high-stake exam.

In order to implement this innovative approach, it is essential to design a model that suits our specific context and available resources. Starting with a small-scale implementation, perhaps focusing on specific organ system within each discipline can allow us to gain experience and address challenges. By sharing our experiences and recommendations, we can collectively refine and adapt the programmatic assessment model fit for our purpose. Embracing programmatic assessment may initially be challenging, some resistance may be felt, particularly in institutes that adhere to traditional curricula. However, for the sake of progress, we must familiarize ourselves with the principles of programmatic assessment. This shift may also address the issue of students often complaining of not receiving enough preparatory leave before exams. As professionals in the medical field, we understand that preparation is an ongoing process and programmatic assessment aligns with the practice of lifelong learning. For any reader of this editorial, the feasibility of programmatic assessment may come across as a concern. Literature on practical approach to planning and designing programmatic assessment is available [4-6]. An important aspect of programmatic assessment is that it can foster mastery of learning. A well-designed programmatic assessment incorporates all three types of assessments [4]:

a.   Assessment of learning: It is a high-stake decision which evaluates if the learner has acquired knowledge and skill.

b.   Assessment for learning: It relates to providing information to the learner by the teacher on his level of competence along with a guidance on his strengths and areas for improvement.

c.   Assessment as learning: A process or a record or a tool which allows the learner to reflect upon his own learning as well as the judgement that has been made on his learning and competence. This process will allow the learner to focus upon his learning and allow him to plan his way forward.

Since programmatic assessment involves multiple assessment across time, it gives us an opportunity to utilize specific tools suited to derive information for the assessment in question. Therefore, an ample opportunity to sample with fit for purpose tool is created. An added advantage is that the learner actively reflects upon his learning with the help of compilation of his assessment. The compiled portfolio of his learning depicts his growth as well as his area for improvement and hence creates a scope for reflective learning.

The time has come, the first step has to begin. We need to start small, document our experience, reflect and share. Let us join hands to build a fit for purpose assessment and start our journey of transformation. We will not know the challenges until we try. The Ottawa 2020 consensus statement for programmatic assessment concludes that twelve principles of programmatic assessment has been tried across literature as assessment models and have been found to be achievable. The consensus encourages its adoption and sharing of experience by educators [7].

This editorial is written with an aim to encourage and persuade faculty to design a model of assessment based on the principle of programmatic assessment suitable to one's context and resources, at least as research opportunities in health profession education to start with. A small innovative project will impel and oblige us to conduct faculty trainings in this regard. It will also aid us to adapt to change and will help in better understanding of the principle of programmatic assessment so that we are able to design better models of assessment in future based on this principal.

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