Re-thinking learning assessment during school closure

**Context**

Countries are implementing drastic measures to slow the spread of COVID-19 including school closure. By the end of first week of April 2020, analyses conducted by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics tracking the consequences of the pandemic on education showed that 188 countries\(^1\) had implemented nationwide school closure, and that the pandemic had impacted 91.3% of the world’s students\(^2\). In Africa, the percentage of students impacted by nationwide closures is estimated to be slightly above the global figure.

Consequently, African governments have had urgent tasks to mitigate the immediate impact of school closures including implementing systems to facilitate the continuity of education for all. An ongoing review by UNESCO-IICBA shows that among the mitigating systems put in place by governments include facilitating delivery of distance learning programs through TVs and radios; encouraging the use of online tutorials through forums such as webinars and podcasts; and subsiding internet connectivity rates so that more families, teachers, and schools can afford connectivity.

In addition, some teachers have initiated several distance learning mechanisms to ensure that learning continues – including preparing take-home packages for students; establishing school based on-line teaching and learning platforms; and using social media platforms like WhatsApp to share learning materials and tests.

Thus, the ongoing mitigations are encouraging especially considering that closure of schools happened abruptly and many teachers had minimal time to prepare alternative distance learning modalities. But with school closure – how can we conduct learning assessment? Education experts generally agree that learning assessment systems have considerable potential to encourage deeper and more meaningful learning – thus, improving levels of learning achievement among all children, and reducing the inequities often observed among subgroups of students.

In the paragraphs below, we briefly outline some distance learning assessment options that countries and teachers could consider during school closure and looking beyond the current COVID-19 crisis.

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\(^1\) Several other countries had implemented localized closures impacting millions of additional students.

\(^2\) Follow the daily evolution of school closures: [https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse](https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse)
Some distance learning assessment options

Just like any other assessment, assessment of distance learning, would depend on the type of assessment being implemented – formative assessment or summative assessment.

Formative assessment (also known to as assessment-for-learning) involves continuous collection and use of information about student achievement, to inform teaching-learning process in classroom with the goal of improving learning achievement. On the other hand, summative assessment (also known as assessment of learning) aims at measuring the levels of learning achievement at the end of a learning cycle.

Formative assessment of distance learning would ideally involve incorporation of short assessment tasks (such as multi-choice items, true or false items, matching exercises, case studies, scenarios, assignments, or projects) within the learning topics.

**Option 1:** In countries or schools where ICT issues (such as ICT capacity, use among teachers and students, and internet connectivity) pause *minor challenges* – e-platforms can be organized to require, for example, a student to pass (or achieve competencies stipulated by their teacher) before proceeding to the next section within the same topic. The e-platforms can also be organized to allow teachers to use students’ responses to better understand the students’ learning needs and difficulties. Information for the assessment tasks would support teachers to tailor instruction to assist individual students to move to the next learning level.

In addition, learning examples can be incorporated into the student responses to help the student understand where they are doing well and where they might be struggling – and importantly, what is required from them to move to the next learning level.

Such e-platforms would preferably run more efficiently online. However, given the current internet connectivity challenges in Africa, the platform can be made available offline, with facilities for regular updates on a needs basis.

**Option 2:** In situations where ICT issues pause *moderate or major challenges*, teachers can be encouraged to include assessment tasks within the learning materials in form of take-home packages, documents posted on websites or files shared through social media platforms such as WhatsApp. Parents would then be encouraged to actively assist students and to ensure that the students engage with the learning materials shared by teachers including the assessment tasks.

In addition, short take-home assessment tasks (such as quizzes) at the end of each week could be used by teachers to monitor learning progress, give feedback to the students, and to identify struggling students needing more support. Such quizzes could also be delivered via social media platforms, mobile phone text messages, or low-tech platforms. Low-tech platforms are normally SMS-based – meaning they work in both smart and feature phones. These kind of low-tech platforms have been used by UNICEF³ and other organizations to conduct surveys – meaning they can also be used to do learning assessment involving multiple choice questions.

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³ See example here: [https://community.rapidpro.io/about-rapidpro/](https://community.rapidpro.io/about-rapidpro/)
Summative assessment of distance learning would be similar to the regular assessment tests that are carried out at the end of specific topics, end of the school term, or end of a learning cycle.

**Option 1:** In countries or schools where ICT issues pause *minor challenges* – e-platforms can be organized to allow teachers to set up learning assessment tests online, and even share test items among teachers across schools and countries. Items in such tests could include opened-ended items (such as essays), closed-ended items (such as multiple choice), or both. Once ready, teachers would then send their students links to the tests (or alert them about the test using mobile technologies such as SMS or WhatsApp). Importantly, such e-platforms can be organized to identify individual students taking the test, control when the student should take the test, and restrict the duration of the test.

**Option 2:** In situations where ICT issues pause *moderate challenges*, teachers can be encouraged to set learning assessment tests as they would normally do in schools then upload these tests on a website. Students would then take the tests as they would normally do using pen-paper, but upload their responses for marking by the teachers. In addition, teachers can be encouraged to use social media such as WhatsApp to share tests with their students. Credibility of this option would rely heavily on parental cooperation.

**Option 3:** Finally, in situations where ICT issues pause *major challenges*, teachers can be encouraged to prepare take-home test packages. Students would then take these tests as they would normally do in classrooms but under the supervision of their families. Alternatively, countries could publish the tests in local newspapers. Just like the option described in the previous paragraph, parental cooperation is also critical for the success of this option.

**ICT solutions**

Ideally, countries should leverage on ICT in ensuring continuation of education during school closure through e-learning. However, in Africa, most teachers and students have limited capacities and access to these technologies, especially among marginalized communities in the continent.

Nevertheless, COVID-19 crisis shows the need to expand ICT access schools, and the need to strengthen ICT capacity among teachers and students to ensure that school closure has insignificant impact on learning. Equally important, there is the need to strengthen teachers’ capacities to implement assessments of e-learning.

Unlike formative assessment of e-learning, summative assessment of e-learning would not help much in informing the teaching and learning process on a daily basis, but would still provide important information at the end of the process. Thus, preferably, countries should consider options for implementing both formative and summative assessment of e-learning during school closure.

In terms of cost, platforms for implementing summative assessment can easily be put together within a short time at low financial cost. In addition, some summative assessment options would not necessarily
require high levels of ICT capacity among teachers and students, whereas some would not require deep internet penetration.

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