UNIT 17 ETHICS OF STUDENT ASSESSMENT

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17.1 INTRODUCTION

You have already studied about various types of tests, their construction, standardization, interpreting the test results and assigning grades. The purpose of construction and standardization of testing procedures is to ensure that assessment of students' performance or of their personality is unbiased and objective. For example, when we intend to assess students' achievement or personality traits like attitude, aptitude, extroversion, neuroticism, etc., we must get a score indicative of what one actually is. It is only on the basis of true assessment that we, as teachers, can help students grow and develop to realize their potential. Guidance and counselling given to the students shall be meaningful or worthwhile only when it is based on a true picture of their capabilities or personality. To be true, assessment should be valid, reliable, objective and unbiased. In the absence of a valid assessment, any guidance or counselling given to the students will not only be futile but harmful also because decisions taken on wrong data may lead to damaging consequences. Thus, in the entire process of students' assessment, questions of ethics are involved. These need to be focused while assessing students.

In the present unit, we have tried to highlight and focus certain issues relating to appropriateness of the construction, standardization and administration of tasks and other ethical concerns relating to assignment of grades, competence to administer tests and personal biases of the personnel involved in the process of assessment.

In keeping with the above mentioned considerations, the following objectives are framed for the present unit.
17.2 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- discuss the nature and concept of ethics,
- explain the code of professional responsibility associated with students' assessment,
- discuss the need for ethics in students' assessment,
- state the reasons why teachers should avoid bias in their assessment of students' performance,
- identify the ethical implications of violation of standards related to assessment of students,
- discuss the basic issues involved in ethics of testing,
- identify the rules considered essential for administration and interpretation of tests and assigning grades to students.

17.3 ETHICAL PRINCIPLES IN ASSESSMENT

According to Cunningham (1998) ethics are rules for conduct, collectively agreed upon, supported and enforced by group of individuals or professional organizations for their members. Any violation of ethical rules/standards, though not legally culpable, is socially deprecated and condemned. The strongest form of enforcement of ethical standards is the group pressure applied by the organization that endorses the ethical code. In certain professions, ethical standards/codes/rules/guidelines, etc. are provided by their respective organizations. In the teaching profession also, there are certain ethical guidelines issued by the government or by the teacher organizations. Consequences of violation of the ethical code include sanctions or even expulsion from the organization. The focus of the ethical guidelines includes statements about the possible misuse of tests, and the professional competence required for the unbiased administration and interpretation of test results.

In the United States of America, ethical standards applicable to the assessment related activities of teachers have been published. They are:

- The standards for teacher competence in student assessment.
- The code of professional responsibilities in educational assessment.
- The standards for educational and psychological testing.

You will agree that all the above three standards embody ethical principles. These standards also focus on the use of standardized tests prepared by qualified and experienced educators. Such standards/codes of professional responsibility are almost nonexistent in India, but their need can never be over emphasized. In order to fulfill their professional responsibility towards students, the professional organizations of teachers should take up this task and should try to enforce the same in schools.

There are many issues in students' assessment which have ethical implications. But before we can think of making recommendations for such ethical standards, we need to understand the concept of ethics in some more details.
17.4 WHAT IS ETHICAL AND WHAT IS NOT?

The appropriateness or fairness of human conduct is discussed when we talk of ethics or code or principles of ethics. This is a very comprehensive field which requires careful consideration to determine which action or behaviour is ethical and which is not. It is because of the fact that fairness of human conduct and behaviour is not something which can be categorically determined or stated in the form of rules and principles to be unconditionality followed. Kant was very right when he said in one of his “Categorical imperatives” that nothing in this world or out of it is good without conditions except the goodwill. What is fair or good in one situation may be totally unfair or bad in another. So it is very difficult to have a consensus on issues relating to ethical conduct. Establishing a widely accepted ethics code that can be used to guide teachers’ activities in the area of students’ assessment is very difficult due to lack of consensus regarding what is an appropriate assessment practice and what is an inappropriate assessment practice. Considering that our purpose with students is to act in a way so as to enable them to continue to grow and develop in their achievement, categorical statements about a student’s achievement in a subject, like ‘extremely weak or poor’, may disappoint him beyond the point of no return. In such a situation what is ethical? – giving a true unbiased picture of what a student actually is without any regard to the consequences such a declaration would have on the individual(s) or manipulating or manoeuvring the result in a way that it does not provide true picture, but avoids disappointment or frustration. An empirical survey conducted by Mehrens and Kaminski (1989) found considerable disagreement among procedures on the issue. Similar conflicts were found by Popham (1991). Teaching the test objectives, or practising the same or similar items that appear in the test are deemed inappropriate. Any activity that gives advantage on the test to some students and withholds the same from others is not permitted. At the same time many teachers according to Mehrens and Kaminski (1989) believe that instructions aimed directly at a test are acceptable. Some teachers feel that use of high stakes standardized test is unfair and has such a negative effect on instruction that any activity used to increase students’ performance is justified. The activities may include practice on items similar to those that appear in the test themselves.

17.5 NEED FOR ETHICAL PRINCIPLES IN STUDENTS’ ASSESSMENT

Teachers know that assessment can have a dramatic effect on the lives of students. It is for this reason that we should have a concern about the ethical implications of its practices and procedures.

In the past emphasis in the context of assessment was primarily on the fair treatment for students and appropriateness of testing procedures. But now, organisations like NVS, or KVS have come to realise that it is not only the students who are responsible for their achievement, but the teachers and the principal are also equally responsible for students’ low achievement. When students’ scores are the bases of teacher’s accountability, it becomes his/her responsibility to ensure that the tests are prepared and administered properly and the scores accurately reflect the true level of their (students’) performance. But when, as a result of students’ assessment, the entire school including the
teachers and the principal are being evaluated, the teachers or the school as such may show a diminished commitment to ensure proper administration of the tests used for assessment. That is, the school may overlook or even deliberately resort to such practices which result in inflated scores. Ethical transgressions are likely to occur when those with the highest stake in students' test performance are also responsible for monitoring assessment practices. Since teachers or schools have vested interests to see that their students perform well, it is quite likely that teachers may exhibit slackness in strictly adhering to the ethical principles involved in preparing, administering and scoring the tests.

No legal restrictions on educational testing: It is common to regulate food items and drugs through legal measures to prevent their harmful effects. Drugs having no demonstrated medicinal value cannot be sold. Before a drug can be marketed, it must undergo years of rigorous testing to ensure its efficacy and minimum side effects. Claims about the medicinal value of vitamins or any other drug substance cannot be made without proper verification and evidence. However, there is no such restriction on constructors or publishers of educational tests. They may make almost any claim for a test and are not required by law to establish the veracity of their claims. But construction and publishing a test has ethical implications which must be borne in mind.

17.6 BASIC ISSUES IN ETHICS OF TESTING

In the preceding sub-sections of the present unit you have studied that there are no set ethical standards in regard to assessment related activities. There are, however, some ethical principles that are widely accepted by the educationists. Such principles are briefly discussed below:

- **The test should be valid**: It is validity of the test that is claimed as the most basic ethical standard or a rule. Simply put, a test is said to be valid if it measures what it purports to measure. It is in fact not the test that is valid, but the decision based on test scores. In other words, we can say that it is interpretation of tests which is most important. It is, therefore, the responsibility of the user or constructor to ensure that the tests are valid for the purposes for which they are being used and for individuals who are being assessed.

- **The assessment should be unbiased**: Any assessment procedure or test is said to be biased if it underestimates the ability or achievements of student(s). In principle, the overestimation is also a bias but since there are no complaints from students in this case, it is not considered serious. Technically underestimation occurs when there is a significant difference between the true score of a student and his/her obtained score on the test used. However, it is very difficult to obtain the true score of one's ability or achievement, hence it is practically very difficult to establish the existence of such differences. The detection of test bias, like unfairness, is dependent on the perspective of those evaluating a test. It should be expected that students will label a test biased or unfair when it contains items which are tilted towards or against a particular social or cultural group of students. In that case some students will feel that their score underestimates their true level of achievement or aptitude. When, for example, the performance of a minority social or cultural group on an achievement test is below the
average of their non-minority peers, we are often tempted to explain the poor performance of the minority group by labeling the test as biased.

- **Removing the test bias:** The easiest way to ensure that a test is not biased is to use an item by item approach in which the tainted items are removed. The most obvious way to eliminate such items is to give the test items to a team of experts who can examine each item individually for its bias in content or construction. Unfortunately, experience has shown that constructing unbiased tests by identifying biased items is not easy. The problem with the use of experts identifying flawed items is that the results of their analysis often conflict with the empirical analyses of items. These analyses examine the difficulty of each item to determine whether or not it differs among subgroups. Experts often label items biased that turn out to be equally difficult for all groups.

- **Only those who are competent should be allowed to administer the test:** It is assumed that not every teacher is equally competent to construct, administer or interpret tests. The competence to administer one test should not imply that the person is also equally competent in the use of the other tests. This applies to all standardized tests, but in the case of psychological tests like personality tests, motivation tests, aptitude and attitude tests, etc., this condition needs to be strictly adhered to. Other tests, such as, standardized achievement tests should be used only by those teachers who are specially trained and competent in their use. Use of standardized achievement tests by persons not qualified to use them or by those operating outside the area of their expertise is clearly unethical. Each person before administering the test must decide whether the use of a particular test is within his/her area of competence.

- **Access to test material should be restricted to those who are competent to use them and have a legitimate need to possess them:** In the case of psychological tests, decisions about who should have access to test material is straightforward. Only those who are qualified by law and training can use these tests. However, in the case of access to other tests, some difficult ethical questions crop up. For example, so far as standardized ability tests and achievement tests are concerned, much training is required for their administration, therefore, their access cannot be allowed to public. Normally, only classroom teachers are allowed to administer the standardized achievement tests.

In that case, care should be taken by the teachers that the content of the tests is not disseminated to persons other than the concerned teachers, especially to parents and students. The test publishers include set of rules in their technical manuals that specify who is eligible to purchase the tests and use them. There is another category of the users of such tests. This category comprises the licensed psychologists. The test publishers also include in the manuals qualifications of the users of tests and categories of persons who are qualified to use such tests. The manuals also include information about how the tests should be used and scored.
Standardized tests should be constructed and administered in such a way that scores accurately reflect achievement of students who take such tests. In this regard also, there are some ethical considerations which should be borne in mind. Sometimes, teachers make such alterations in the curriculum that create a mismatch with the content of the test. Making such alterations is highly improper because by doing so sampling assumptions of the test are violated and the resulting standard scores may lose their meaning and significance. In certain cases, teachers teach actual items from the test. Score on the test then will not be genuine but inflated ones. Teachers may also change items or point out correct answers. They may also provide inappropriate help when the test is being administered or they may allow students to have more time to complete the tests. When the stakes involved are high such intentional maladministration of the test tends to increase. Also, when undue importance is placed on students’ performance and there is absence of proper supervision of test administration, students are more likely to cheat. Then, if students’ performance is likely to impact the work of teachers, then also inappropriateness of test administration increases. All these malpractices involve question of test ethics and should be properly taken care of. Teachers who teach items similar to ones included in the test to those who appear for the test to be or focus attention on the areas covered in the test are indeed exhibiting inappropriate or unethical behaviour. If the instruction has no other purpose except to raising the test scores and if it does not address the learning objectives, then it, undoubtedly, is inappropriate and unethical.

The honest and accurate assessment of students’ performance using standardized achievement tests is dependent upon the ethics of school system that adopts the test and on those who administer it. Nevertheless, there are many who believe that all standardized testing, as such, is unethical. Mehrens and Kaminski (1989) describe various practices related to preparing students for standardized achievement testing. Some of these practices are quite appropriate and there are others which are clearly unacceptable. These practices are:

- General instructions on objectives without any consideration of objectives measured on standardized tests.
- Teaching test taking skills.
- Instructions on objectives that are measured by a variety of standardized tests.
- Instructions based on objectives (skills, subskills) that specifically match those on the standardized test to be administered.
- Practice on the published parallel forms of the test.
- Practice on the same test.

According to Mehrens and Kaminski practice 1 is always ethical where as 5 and 6 are never ethical and decisions about those in between are open to debate and discussion.
17.8 HANDLING TEST MATERIAL AND TEST ADMINISTRATION: SOME SUGGESTIONS

When tests with high stake are administered, it is important to adhere to strict rules governing the handling of the test material and test administration procedures. Susan Phillop (1993) has produced a set of recommendations for ensuring test security for high stake test administration.

- Test booklets should be given to the test administrators only just before the test starts.
- Allow only minimum necessary time for testing and test should be administered on all sites the same day and same time.
- All testing material be returned immediately after testing.
- Seal and number all test booklets and wrap and seal all bundles of test booklets.
- Obtain written assurance from test administrators that test booklets were opened only by the examiners when told to do so during testing and no booklets were photocopied.
- Require test administrators to account for all testing material before examiners are allowed to leave the room at the conclusion of the test.
- Assure adequate number of test supervisions and allow one student at a time to leave the room when testing is on.
- Randomly audit test sites unannounced to ensure that proper procedures are followed.
- The responses and interpretations of a test should remain strictly confidential.

This is an important aspect of test ethics. Test should be administered for the benefit of those being tested. Interpretation and responses upon which they are based belong to them. Information about results of the test should be conveyed only to the student concerned or to his/her parents. In general, school should not assess personality of the students but if it is required permission from parents should be obtained.

17.9 ASSIGNING GRADES

The grade a teacher assigns to a student can have an impact on his/her (student’s) life. Teachers are ethically bound to assign grades fairly following accepted practices. The grades should be assigned to student’s achievement only and other factors such as effort, ability, neatness, and attitudes should not influence grades.

17.10 LET US SUM UP

Ethics are rules for conduct that lie somewhere between the personal nature of morals and values, and laws which stem from legislative process. Though violation of standards of ethics does not lead a person to criminal culpability yet it is highly undesirable in the context of professional growth of teachers.
Ethics represent a consensus view of how a teacher should behave. These are enforced not by law but by teacher organizations that might have published some ethical guidelines. Though there is a lack of consensus about what exactly is ethical and what is not with regard to students' assessment quite often teachers are caught in a dilemma regarding following ethical standards and helping students without any regard to what the ethical principles permit. Furthermore, there are no sanctions for those who violate these ethical principles unless they also involve violation of law, or the school rules. Yet, ethics of classroom assessment is very important because assessment has a great significance and impact on the lives of students. Associated with students' assessment are many significant issues which should be carefully considered during the process of assessment. Otherwise assessment as such will have no meaning, validity or significance. The issues are bias, competence, access to test material, appropriate test construction and administration practices, who should have access to test results and their interpretation, assignment of grades, etc.

17.11 UNIT-END EXERCISES

You are teacher of Philosophy. Philosophy is a subsidiary subject for students having Commerce and Accountancy as the main. One student, Govind, who has a special aptitude for Commerce and is capable of making a good career in this subject has absolutely no interest in Philosophy. But in order to qualify the XII examination he must clear his subsidiary - Philosophy. Govind has no interest in Philosophy and can never get through it unless out of the way help is rendered to him. Somehow he comes to know that you are the paper setter and examiner in Philosophy. Hesitatingly he approaches you and explains his difficulty that on his own he cannot pass the examination in Philosophy, as he does not understand even a, b, c, of it. But if he fails to pass in Philosophy, he will be declared unsuccessful in XII examination and that will result in spoiling his career in commerce. He explains to you that Philosophy has absolutely no role to play in his career in commerce and accountancy and it is not necessary for him to develop an understanding of Philosophy. Therefore, he entreats you for particular favour so that his career is not spoiled: either to disclose to him the questions set in the examination or give him a just pass irrespective of the quality of his answers.

Should you accede to Govind's request?

If yes, don't you think it will be highly unethical on your part as a teacher?

If not, will it not be unethical as his career will be spoiled for not passing a subject which is irrelevant for him.

Justify your answer in either case.

17.12 SUGGESTED READINGS

