

HIGHER EDUCATION INSTRUCTORS PERCEPTION AND PRACTICE OF ACTIVE LEARNING AND CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT TECHNIQUES: THE CASE OF JIMMA UNIVERSITY

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Abstract. This article examines instructors perception and practice on active learning and continuous assessment in higher education of Ethiopia. Data were collected from participants (instructors, deans, department heads, and students) through questionnaires, interview, focus group discussion and observation. The results show that instructors perceive positively for these two constructivist strategies. In addition, even though some instructors are trying to use few active learning and continuous assessment methods in their classrooms the majority of them are not practicing as expected. The factors affecting successful implementation of active learning and continuous assessment include teachers commitment, students attitude, and institutional problems, lack of resources, large class size, and high teaching load.

Keywords: active learning; continuous assessment; perception; practice; higher education institutions

Introduction

Since traditional method of teaching has limited usefulness, a number of distinguished writers have argued the case for the teaching and learning

environment to become the center for inquiry (Oinam, 2017; Hopkins, 2002)). As Biggs & Tang (2011) suggest the task of teaching does not require that students' heads are filled with information and outdated knowledge; rather its purpose is to help learners to develop a self learning skill and rational thinking to be critical reflective.

According to Kilic (2010), current studies do not substantiate teacher centered methods of teaching where teachers provide knowledge for the students and students in turn are passively absorbing information. Rather, the author says, current research studies in the area advocates that students should be active participants in teaching learning process. The same author further notes that a growing number of institutions around the world have encouraged participatory teaching and learning and assessment processes, especially through the introduction of active learning processes and continuous assessment strategies. In the active learning class the teacher controls student's learning and he/she also facilitates through the use of various active learning strategies to develop students' performance.

After a careful study of available literature Liu et al. (2006) identified three aspects of the art of teaching that require attention: (1) the continual improvement of practice and a solid commitment to that improvement; (2) the advancement of abilities, understanding and critical reflection which must be contained within a framework; and (3) the improvement of sharing practical and theoretical understanding on shared ideas. In a similar vein, Stenhouse (1975) explained that the main feature of professional teachers is the ability to develop themselves autonomously in their profession through systematic self-study, study of their colleagues and through testing ideas in their classroom through conducting action research. The crucial message in the above arguments is that teaching is a profession, and that we can no longer continue to view teachers as mere distributors of knowledge. Most importantly, the

message appears to be that the professional teacher is not only a teacher but also a researcher in to the problems of teaching.

It is repeatedly evidenced that under normal condition to bring change on student learning, there should be a significant change in teachers teaching-learning process. As Ramsden (2003) points out an important tactic to encourage student learning needs to give attention to engaging students and increasing the teaching-learning lists of teachers and students respectively. What is impressive here is that unless reforms address the context of teaching, learning and assessment, as well as capacity building at the institutional level then the aspiration of the reform would never be realized.

During the last few years, higher education in Ethiopia has been faced with a number of significant changes and influences. These include a greater emphasis on active learning, continuous assessment, practicum, widening access, and developments in information and communication technologies to mention some but not all. With the recent move to introduce active learning and continuous assessment the academic staffs in higher institutions are expected to play the role of facilitators, resource persons, and guides as opposed to mere dispensers of information and authority figures. Accordingly, with Ministry of Education (MOE, 2015) strongly recommend higher education institution instructors to use active learning and continuous assessment in their classroom.

As the ministry of education document (MOE, 2015) made clear that the main objective of introducing new practices such as active learning and continuous assessment in the higher educations of Ethiopia is aimed at enhancing educational quality through improving the development of knowledge, skill and attitude on the part of the students. Accordingly, the university instructors are expected to develop their professionalism and be reflective practitioner to use active learning and continuous assessment so as to enhance student learning.

Statement of the problem

With the Ministry of Education initiative new practices such as active learning and continuous assessment is introduced in the higher educations of Ethiopia with the purpose of enhancing the educational quality in the country. To effectively use student centered method and formative assessment techniques in their class; higher education institutions have been providing different training for university instructors so as to develop the skills and professionalism of instructors. The purpose of the training was to develop instructors practical skills to be reflective practitioner.

However, to the best knowledge of the writer, no attempt is made to assess to what extent the university instructors are using active learning and continuous assessment in their classroom. Consequently, assessing the extent of the university instructors use of active learning and continuous assessment in higher education institution classroom needs due attention. Therefore, the intention of this paper is to find out the perception and practice of higher education institution instructors on the use of active learning and continuous assessment in their classroom. To see this, the following research questions were raised: (a) what is the perception of instructors towards the use of active learning and continuous assessment methods in higher learning institutions; (b) to what extent instructors use active learning and continuous assessment methods in their classroom; (c) what problems instructors face in employing active learning and continuous assessment in their classroom.

Methodology

Research design

A descriptive survey research design was used in this research. The rationale behind using this design is that it is appropriate to describe the perception and practice of higher education institution instructors on active learning and continuous assessment in their classrooms.

Participants

The samples of this study were instructors who are teaching in Jimma University. Jimma University has eight colleges. From these colleges three colleges (College of Social Science and Humanities, College of Education and Behavioral Sciences, and College of Natural and Computation Sciences) were selected as sample colleges by simple random sampling technique. Again from these colleges three departments (Chemistry, Mathematics, Physics, Geography, History, English, Educational Panning, Teacher Education and Curriculum Studies, and Psychology) were selected as sample departments. Then from these colleges a total of 68 instructors (30%) were selected by stratified sampling techniques. In addition to these instructors three Department heads in each college a total of nine Department heads were selected by simple random sampling and the academic deans of the three colleges a total of three were taken by purposive sampling techniques as a sample of the study. Moreover, five students from which the sample instructors teach were selected randomly as a sample of this study, but unfortunately in a sample class more than three teachers can teach in the same in this case only five students can explain all the sample teachers in that class related to the issue raised as a result a total of sixty (60) students were included in the study.

Instruments of data collection

Classroom observation: Observation checklist in line with the different active learning methods was prepared. Each sample instructors were observed at least two times by the researcher and his associates while he/she is conducting his/her classes. Then each activity of the instructor and students were observed and recorded to decide what proportion of the lesson is active.

Questionnaires: Both open and closed ended questionnaires were prepared for instructors. The closed ended questionnaires were five point

Likert scale items that asks the degree of agreement and disagreement on the issue of active learning and continuous assessment.

Interview: Interview guide questions for instructors, department heads, and college deans were prepared. Each sample instructor was interviewed at the end of the last class observation. On the other hand, department heads and college deans were interviewed at the end.

Focus group discussion: Focus group discussion guide questions were prepared and five students who are attending classes taught by each sample instructors were invited for a focus group discussion.

Procedures of data collection

To maintain the validity and reliability of the instrument a pilot testing was conducted by selecting one college in Jimma University. After preparing the instruments it was given for two experts from education college, Jimma University to check the validity of the items and comments were incorporated. Then, pilot-tested was conducted with a small group (N=20) of instructors. An internal consistency reliability estimate was calculated using Cronbach's Coefficient of Alpha ($\alpha=0.87$). The items were further revised using the data that has been collected during piloting. This ensured that items were reliable in measuring the variables. Regarding observation instrument the issue of reliability was addressed by pilot testing of the instruments in small group of instructors in the university that were not part of the main study. The percentage agreement between two observers was calculated to check the level of agreement between observers and it was found out that, about 83.1% agreement score was obtained which indicates good inter rater agreement between observers.

To investigate instructors' perception on the use of active learning and continuous assessment, a Likert scale types of questionnaires were administered for sample instructors. On the other hand, each sample instructor

was observed at least two times while he/she is conducting his/her lesson using observation checklist. Accordingly, the researcher observed instructor's lesson and record all the activities of the instructor and the students, then at the end of the classroom observation the observed instructors were interviewed individually. To cross check the instructor's response five students from each sample instructor's class were interviewed in groups (Focus Group Discussion was conducted). Deans of the respective colleges and department heads were interviewed on the general instructors' perception, practice, and challenge facing in implementing active learning and continuous assessment strategies in their classroom.

Methods of data analysis

The collected data with the use of observation, interview and focus group discussion from the sample instructors, Deans, department heads, and students were analyzed qualitatively. On the other hand, the quantitative data collected through the questionnaires were processed with SPSS version 20. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, mean, standard deviation, and percentages were used to analyze the data to answer the research questions.

Results

Participants' perception on active learning and continuous assessment

One's perception towards a certain issue is a determinant factor on one's practice. To assess instructors' perception on active learning technique about 10 item questionnaires with Likert scale type were prepared and respondents were asked to show their agreement or disagreement and the result is summarized in the Table 1.

As clearly depicted in Table 1 all of the items except two were rated above the average of the five point Likert scale. High mean score is rated for items like being a role model for the students (M=4.97, SD=0.81), followed by

effectively managing the time in the class (M=4.74, SD=0.61). Lowest scored item is the one labeled as supporting the disadvantage students in the classroom (M= 2.07, SD=0.82), followed by use of active learning in large class (M=2.09, SD=0.84) and (M=2.79, SD=1.02) which is the use of instructional resources effectively.

Table 1. Participants’ perception of active learning approach (N =68)

Item	Mean	SD
ALM helped me to make my lesson relevant for learners.	4.63	.73
ALM helped me to address learning styles of students in the classroom	3.47	.65
ALM helped me to manage group activities in the classroom.	4.72	.88
ALM helped me to be reflective in my classroom	4.72	.64
ALM helped me to be a good role model for my students	4.97	.81
ALM helped me to use instructional resources effectively.	2.79	1.02
ALM helped me to support disadvantaged students	2.07	.82
ALM helped me to be gender sensitive in my classroom.	3.28	1.08
ALM enabled me to use verities of active learning methods in large classes	2.09	.84
ALM helped me to effectively manage my lesson time	4.74	.61

Generally, the above result shows that university instructors perception towards active learning method is positive given the average mean score of 3.8. Instructors perception is a prerequisite to use these methods in the classroom. When they have a positive perception towards an active learning method, there will be a high probability to practice it in their classroom.

On the other hand, continuous assessment is a means for educational quality enhancement. As a result, is effective practice starts with one’s vision, for the type of learning one aspires to achieve. It is most effective means is conceptualizing of learning as multidimensional and expressed performance over time. However, its practice starts on the parts of teachers perception. In other words, when the teachers believe that this strategy is important and give

value it, they may try to implement it in the classroom. Thus, its use depends up on the perception of instructors on the method. To see the instructors opinion on continuous assessment, participants were asked to show their agreement or disagreement on the prepared questions and the result is presented on the Table 2.

Table 2. Participants perception to continuous assessment (N =68)

Item	Mean	SD
It is good to use different assessment techniques at different time	4.75	0.56
The results of continuous assessment help me to improve my teaching	3.45	0.61
Self-assessment techniques help me to evaluate my students.	3.59	0.97
Peer assessment techniques help to evaluate my students	3.66	0.94
Continuous assessment helps my students to be more motivated and active during the lesson.	4.12	0.73
Continuous assessment techniques can be used in large classes.	3.63	1.09
My students will be benefited when I use different assessment techniques.	4.75	0.56
Continuous assessment is useful in assessing the different skill of student.	3.21	0.89

As is seen from Table 2 above all of the items were rated above the average of the five point Likert scale. High mean score is rated for items like helping to use different continuous assessment techniques (M=4.75, SD=0.56), followed using continuous assessment helping to be more motivated and active during the lesson (M=4.12, SD=0.75).

Generally, from this result it can be said that university instructors' perception on the importance of formative assessment is positive given the average mean score of 3.89. The above result shows that teachers have favorable attitude towards continuous assessment techniques. In other words, they perceive that continuous assessment is a dominant indicative means that

allows learners to realize the areas in which they face trouble and to focus their energies in those areas unlike the summative assessment.

The practice of active learning and continuous assessment techniques

To see what proportion of their lesson time instructors use active learning method, semi-structured observation checklist was prepared and the sample instructors were observed at least two times while they are conducting the actual classroom. The observation checklist was divided in to 10 separate parts (each 5 minutes of a 50 minutes lesson) which helps to decide whether the instructor make the lesson active or not in each five minutes. This helps to identify what percentage of the class time that a given instructor uses active learning methods in his/her classroom. The result is presented in Fig. 1.

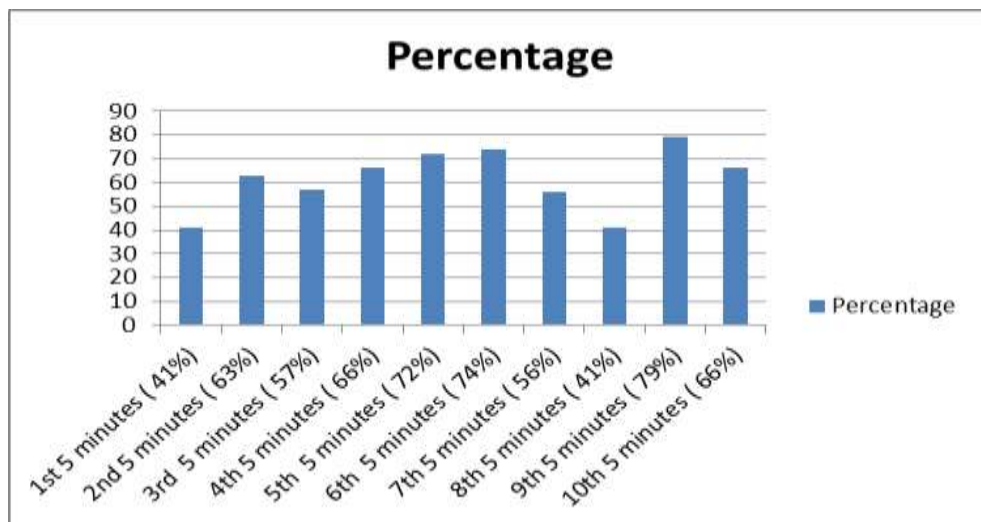


Figure 1. Percentage distributions of instructors used active learning method across the categories of time

As per the evidence presented on the above Fig. 1, on the average, most of the instructors use active learning methods (61.5%) of their class

time. However, instructors use less (41% of time active learning methods particularly at the beginning of their lesson. On the other hand, towards the end of the lesson that is at the 9th 5 minutes they use most of their time (79%) by employing active learning methods. This result shows that most of the sample instructors implement active learning methods in their classroom.

Regarding the practice of continuous assessment techniques, participant instructors were requested to list the most commonly used continuous assessment technique and the result is summarized and presented in Fig. 2.

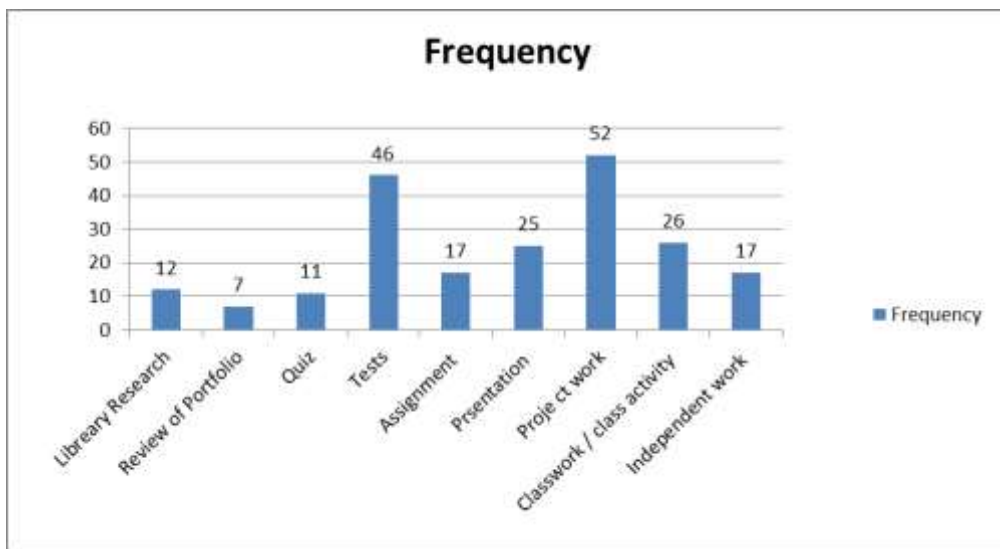


Figure 2. Frequency of continuous assessment techniques used by the instructors

A cursory look in to the Fig. 2 pointed out that the sampled instructors use different continuous assessment techniques to evaluate their students progress. As it is shown in Figure 2 from all continuous assessment techniques the most frequently used method by most instructors is the project work (52) followed by continuous tests (46). However, the least used method by the sample instructors is review of portfolio evidence (7). This result shows that

even though the number is small they have tried to apply continuous student assessment techniques.

Similarly, the focus group discussion result with students shows that every teacher is expected to assess his students progress continuously otherwise students as well as the officials may not accept the students result if he/she tries to assess only at once as summative assessment. This in turn clearly indicates that the implementation of the continuous assessment is becoming parts of the institution system.

Major problems encountered in implementation of active learning and continuous assessment techniques

There might be many problems that can affect instructors while implementing active learning and continuous assessment in the classroom. To identify these factors respondents were asked to state problems they faced in applying active learning and continuous assessment techniques through open ended questions and interview with instructors. Generally, these multifaceted problems can be categorized under the students related, instructors related, institutional and environmental related factors.

So as to use continuous assessment and active learning strategies in a classroom the most important thing is instructors willingness and commitment. When the instructors are willing they may overcome many challenges and tries to implement these two strategies in their classroom. For instance one of the interview instructor mentioned that “the use of active learning and continuous assessment is tough job; since it demand more preparation time.” In addition, the implementation of active learning method is very difficult when the class is large, and instructors might be dissatisfied and may lose their willingness to apply active learning methods in their classroom.

The other problem affecting the effective implementation of active learning is the ever-constant heavy load of teachers. For instance, one of the

interviewee Deans has said this: “instructors either due to lack of teacher in the department or to get additional income, they teach more than 24 credit hour per week which is beyond the expected standard for higher education in the country.” Teachers load is one major factor hindering their dedication to the demanding job of closely following every student in the class as well as critically assessing assignments, homework and quizzes. Teachers also have to do a lot in their office to prepare instruction, set activities, and construct questions, record assessment results and above all consulting students in need of their help.

Class size is also another challenge in higher education institution of Ethiopia. Active learning method requires careful plan, implementation, and giving regular feedback to the students work. Regarding class size, one of the interviewee teachers mentioned that:

[P]articularly in the first year, the average class size is 70-80 students and a teacher is compelled to teach up to 12 hours per week, (i.e. about four or five sections) the total number of students one is teaching is 240-300. The problem is even worse among those teachers shouldering overloads that may result in teaching of 700-1000 students by an individual teacher.

This number is too large to conduct active learning and to give immediate feedback to all works of students. Indeed, providing feedback has been highly suppressed under such a very high student population.

In addition, another interviewed instructor explained that “the normal salary that you get at the end of each month is not adequate to live with as a result you are expected to shoulder a number of classes with large number of students to earn additional income.” Thus, this instructor described that there is

a challenge in using active learning methods in the classroom. In this case, the instructor cannot provide frequent feedback for the students to learn better.

Moreover, the use of active learning and continuous assessment can be hindered by the availability of instructional materials. Both active learning method and continuous assessment strategies require resources; since student need to do their own learning by themselves but without adequate teaching materials and resources it is difficult to help them to do their work and learn better.

Besides, focus group discussion with the sample students confirmed that when the teacher requested them to read or copy some part of the module but when they go to the library and ask to borrow the module they could not find it in the library. Instructors in their interview also support the students' opinion by explaining that at the beginning, there were five copies of modules for 120 to 1200 students but now even these five copies may not exist in the library. Therefore, the students as well as the instructors are suffering from shortage of the materials.

Finally, university students come with a pedagogical background in which teachers used to have been providers of knowledge. Thus, they appear to be happier with instructors giving notes and lecturing in very attractive ways. They also have discomforts with series of assignments and activities that make them busy. Instead, many like to study independently and work on mid and final examinations. When students were asked to reflect upon instructors' classroom performance, problems and possible solutions; one of the problems mentioned was that instructors are not giving good notes, and that some teachers are giving them many assignments whose evaluation they do not trust.

Discussion

In this section, discussion has been made on three important issues: Instructors perception, their practice and major challenges on the use of active learning and continuous assessment:

Perception is one of the determinant factors for instructors to use both active learning and continuous assessment in their classroom. Regarding this the result of this study show that instructors perceive positively both active learning and continuous assessment given the average mean score of 3.8, and 3.89 respectively. This shows that instructors have believe that in active learning method is important for student learning. From this result, it is clear that the sample respondents believe that students better learn when the teacher serves as facilitator and when the students are doing their activities (Remesal, 2011). Accordingly, Akerlind (2004) argues that one's perception towards a certain issue determine his/her practice. As a result, instructors perception towards active learning and continuous assessment is a prerequisite to use these methods in the classroom. When they have a positive perception towards an active learning method, there will be a high probability to practice it in their classroom.

The second issue is instructors practice of active learning and continuous assessment in the classroom. The result shows that even though they are limited instructors are using both active learning and continuous assessment techniques in their classroom majority of them are not practicing as expected. This result is consistent with their perception. They believe that both these techniques are important for students learning as well as they tried to use it in their classroom. This result is substantiated by Maclellan & Soden (2004) which describes when teachers are trying to use active learning and continuous assessment techniques in their class to support different students in a class. Every student in a class may need different methods of learning the information, whereas, some students may need less support. Hence, the role of

the instructor is to empower students to realize that potential by supporting them when they need it.

Another issue is the factors that affect instructors' use of active learning and continuous assessment. From the collected data and analysis higher education instructors faced many challenges that affect them from employing active learning and continuous assessment techniques in a classroom. These factors emanate from the students, instructors, and institutional and environmental factors.

Factors related to instructors are related with their commitment and workload. Both continuous assessment and active learning method is a highly demanding job and it demands teacher commitment and willingness. Actually, in continuous assessment the role of the teachers in grading of students is more emphasized since teachers are expected to include different assessment technique for providing necessary and relevant information about individual learners' progress. According to Carless (2015) and Hernández (2012) in continuous assessment teachers are expected to incorporate their assessment strategies in their instruction, correcting their work, and have a discussion with students, parents about good standards of student work. All these require considerable interest and commitment of teachers. Thus, lack of commitment and motivation may cause teachers to be less successful in teaching.

Likewise, the use of active learning method highly demands teacher commitment and willingness, for instance when the teachers are trying to use active learning methods in their classroom; they may face different problems like limited class time. On the hand, it may demand them more preparation time in this case they might be dissatisfied and may lose their willingness to apply active learning methods in their classroom (Biggs & Tang, 2011).

The other problem related to instructors that affect the effective implementation of active learning and continuous assessment is overload of teachers. In Ethiopian higher education institutions, teachers have to take a

maximum load of 12 hours per week. Yet it is common to see some teachers teaching up to 36 hours per week. Supporting the above idea Tessema (2006) clearly described those teachers overload is not an exception with Ethiopian teachers, the commitment of teacher educators to all the aforementioned duties and responsibilities is not whole hearted. To earn additional income, they are usually engaged in additional activities, which make them busy. However, the problem is that extra-commitments of teachers in other income generating activities are often made at the expense of their regular job.

Students' attitude and experience towards the use of active learning and continuous assessment is another factor identified. College students have come with a pedagogical background in which teachers used to have been providers of knowledge. Thus, they appear to be happier with teachers giving notes and lecturing very attractive ways. They also have discomforts with series of assignments and activities that make them busy. Instead, many like to study independently and work on mid and final examinations. Supporting these idea scholars such Doyle (2008) explained that when students are not accustomed to student centered method of teaching they may show a kind of resistance because they are familiar with lecture and passive learning.

Finally, there are factors related to institution which includes large class size, shortage of classrooms, furniture, instructional aids and material and resources. Large class size is one of the factors that affect instructors' use of active learning and continuous assessment techniques. The use of these constructivist techniques requires careful plan, implementation, and giving regular feedback to the students' work. It is very difficult to use active learning method and provide feedback on the works of the students when the students' number is large in a class. As a result, student number in a class is one of hindering factor for the use of active learning in higher education institutions. Nevertheless, Hopkins (2002) and Stanley & Porter (2002) underlined the significance of feedback without it students do not know how

well they are doing and do not know what to do to improve and close the gap between current attainment and desired attainment.

The use of continuous assessment and active learning requires resources. If there is no adequate resource for teachers it is difficult to use them in a classroom. Scholars such as Doyle (2008) and Fink (2003) describe that since active learning method requires the student to do their own learning by themselves and there are no available teaching materials it cannot be materialized. For instance, if a certain teacher wants to teach reading for his/her students the best way is to develop this skill is to give a chance for his/her students to read. Generally, when there is lack of resources the instructors cannot implement active learning methods and students cannot develop the required skill.

Conclusion

The paper has attempted to examine higher education instructors' perception and practice on active learning and continuous assessment technique in Ethiopia. From the result of this study it can be concluded that higher education institution instructors' perception on active learning methods and continuous assessment techniques is positive. This indicates that they have a strong conviction that these two constructivist approach have a great impact on students learning.

What is remarkable is that higher education institution instructors are using active learning and continuous assessment techniques in their classroom though the numbers are limited. From this result one can conclude that they have awareness about these techniques either in their undergraduate, graduate training or through special workshop, seminar etc.

The paper has shown that however teachers are trying to use active learning and continuous assessment techniques in their classrooms they are hindered by different variables. Actually, the major challenges that affect

successful implementation of active learning methods and continuous assessment are related to the instructors (their commitment and workload), students in terms of their interest and past experience, and institutional factors (large class size, lack of teaching materials and resources).

Recommendations

As teachers have direct influence on student learning, no other factor is more important to consider than the teachers themselves. To bring teachers commitment on the use of active learning and continuous assessment techniques; the university should design continuous continuous professional development program for instructors.

Continuous professional development should be based on actual classroom situation. For example, if active learning is being hindered by large class size, subsequent training should accommodate recent strategies of how to manage active learning in large class sizes.

The university should also arrange Continuous Professional Development or at least series of short-term workshop or seminars and arranging inter-college visits for experience sharing is also believed to assist the success of implementing of active learning and continuous assessment techniques.

Furthermore, students need to be very well aware of the new educational innovations. The colleges have to do also its best to support students by providing materials that could support active learning that will help them learn by doing. The initiative taken to provide students with reading materials is a very good example but the quality should be maintained to the educational reform advocated.

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