LEARNING ORIENTED AND CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT: ONE ANSWER TO THE COVID-19 DILEMMA

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Welcome to a new online distributed context for learning

The recent outbreak of Covid-19 has led to a steep learning curve for many educators who hitherto had perhaps been reluctant to use digital technology both for teaching and testing, even though Blended Learning (BL) is widespread. The use of technology in class is certainly not new and BL, in fact, arguably dates back in ELT to Sharma and Barret's (2007) definition of BL as a combination of digital online resources, or a learning management system (LMS), used together with traditional face-to-face (f2f) teaching in the classroom. As a result of the recent emergency situation, however, this is being redefined as f2f teaching is no longer taking place in a 'physical' classroom, but is increasingly moving to a face-to-face context which is mediated by video conferencing software such Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams, or Google Meet, to name just a few. This is still a blended format, but it is a question of asynchronous and synchronous work being blended rather than the digital and the physical.

In many countries, and Italy is one of these, this change came about literally from one day to the next. Teachers both in state and private schools, universities and colleges found themselves having to manage a whole new approach to teaching which involved dealing with the technological aspects and teaching in different ways. In this new online distributed context one of the biggest hurdles has been, and still is, how to manage assessment. This article looks at the dilemma and proposes a system of Learning Oriented Assessment (LOA), a term coined by Carless (2007) in 2003, as a possible solution. This system, in which summative and formative practices are combined and integrated into the learning cycle, has been developed over four years on an Advanced English for Professional Purposes (EPP) course at the University of Verona. It is a cycle which moves from feedback on summative assessment to formative practices which help learners progress towards improved performance on their final tests.

Summative and formative assessment in Higher Education in Italy

In Higher Education (HE) institutions in Italy, BL in the traditional sense has been increasingly introduced in most twenty-first century universities, but this often entails the use of an LMS to store slides and documents for student access, a noticeboard for administrational messages and exam results etc., and discussion forums for learners to develop topics covered in class. The 'real' teaching, it was always felt, took place in the f2f context. This, of course, is now changing rapidly.

As far as assessment is concerned, until recently, there has always been a clear-cut division between the summative and formative. High-

stakes tests, such as the exams taken by undergraduates as part of their degrees, are one of the essential steps in a student's career at university and, as such, the security of such tests is of paramount importance. Exams are preferably carried out in physically proctored situations, where the security of the process can be ensured. Formative assessment, on the other hand, which supports learning by means of tools such as feedback, reflection and learning scaffolding, has tended to be neglected and pushed into the background. This has happened, despite a wealth of research suggesting its beneficial effects on learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998), possibly because time constraints and the focus on the summative left little space for it.

The challenges of the digital context

The situation at present, however, in Italy as in many other places, makes the previous procedures untenable. Living in a world where many have been abruptly introduced to the digital context has led to considerations of ways in which assessment can be implemented online. It is crucial to be aware of the stakes on the one hand, and therefore to safeguard the security of examinations, but at the same time it is important to ensure the online tests meet the desired aims and that testing validity is also catered for.

The question of how to do this is creating headaches for institutions and ministries alike and there is a race to find the best online proctoring systems possible. Whereas oral tests can be conducted via video conferencing with relatively little change, this is not so for written exams. Questions such as how to manage writing abound and it has been said

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repeatedly that the simple transfer of traditional summative assessment procedures online is not enough. The asynchronous nature of the online work means that security and cheating are both key issues as is candidate identity fraud (Xiong & Suen, 2018).

Many, in fact, tend to separate summative and formative, treating them as completely different processes, which are unrelated to each other. Hamp-Lyons (2007: 487) spoke of "two cultures of assessment: a learning and an exam culture", underlining precisely this separation. In LOA, however, they are seen as two sides of the same learning coin, with information from summative tests informing the learning process and leading to reflection and goal setting.

Combining formative assessment **for** learning with summative assessment **of** learning is one way, then, of reinforcing learning and preparing for summative tests effectively as well. Designing this type of framework means exploring the affordances of both the digital and the f2f contexts to exploit them effectively. A system of LOA, when adopted as part of a process of continuous assessment and developed systematically over a whole course, may be one answer to the problem of transferring the assessment process online. The University of Verona chose to pilot an innovative LOA system on its relatively new Advanced English EPP course, and the results have been promising.

English for the world of work and LOA

English for the World of Work was first held in the 2015-2016 academic year and was designed to meet the needs both of university students entering the world of work and those who were already at work but needed further language support. The course is task-based, delivered in a blended context, which has easily adapted to the new conditions of having f2f lessons via Zoom. The different modules focus on developing realistic tasks such as writing effective emails, and developing a social media profile for sites such as LinkedIn and Instagram, which may then be shared with potential employers or clients. Because of this practical

focus on developing an awareness and mastery of the language required to become competent in professional skills, the assessment was designed to reflect this with realistic tasks being chosen for the final written and oral tasks.

The summative and the formative are integrated into the learning path of the course in the following ways:

1. One review quiz per module (used to review language areas and other content) gives learners the opportunity to identify problem areas and set learning goals based on the in-built feedback;

2. Two assignments are provided per module to enable learners to carry out a task (such as creating a CV) which is graded as part of the continuous assessment procedure, but written or oral feedback is also provided on an individual basis and learners then review their work independently and include it in the dossier section of an e-portfolio (described below);

3. Two reflection tasks are also provided both on the learning process and on the content of the module, which are also included in the e-portfolio.

How this is integrated into the other work is shown in the overview of Module One below (see Figure 1).

The final summative assessment, which is also task-based, consists of an evaluation of written and oral work. In line with the socio-cognitive model of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), it takes a criterion-related approach to the final tasks, beginning with a holistic overall impression of the whole portfolio and then focusing on language resources, text organization, readability and creativity.
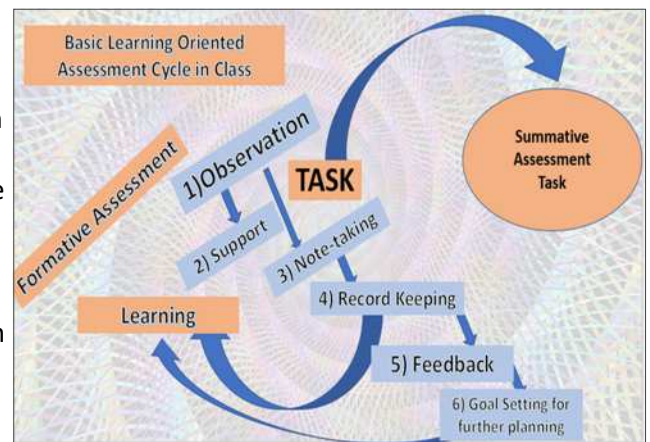

Figure 1: Contents of Module One.

Spoken language, on the other hand, is assessed by means of a 5-minute presentation of one aspect of the course of particular interest. This ties into the work done on

Figure. 2: The LOA framework.

presentation skills in the course, and what is being assessed is the ability to give a professionally developed presentation as well as the ability to use spoken language effectively.

Formative and summative in a single cycle

LOA is a further instance of a 'blend' in this course. The summative provides the springboard for formative practices which then lead back to final tests in which performance is measured. The system is scaffolded by f2f work in class, where reflections are carried out initially as monitored breakout room discussions and then developed autonomously. In the first module, for instance, which focuses on developing a social media profile of each participant, the language focus is 'describing professional strengths for the workplace'; a summative progress quiz is provided towards the end of the module, with learners being given this task to

review both the language and skills work.

participants are required to complete a minimum of six such

of the participant's professional toolkit at a later stage. It is also used

Figure 3: Instructions for a summative progress quiz.

The task instructions scaffold the process both of interpreting feedback and of setting realistic goals, skills which often need to be developed. Setting goals cooperatively helps to do this, and learners can be encouraged to learn from the feedback that is provided. As the course progresses, however, the emphasis moves towards including such reflections and goals in the portfolio.

Formative assessment also entails information gathering for teachers, however, and the quizzes also inform their planning process as key points, such as representative language problems, may often emerge and form the basis for further f2f work.

Reflections (see Figure 4 below) are also carried out in a similar way and

tasks in their portfolios for the final summative assessment.

In this way summative assessments in the form of review quizzes and assignments throughout the course inform the formative process of developing the learning process and setting goals to take learning forwards. One major component of the assessment process is the e-portfolio which gives learners time to develop their awareness of language knowledge and skills all the way through the course.

The e-portfolio

The portfolio is developed as an e-portfolio online and includes:

1. a personal profile section,
2. a goal setting section, and
3. two other sections, reflections and dossier (mainly used for summative assessment).

The portfolio is created as an

formatively as reflections and assignments are written, developed and discussed in the f2f context and goals are set, before the content is assessed summatively at the end of the course. It provides a context for the two elements of formative and summative assessment to dovetail well throughout the process of continuous assessment.

Conclusion

This LOA system, honed over the years, has proved highly effective. It integrates assessment into learning in a task-based approach which is particularly suited to the professional nature of this EPP course, but the framework could easily be transferred to different blended learning contexts. Whilst there may still be some issues of exam security, a continuous assessment approach enables such issues to be identified perhaps more easily, and those motivated to develop a document such as an e-portfolio, which can be used outside the context of the classroom, are often highly motivated to present their own work in the best

Figure 4: Sample reflection task.

ongoing task and can become part

way possible. LOA applied in such a way may be one way forward in this particular situation where traditional summative assessments cannot simply be transferred effectively to online contexts.

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