

To Test or To Detest Test in the New Norm

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COVID-19 stormed into every country in the globe, naturally without any warning. Within a wink of an eye, it chaotically affected every industry, leaving behind the debris of a shattered economy.

While some countries are recovering slowly from the devastating impact, others are struggling to stay above water. Health alerts are in place, with stringent standard operating procedures (SOPs) for all industries, especially for the education sector that sees mass student convention at any one time.

In Malaysia, a very comprehensive school re-opening management guideline has been developed and distributed to all schools to curb any spread of COVID-19, which appears to be under control lately.

Syabas to the government for the proactive measures taken and the public for faithfully pledging their compliance! To the frontliners, we record our profound gratitude for your unconditional sacrifices and dedication!

Face-to-face assessments

With the announcement that all schools will be reopened in stages from 24 June 2020 to students facing public and international examinations, and examination postponed to next year, the nuances of test administration practices amidst the (recovery stage of) pandemic COVID-19 is an inevitable and impending global educational core issue that must be taken by its horns.

While many countries took immediate action during the lockdown and opted for the one of three possible alternatives of cancelling, postponing or modifying the format of assessments (online test was a popular choice), the real issue still lurking in the somewhat ‘grey’ understanding of assessments is how to administer future face-to-face assessments in the new norm.

The Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing (Standards) is a sine quo non for a valid, reliable and fair test administration which secures the integrity and security of the test scores and that they “are valid for their intended use”.

The Standards is a joint publication of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), American Psychological Association (APA), and National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME) that stipulates imperative testing guidelines of educational and psychological assessments related to the design, implementation, accommodation, scoring, and reporting. Rooting to the guidelines outlined in the Standards in ensuring that the validity of the overall interpretation of the tests scores are not compromised, several take home points for consideration in administering classroom tests or assessments in the new norm can be drawn.

Among them:

Health Hazards related to the handling of test materials such as the stationery shared by the test administrators, including the highly shared items such as the writing papers, which are highly transmitted among invigilators-examinees-examiners. Will wearing of gloves be made mandatory and the frequent use of hand sanitisers help? Seating plans that adhere to the minimum one-metre social distancing is inevitable, but sanitising in between sessions is also another concern, which will involve additional financial burden and authorised non-educator personnel, who should not threaten the test security. The compulsory practice of social distancing, which will limit the space capacity is another concern for the school as the need arises in preparing additional test venues that are conducive for test administration.

Examinees

The major players in any assessment are the students themselves. How will the new norms or ‘non-routine’ test administrations affect them mentally and emotionally? In this matter, briefing or a ‘mock’ pre-administration will enable them to be more ready on what to expect on the real day. Apart from that, how will the students whose immune systems are compromised due to the pandemic sit for the examination? If there are replacement assessments, then steps must be taken to ensure that the modification does not alter the test

construct. These will require hiring qualified experts who will be able to provide the correct professional advice.

Invigilators/Examiners

The invigilators, especially, require some form of mental preparedness to be ready for the new norm during test administration. Will briefing do the trick or should proper training be conducted by trained personnel from the health and educational sectors? The examiners too need to be briefed on the handling of test materials to prevent any health-risk issues.

Technology concerns

In the event, where computer-based testing (CBT) is adopted, issues related to student readiness and familiarity in using the computer to answer test items is an important consideration. In addition to giving extended time, unfamiliarity to CBT can inversely affect student performance and increase anxiety. These concerns need to be studied by surveying the students' background so that no one student is unfairly sitting for a examination and the unintended construct of their personal traits are indirectly measured as a test construct, thus contributing to their differential performance, despite possessing the same latent traits. Needless to say, the gadgets used require sanitisation before the next session as well.

Formative assessments

These highlighted issues are some of the concerns that need to be investigated and judgments regarding the adjustments need to be made by consulting qualified experts so that the safety issues and integrity of test scores are not compromised. While the above issues are focused on summative assessments, formative assessments cannot be neglected either. The fundamentals of any formative assessment require timely and constructive feedback to monitor students' learning progress. In that vein, educators shoulder a critical responsibility of delivering the much-needed diagnostic information on their students' learning loss as an actionable teacher data that can facilitate immediate intervention.

As a conclusion, educators are knowledgeable in designing, administering, scoring and reporting test scores with high integrity. From the education perspective, the new norms

nevertheless call for the need to, perhaps, place more emphasis on one of the four Messick's (1989) unitary model of validity - the consequential validity, the other three being content, construct and criterion validity. Being a leading American psychologist who worked for the Educational Testing Service (ETS), Samuel J. Messick (3 April 1931 – 6 October 1998) "was in the forefront of the mathematics and statistics of psychometrics" and introduced the idea of restrained use of student test score in 1989.

His emphasis on identifying "potential and actual social consequences of" testing shaped his thoughts on consequential validity, which refers to the positive or negative social consequences of a particular test. While the positive consequence is desired and intended, the negative consequence of testing on students needs to be carefully considered before designing and administering the test so that the test scores are cautiously interpreted and stay in perspective.

Drawing back on his conviction laid almost three decades ago, there needs to be some form of assurance that assessment in the new norm is free from any negative social consequences that might appear to invalidate the interpretation of test scores and, for that, measures need to be drawn in that direction, prioritising of course health concerns. But why the emphasis on validity in test administration and why now when the lives of every societal group from both poor and rich countries are disrupted by the pandemic?

The reason is rather clear when we understand that a valid test is a fair test, and students from vulnerable groups in any country suffer the most, especially during COVID-19. Thus, whether it is test integrity or health care in the new norm, more is required and possibly expected than exercising the new norms - what more with equity being in the forefront of many countries that are resolutely addressing the rural-urban infrastructural gap.

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