Abstract
An assessment model is not absolutely necessary for good teaching, however, it does enhance learning process because it gives the teachers and students opportunity to check, diagnose, evaluate, prescribe and describe learning outcome. Most assessment models provide either or both numeric and letter grades. Both can be ineffective in addressing student performance; therefore, sometimes narrative details and subjective assessments are provided. This paper discusses different features to look for in an ideal and cost effective model. This analysis will help weekend schools find a suitable model and use it consistently to enhance learning. When grading policies improve, discipline and morale of the students always follow.

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Assessing Student Performance: A Necessary Tool to Enhance Learning

By: Husain A. Nuri

Every educational institute has one or the other form of assessing student performance. It is an important tool that not only helps students understand, orient and refocus their learning objectives, but also provides necessary data to assess the strength and scope of the program and the school in general. If a school has some form of accreditation, it has to meet certain minimum standards to keep the accreditation. Most effective assessment models and grading practices provide accurate, specific and timely feedback designed to improve student performance (Marzano, 2000, O'Connor, 2007). Assessing student performance is, therefore, important to maintain education standard and accreditation.

However, when it comes to the Sunday school, there is no accreditation to maintain, therefore, no external authority to report to, and as such no urgency to have an assessment model

in place. If they have a model in place, for the most, it is inadequate and does not provide the greatest benefit out of it. In the USA, over 1000 Sunday schools, catering to well over 200,000 students annually, the inadequacy of assessment model and downplaying with the importance of having one will have long lasting negative impact on the society.

Assessment can be ineffective:

Before discussing the importance of having a good assessment model in place, it is critical to understand how a good model can also be ineffective. Many schools adopt a letter grades as assessment model. It can give some idea about learning process and progression of a student; however, it can be far inadequate in properly assessing student performance (Payne, 1974). If letter grades are to be used, there needs to be a great deal of information synthesis before such letter grade can make sense (Stiggins, 1994).

The cut-off between two different letter grades is always arbitrary and difficult to justify and synthesize. For example, in most instances, a letter grade B range between 80 and 89. Students in both ends of the range get the same letter grade, however, their acutal points differ by 9 points. On the other hand, students with just one point difference, with a score of 79 and another with a score of 90, receives a grade of C or A.

To overcome this shortcoming of letter grade assessment models, narrative details and checklist of learning outcome was adopted in many models. To some extent it serves the purpose, but schools with limited resources, particularly the weekend schools, such a model can be exasperating.

Good narrative takes time to prepare, but over a time as teachers complete more narratives; their comments tend to become more standardized. Parents often find such standardized, detailed checklist of learning outcome too difficult to interpret. It was argued that

such standardized checklist seldom indicate the appropriateness of the students' performance in relation to achievement expected of that level (Afflerbach and Sammons, 1991).

No one model can be effective:

Because of inconsistency and inadequacy of each assessment model, schools were often required to define their primary purpose of grading, focus on that objective and develop an appropriate model or approach for grading (Cangelosi, 1990). When it comes to the weekend schools, given their limited resources, finding and utilizing an appropriate assessment model becomes a distant proposition.

Assessment is not essential to teaching:

In several studies it was shown that grading and reporting were not essential to teach well (Frisbie and Waltman, 1992). Teachers do not need them to become better teachers and students do not need to learn better. Therefore, the question is why an assessment model is important?

What the teachers do need in the classroom is to check regularly how the students are doing, what they have learned and what difficulties they are facing. Checking helps the teacher to diagnose and prescribe and assessment model helps to evaluate and describe (Bloom et. al. 1981). While an assessment model is not absolutely necessary for good teaching, it does enhance learning process because it gives the teachers and students opportunity to check, diagnose, evaluate, prescribe and describe learning outcome.

Overcome shortcoming of subjective assessment:

Earlier we mentioned that some of the assessment models tend to become descriptive and standardized in order to overcome the shortcoming of the letter grades. The more a model

becomes descriptive and analytical, the greater is the risk of it becoming influenced by subjectivity of the teacher.

For this reason, some of the educators preferred to have a holistic assessment approach to capture entire dimension of students' learning process (Ornstein, 1994). They argue that teachers know their students, understand various dimensions of students' learning skill, understand efforts undertaken by the students, know their level of commitments, and above all, have the clear notion of progress made. Their subjective analysis can diagnose, prescribe and describe students' performance very well. It can yield very accurate description of what students have learned and how they have progressed.

However, weekend school teachers must remain aware of the shortcoming and challenges of subjective assessment of students' performance. Subjectivity can translate into bias and bias can lead to disastrous consequence. If challenged by parents, subjective assessment is difficult to defend. From the students' view point, subjective assessment may not be convincing enough if two students are marginally different and one wants to outshine the other.

Teachers' perception of students' behavior can significantly influence their judgment of scholastic performance (Hills, 1991). When assessing performance of students, those with behavioral problems tend to receive strict judgment and lower scores, even if they performed well. Students who are attentive in class, even if they perform as well or as bad as a problem student, their score tends to be higher because of granting reward or because of subjective anticipation of them doing well.

Problem boys tend to get stricter assessment compared to problem girls (Bennett et al. 1993). When parents challenge the subjective assessment, the level and degree of challenge translates positively or negatively in the subsequent assessment of the students. Even the

handwriting of students influences the teachers. Students with neat handwriting tend to receive favorable assessment than those who are not as neat.

Whatever assessment models weekend school adopts, it is advisable to minimize subjectivity in the assessment. Weekend schools rely upon the teachers for assessment, but they cannot afford to train their teachers adequately to understand the subjectivity. If at all they need to use subjectivity, teachers need to carefully reduce negative judgment and someone should monitor the assessment for consistency.

Assessment should reward, not punish:

Most students will respond positively to a high score as recognition of their effort and success. Some will work hard to maintain the high score and avoid falling into low grades. On the other hand, if high scores are given disproportionate to students' effort, there will be less motivation to learn and excel.

On the other hand, no studies show giving low grades as a punishment prompt students to give more efforts or learn better. In fact, none of the studies support giving low grades as punishment. When students continue to get low scores, they tend to defend themselves by considering purpose of education as irrelevant and meaningless.

In weekend schools, where student attendance is mostly at the behest of parental pressure, grading should, under no circumstance, be a tool for punishment. Whenever circumstance arises where a teacher feels compelled to give low score, instead the teacher should regard the students' work as inadequate or incomplete.

In the weekend schools environment, giving a failing grade have no educational value and in the long run only helps the student to abandon the school. For the most part, students are

smart enough to recognize that performance in the weekend school is not a tool to get college admission, scholarship and a better career.

Weekend school teachers should, therefore, avoid giving low scores as punishment and avoid giving failing grades. Instead, they should motivate the students to perform well. Instead of giving failing grades, teachers can give 'require additional effort' as an alternative of 'F' grade.

Ineffective assessment—zero for missing works:

Although there are evidences that giving punishment grades does not work (Guskey, 2000) and that there is mathematical flaw in using zero in 100-point scale, many teachers tend to give zero for missing assignment or homework.

Those who support giving zero claim that students who do not turn in homework or assignment need to face consequence. They are right. But the consequence should be to finish the homework or assignment during the break time or after school, often by involving parents in the process. Parental involvement helps, because lack of parental support for weekend school programs is one of the causes for students' apathy. Giving zero is not the appropriate consequence.

Ineffective assessment—averaging:

Averaging of exam scores is another ineffective method of assessment. If a school conducts four exams and a student takes only two exams, the average of two exams may not reflect true performance of the student, if he had taken all four exams. In another example, a student who takes the first exam and scores 99%, but does not take the rest of the exams, his average score of 99% is as misleading as 24.75% if the denominator is 4, for four exams. A 99% score does not indicate if the student fulfilled the entire course material of the academic year.

Only the teacher will know the student did not acquire full understanding of the course, but the score will give totally contradictory picture.

Ineffective assessment—"semester killer":

Assessment of student performance based on a single project, test or assignment can be termed as "semester killer." A single project, test or assignment either makes or breaks a student. If a weekend school had nine months of teaching, a project based on one or two months not only jeopardizes rest of the seven months, but also undermines the overall effectiveness of the program.

Why weekend schools should assess students:

Despite all the debate about assessment models, and despite different shortcomings, weekend Islamic schools must assess student performance and report it to the students and parents. One of the main features of any assessment model is the ability for schools to issue report cards. All public and private schools in the USA have necessary tools to generate report cards and interpret the report to enhance education. However, Islamic weekend schools often do not have a standard grading system or cannot generate meaningful report cards. Their inability, inaccuracy and inconsistency in grading not only show lack of focus, but also lower student moral and parental confidence.

Due to this reason, the student, parent and teacher expectations remain at the lowest level. Parents become used to not seeing any formal report cards; as it were the concept of report cards is foreign to them. Most parents do agree if they were given some sort of report cards, they would consider the efforts worthwhile.

What features to look for in a model:

Identify the features a school should be looking for in a model. Ask some of the questions to determine how much fund can be allocated to implement the model. If a school cannot afford to have multi user license, can a single user license serve the need? Who can be trained to use the model and can the person dedicate time to manage the model during the course of the school year? Can you get help from the software company if needed?

Ideally the model should allow assessment to be objective and consistent. The model should allow the teacher to clarify his/her scoring methodologies in specific terms. The model should clearly explain how the students' work will be evaluated and what is expected. The model should create student awareness of the criteria used in assessing peer performance. The model should provide useful feedback regarding the effectiveness of the model. The model should provide real time data. The model should allow the user to transfer the data into meaningful reports for parents and students.

Keep it simple—keep it effective:

The author developed an Excel based model that provides the following thirteen features: (1) The model should be relatively easy to use for Sunday school teachers. (2) The model's effectiveness in eliminating subjectivity of teachers. (3) The model's ability to give scope to modify some features, yet maintain its integrity. (4) The model should accommodate names of maximum 40 students in a class, although typical class size is 25. (5) School's ability to decide how many exams will be conducted in a school year and their weight. (6) Teacher's ability to decide the weight of homework. (7) Teacher's ability to decide scores of homework and how they would be graded. (8) The model's ability to blend the weights of homework and exam scores to overall total of 100%. (9) The models ability to accommodate bonus points and special

project scores. (10) Eliminate the effect of zero. (11) The model's ability to translate the 100 point score into letter grades. (12) The model's ability to generate real time results. (13) The model's scope to translate the data into meaningful reports.

The assessment model:

Below are some of the screen shots of the model. The homework worksheet is the most important worksheet of the model. The homework worksheet has several input cells that require careful understanding. The cells where a user can input data are white in color. (Fig. 1)

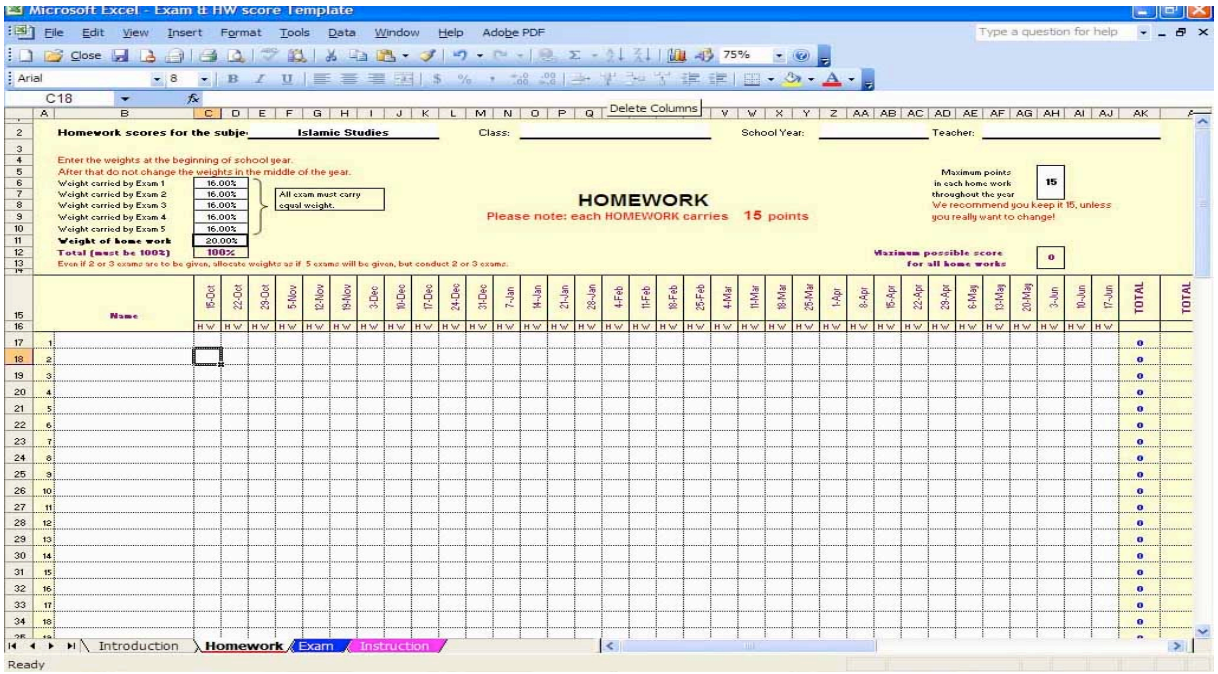


Fig 1: Homework worksheet to record homework.

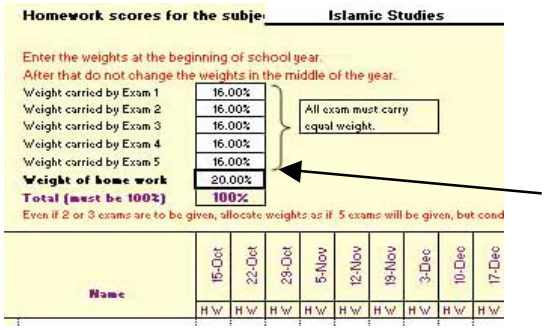


Fig 2: Weights of exam and homework – the default is 16% for each of the 5 exam and 20% for the homework.

If the default is acceptable to teachers, they can leave it untouched; else they can change it as instructed, in the beginning of the school year.

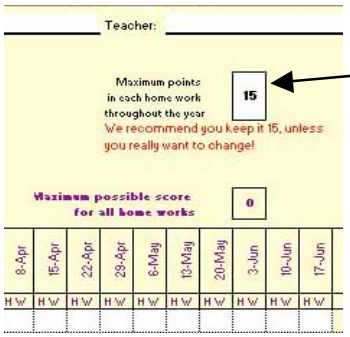
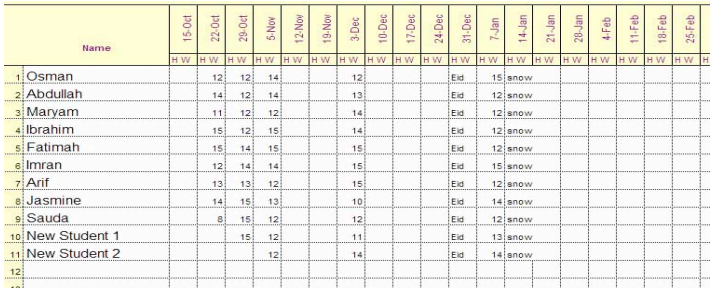


Fig 3: Maximum points for each homework, throughout the year.

Out of the 15 points, 5 points are for timely submission of homework and 10 points for correct responses.



	Name	15-Oct	22-Oct	29-Oct	5-Nov	12-Nov	19-Nov	3-Dec	10-Dec	17-Dec	24-Dec	31-Dec	7-Jan	14-Jan	21-Jan	28-Jan	4-Feb	11-Feb	18-Feb	25-Feb
		H W	H W	H W	H W	H W	H W	H W	H W	H W	H W	H W	H W	H W	H W	H W	H W	H W	H W	H
1	Osman		12	12	14			12				Eid	15	snow						
2	Abdullah		14	12	14			13				Eid	12	snow						
3	Maryam		11	12	12			14				Eid	12	snow						
4	Ibrahim		15	12	15			14				Eid	12	snow						
5	Fatimah		15	14	15			15				Eid	12	snow						
6	Imran		12	14	14			15				Eid	15	snow						
7	Arif		13	13	12			15				Eid	12	snow						
8	Jasmine		14	15	13			10				Eid	14	snow						
9	Sauda		8	15	12			12				Eid	12	snow						
10	New Student 1			15	12			11				Eid	13	snow						
11	New Student 2				12			14				Eid	14	snow						
12																				

Fig 4: Homework scores are transferred from handwritten form into the computer.

Cells are left blank on days when homework were not assigned.

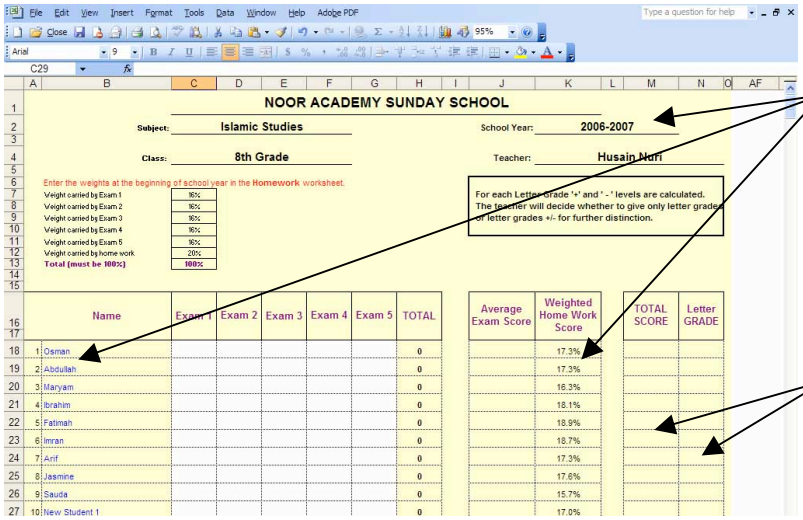


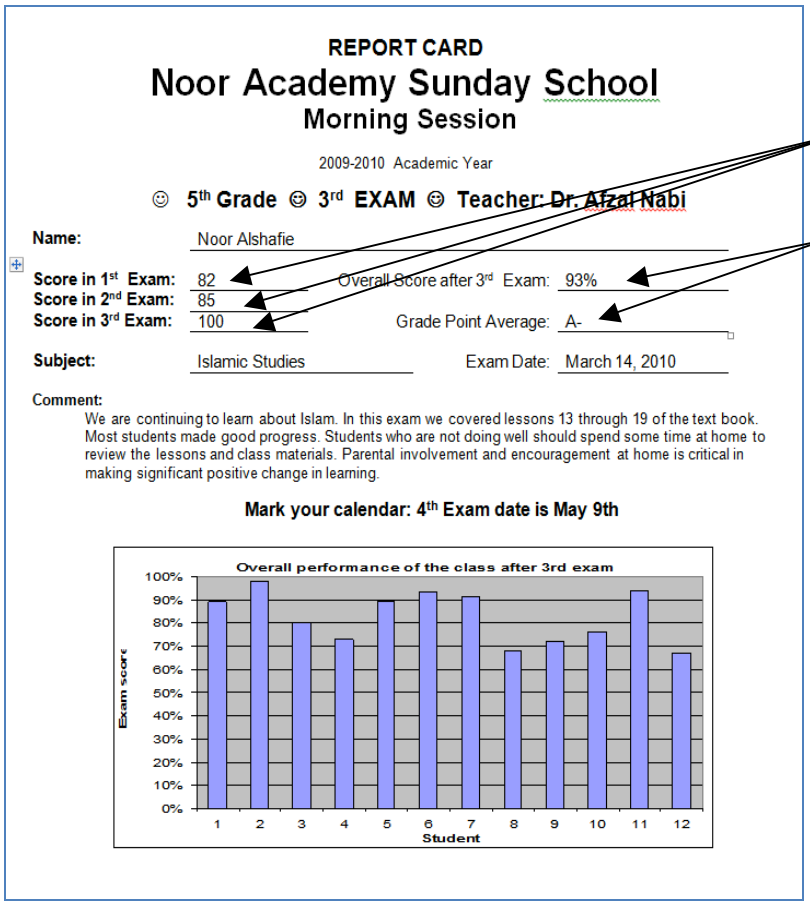
Fig 8: Information entered in Homework worksheet gets populated in the Exam worksheet, e.g. class, school year, teacher name, student name and homework scores (ref. fig. 6).

But unless exam scores are entered, the program will not calculate Total Score and Letter Grade.

Report card:

Keeping records are not enough unless these records can be transferred into a report card that can be sent to the parents. Simple mail merge features of MS-Word and Graph features of Excel can be used to generate reports. The report card has comments by the teacher or principal. These are common for the entire class. It can be individualized for each student. In order to do that the teacher has to provide individualized comments for each student and data document has

to be set accordingly. A graph is placed in the report card, without mentioning the student name, to show how the overall class has performed after the 1st exam.



REPORT CARD

Noor Academy Sunday School

Morning Session

2009-2010 Academic Year

☺ 5th Grade ☺ 3rd EXAM ☺ Teacher: Dr. Afzal Nabi

Name: Noor Alshafie

Score in 1st Exam: 82

Score in 2nd Exam: 85

Score in 3rd Exam: 100

Overall Score after 3rd Exam: 93%

Grade Point Average: A-

Subject: Islamic Studies

Exam Date: March 14, 2010

Comment:

We are continuing to learn about Islam. In this exam we covered lessons 13 through 19 of the text book. Most students made good progress. Students who are not doing well should spend some time at home to review the lessons and class materials. Parental involvement and encouragement at home is critical in making significant positive change in learning.

Mark your calendar: 4th Exam date is May 9th

First three exam scores and overall grade point and letter grade is shown.

Fig xx: Mail merge document of a simple report card

Conclusion:

When grading policies improve, discipline and morale of students always follow. Use of this or similar assessment models in weekend Islamic schools can significantly improve student performance. Proper record keeping will give the administration increased control on the quality and effectiveness of the school. Every class can be uniformly and consistently graded. The model provides real time data. The model also encourages some degree of teacher involvement and

accountability. The goal of assessment should be to encourage learning and student involvement in school or curriculum.

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