Enhancing 21st Century Skills Through Digital Collaborative Assessment Practices in Lesotho Schools

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	Collaborative assessment, particularly in digitally connected environments, is becoming crucial in education setting. Studies showed that collaborative assessments are often highly structured learning activities that aim to guide and empower students to refine their skills in reviewing the work of their peers against the set criteria. Even although these practices can be essential in fostering 21st century skills, students are not aware of them as they are still taught and assessed through traditional approaches because teachers tend to avoid integrating collaborative practices in their teaching. Therefore, the aim of this study is to awaken teachers' collaborative assessment practices and recommend strategies that foster collaborative learning. In doing this, a collaborative learning theory was adapted to underpin the study. The study used a systematic literature review, where the process commenced with problem identification from articles and grey literature. Articles were first screened by their titles to find relevance. A further screening was performed by reading abstracts and irrelevant articles were excluded. Eligibility was another criterion for inclusion and exclusion by reading full-texts and these were included in the final analysis. The study identified that digital collaborative assessment has several benefits to the students: it improves problem-solving; encourages social interaction; promotes diversity; improves communication skills; encourages engagement and develops critical thinking skills. The study also recommends the best practices of carrying out digital collaborative assessments that teachers should follow when designing active group activities; implementing project-based learning; devoting time to team building. When higher education aligns the assessment with curricula objectives, collaborative assessment can effectively impact learning.

Keywords: 21st century skills; critical thinking; collaborative assessment; level of engagement; social interaction. |

Introduction

Collaborative assessment, particularly in digitally connected environments, is becoming crucial in education setting (Kurata, 2023). Since collaborative assessment is important for enhancing the 21st century skills for future relevance, its mastery is critical for preparing students for the complexities of the modern workforce in future (Jovanna, 2022; Ghazal, Al-Samarraie & Wright 2019). Studies have shown a growing debate surrounding planning and monitoring students' progress in education settings. This debate is on the approach that teachers can appropriately use to measure students' capability in a group. This means changing the traditional structure of assessment and adapting to assessment methods that are more student-centred and relevant to the demands of the world of work (Jovanna, 2022; Adefila et al., 2021; Meijer, Hoekstra & Brouwer, 2020; Marcinek, 2011). This has initiated a change from traditional assessment methods and employment of assessment methods that integrate and nurture these skills that include critical thinking and creativity (Kurata, 2023). Studies further evident that traditional assessment methods that teachers use stress rote memorization of content which overlook the development and evaluation of 21st century skills such as collaboration, critical thinking and problem-solving (Kurata, 2023; Ayanwale, 2023).

This implies that these new assessment methods can replace the old methods which present no place for development of 21st century skills needed for filling the gap between schooling and labour market. It therefore induces schools to develop advanced programme that can aim at empowering students with skills to embrace opportunities and addressing these challenges in the digital era (Kurata, 2023; Parmini, Raiputra, Mukhamdanah, Aridawati, & Sudiartha, 2023). Additionally, Kurata, 2023 and Ayanwale (2023) also evident that for countries to prepare their nationals with skills that will enable them to succeed and become competitive in the modern world, traditional methods of assessment are no longer relevant. For this reason, it calls for a need to adapt collaborative assessment across education sector, in order to develop the 21st century skills (Boud & Bearman 2022; Reiger & Reiger, 2020, van Aalast 2013). Scholars defined collaborative assessment as an approach to assessment whereby students work together in pairs or groups, allowing them to benefit from their peers' knowledge and teacher feedback in the same activity Kuwabara, Einbinder, Sun & Azizi, 2020). In other words, they are trying to assess some aspects of their own learning as a group together. Collaborative assessment is characterized by two features, the feedback from both teacher and peers reflecting on individual student's capability. This reflection helps for both teachers and other peers give verbal feedback since it does not only imply giving grades. Other than enhancing understanding it also builds collaboration because it involves students working together, in pairs or small groups to evaluate their learning and that of their peer (Zhu & Ergulec 2023; van Aalast, 2013). Studies further show that motivation increases when students are actively engaged in learning settings and in programmes that involve collaborative assessment because it fosters creativity (Lin, Hsu, Lin, & Hsiao, 2018; Marashi & Khatami, 2017). This indicates that education must prioritize the growth of students' cognitive, social, and emotional skills in addition to their acquisition of considerable information in pertinent areas if it is to assist young people in acquiring the professional skills necessary for future employment (Pellegrino, 2017).

Even though these practices can be essential in fostering 21st century skills, students are not aware of them because they are still taught and assessed through traditional approaches as teachers tend to avoid adapting inquiry-based collaborative assessment practices in their classrooms (Ghazal & Al-Samarraie, 2019). Due to a lack of training, there are several professional, technological, and financial reasons for this avoidance (Serfontein & Smit, 2021 & Ghazal & Al-Samarraie, 2019). Other studies have shown that even when teachers integrate collaborative practices in the classrooms, they tend to emphasize the product of the given task, rather than teamwork and process (Fransen, Kirschner, & Erkens, 2013). This encourages students to prioritize completing tasks over understanding the primary concepts which might lead to ineffective learning. Although it might increase their motivation when looking at the grades obtained, it might also compromise learning process itself because students can avoid challenging tasks. Unfortunately, there is limited information regarding the extent to which 21st century skills are integrated in the collaborative assessment methods of Lesotho (Kurata, 2023). Therefore, this study aims to awaken teachers' practices by showing the importance of collaborative assessment and the strategies that need to be used to foster collaborative learning.

Research Questions

The study tries to respond to these questions:
a) To what extent does collaborative assessment foster 21st century skills?
b) Which effective collaborative assessment practices can foster these skills?

Literature Review

Need for collaborative assessment in Lesotho
Meijer et al. (2020) define collaborative assessment as highly defined assessment activities that aim to guide and empower students to refine their 21st century skills in reviewing the work of their peers against the set criteria. This refers to a situation where students work together in pairs or groups, which allows them to benefit from the knowledge of their peers and their teachers' feedback in the same activity. After a report on skills audit which was performed in Lesotho, it was found that there is a mismatch between skills possessed by students and the skills demanded by the market (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2023; Thaanyane, 2021). This results in graduates struggling to find the right jobs that match their skills leading to unemployment or underemployment. It also contributes to skill gap in the digital workplace, making it difficult for them to fill the right positions. If employed, it is likely to cost an organization training or adjustment of the curricula, in order to align the assessment with needs of the students. On the other hand, Kurata (2023) postulated that the arouse as a result of teachers demonstrating insufficient understanding of the implementation of authentic assessment that target and nurture the 21st century skills. Collaborative assessments that can be used to foster 21st century skills can take many forms, but for this study, only two forms are discussed: the group assessment and peer assessment.

Group assessments (also known as team assessments) are those assessment tasks assigned to students to work collaboratively on them and resulting in the same mark being awarded to the group members (Zhu & Ergulec, 2023). This entails grading or providing comments for the group on both the collaborative learning

process and the collaborative learning product, which can become ambiguous in the group's work, after students complete a task in a group and receive the same assessment score (Meijer et al., 2020). It typically succeeds in realizing this promise when combined with assessment tools that make use of suitable learning behaviors from students. It has the ability to dramatically improve student engagement, performance, marks, and retention (Sewlal 2024). These benefits might not emerge in the absence of such assessment procedures. Compared with individual learning, collaborative approaches promote higher quality learning, deepening understanding of course content, becoming more creativity, getting greater retention of material, and greater student satisfaction. Because working as a group on a common task or problem can be an effective way to equip students with teamwork skills, which are highly valued in the professional world. If groups are too large, motivation and effort of individual student can be lesser than when studying alone, and there is a likelihood of being not serious and reliable in conducting this assessment in a group. As a result, teachers should mix students based on their capacity to construct offered assessment works so that the better students can benefit from their greater contribution.

Peer assessment

Another form of collaborative assessment is peer assessment According to Allsop et al. (2020), Arnold (2021), Castro et al. (2021), and others, peer assessment is a particular kind of collaborative assessment technique that is best suited to boost student engagement and learning as well as facilitate the development of digital workplace skills. This includes students assessing the work of their peers (Mphahlele, 2024). This one refers to a situation where students provide feedback and grade their classmates' work (Zhu & Ergulec, 2023). The teacher would then assess the students' work, taking into account the feedback provided by their peers. It is considered as a reliable collaborative assessment approach because it relies on individual student's ability to self-evaluate his or her personal contribution to group. When students are aware of their contributions throughout the learning process, their participation increases. Collaborative assessment is also the essential strategy that improves 21st century skills as students work in small groups to complete tasks assigned. Hence, the foundation of collaborative assessment originates from Vygotsky theory of proximal (1978) which implies the dependence on other students' knowledge. Therefore, incorporating technology into the learning and teaching would assist in improving their skills. Hence, peer assessment can also help students become aware of other group members' abilities which can help building their own collaborative learning skills (Rizzo, 2013). This can be a valuable way of assessing students' work as it allows for a more comprehensive assessment using online tools to facilitate it.

Theoretical Framework

Collaborative Learning Theory

This study draws on Collaborative Learning Theory, which is rooted in Lev Vygotsky's idea (1978), Zone of Proximal Development. This theory emphasizes that learning does not only occur through interaction between teachers and students but can also occur through interaction among students. He explains that learners rely on one another to accomplish tasks that they would not otherwise be able to complete individually. He argues that teachers should measure their students' capabilities to solve issues rather than only their knowledge gain. According to this assumption, a student can complete his or her work if guided by more skilled classmates or adults. According to Vygotsky (1978), collaborative learning is essential for developing critical thinking skills, with research indicating that pupils remember more material when working in groups. It is significant to this study because arming students with 21st-century skills not only supports the development of competent and adaptive individuals, but also builds a more inclusive, competitive, and sustainable society in the current period (Oswald & Zhao, 2021). Peer-to-peer learning supports deeper thinking in the classroom, and these abilities include critical thinking, working together in complicated situations, and having a thorough awareness of social and global concerns (Wang et al., 2024). Group learning, according to the principle of collaborative learning, helps in the development of students' higher order thinking, oral communication, self-management, and leadership abilities. Additionally, students can hone their leadership and organizing abilities. These practices are influenced by 21st century skills and can help in building upon students' leadership and organizational skills.

Research methodology

The study adapted the systematic literature review based on Kitchen et al. (2010) guidelines proposed to identify, evaluate and interpret results if the study at hand. The process commenced searching for literature to find all studies relevant to the current study. This stage is referred to as the identification of the problem which was done by identifying research articles from database using the phrase "collaborative assessment in higher education". The process ended with 48 articles which was refined into 36 after removing duplicates and irrelevant ones. This was followed by the second stage, the pre-screening of the downloaded articles through their titles and those that were found irrelevant were excluded. A further screening was performed by reading the abstracts of the remaining work to find their relevance to the study at hand and if the abstract is found irrelevant it was excluded from forming part of the study. Following a screening stage, relevant articles were

further screened for eligibility in the study. This was done through screening the remaining articles further using the terms "collaborative assessment or learning and higher education". This means that all searched items which did not meet the criteria were excluded in the study. All was done to narrow down the search to respond to the research questions for this study. Then these articles were included in the final analysis. Then findings from all these articles were summarized to form a new knowledge and themes for the current study. Based on this summary, two themes emerged and sub-themes under each theme were discussed in response to the two research questions of this study.

Findings and discussions

This section discusses the findings and discussions of the findings of this study. To respond to the first research question of this study "To what extent does collaborative assessment develop the 21st century skills? the study identified the following benefits:

It improves problem-solving skills
It was found that collaborative assessment builds students' core skills such as teamwork, leadership, negotiation, analytic skills in evaluating the work of others which are referred to as 21st century skills. It allows students to develop tolerance and empathy in working with other views, cultures and perspectives. Working through a problem or assignment as a group can help students develop their own problem-solving skills. This aligns with what Hitipeuw, Danardana, & Pali, 2023; Martiner (2022) and Cretus (2016) articulated that collaborative learning models can be used to promote openness and when developing these skills used to solve problems as well as increasing attitudes towards respecting diversity. This also concurs with Vygotsky (1978) that collaborative learning theory increases members of the group's capability to resolve problems and develop their leadership skills that can be used to solve problem at the digital workplace in future. These skills further enable individuals to work together with others to solve problems together and achieve common goals (Sanyal & Hisam (2018; Le, Janssen, & Wubbels, 2018; Tomasello, 2018). This can create cooperation within the group and adaptation to the group as collaboration skills relate to students' ability to work together to achieve common goals as it has been presented by Tang, Vezzani, & Eriksson, (2020) and Erdoğan (2019). This process of debate and discussion helps them to develop their analytical skills, as they must evaluate the validity of different arguments and synthesise information from various sources. In this way, collaborative learning fosters a more sophisticated approach to problem-solving and decision-making.

It encourages social interaction
It was also found that learning approaches that make students work together help them acquire and share knowledge that Vygotsky (1978) showed that it is acquired through interaction. These enhance learning performance as students teach each other how to address misunderstandings and clarifying misconceptions. So, this means students can inter-independently achieve goals together successfully. Throughout this process students practice and develop social skills which will help them form and maintain strong personal relations as they share and listen towards a common goal using technological tools. These findings support Rezaei (2020) ideas that working in groups creates situations in which schoolwork is perceived not as a task or routine but as an opportunity to interact on issues of personal importance. Technological tools can also be utilized in collaborative assessments to facilitate communication and enhance students' social interaction. These technological tools include online discussion boards, shared documents, and virtual meeting platforms which support collaborative learning in both physical and virtual environments.

This finding is also in agreement with Arnold (2021) that when peer assessment is facilitated through technological tools, it does not only contribute to individual's cognitive understanding of the technical contents, but also develops graduate skills such as communication, teamwork and other workplace skills. By interacting with peers who may have different viewpoints and areas of expertise, students learn to navigate complex issues and arrive at well-rounded conclusions. Like Poort et. al (2022) cited, when members are given a chance to choose, they are likely to choose to collaborate with their friends or peers and this might affect their level of engagement. This also diminishes the level of engagement when members are of the same culture because they feel like not challenging their friends' views aligning with Vygotsky (1978) that collaboration fosters competitiveness and inclusiveness.

It promotes diversity
The study findings also reveal that students' communication abilities differ when participating in learning and discussion activities. As a result, there are students who are able to be active in discussion activities (collaboration) but are not able to communicate well or vice versa because of their background as previously indicated from Rohid & Rusmawati (2019). It allows students to develop tolerance and empathy in working with other views, cultures and perspectives. It creates a comfortable interactive learning environment because it fills the gaps in members' understanding from diverse backgrounds. It also gives them opportunity to increase cultural awareness and generate new knowledge from different peers. Since it fosters collaborative abilities, group work is seen as an essential teaching approach that benefits both instructors and students. It

also inspires students by giving them chance to learn from their peers, which allows them to consider the issue from multiple perspectives and fosters creativity as indicated in Rezaei (2020). Effective collaborative assessments should be thoughtfully designed aligned with learning objectives ensuring that they incorporate those elements that enhance diverse learning experience such as peer review, group projects, and reflective practices. They must also be designed along the learning outcomes, evaluation criteria and facilitation of peer-to-peer feedback.

As put by Hernandez-Selles et al. (2019) and Kurata et al., 2013), students' cultural awareness increases since they have the opportunity to work with diverse peers worldwide and are able to generate new knowledge using technology tools that bridge the distance between students and instructors. Higher education needs to examine how technological tools and platforms can be integrated to enhance and support collaborative assessment practices, facilitating real-time feedback, and streamlined assessment processes. Since it brings students from different background, there is a possibility of different opinions and perspectives. As a result, open-mindedness and acceptance are encouraged. Although it might end up in misunderstanding or language barriers, group members are likely to bring their culturally diverse which helps in becoming more creative and innovative because of technology, resulting in positive impact on problem solving than working alone. This also can contribute to quality of learning and group's decision making. Contrarily, it might lead to members' conflicts causing members to withdraw from the group or even decreasing their individual engagement in a group.

It improves communication skills
The findings further show that collaborative assessment provides students sufficient opportunities to practise and refine their communication skills. Working in groups requires clear and effective verbal and non-verbal communication, including active listening, articulating thoughts, and giving and receiving feedback. These skills are essential for success in both academic and professional settings. By engaging in group discussions and projects, students learn how to convey their ideas succinctly and respectfully, negotiate meaning, and build on the contributions of others. The use of verbal communication skills to share ideas and explain concepts clearly has the potential to improve written communication skills as more skills are used to improve writing or and editing processes. By engaging in collaborative assessment, students can improve their communication skills, deepen their understanding of the materials of their courses and develop valuable teamwork abilities that employers seek for. The class can be divided into small groups, where more time will be allotted, and more chances of conversation can be performed. Additionally, it was found that collaborative assessment can improve the quality of student's communication through social networking. This implies that it psychologically facilitates students to communicate with their partners in a relaxed and safe atmosphere.

It encourages engagement
Unlike in the past, where classrooms have been somewhat solitary places where students could only collaborate with those in their immediate vicinity. There are no longer barriers to boundaries of the classrooms because technology has made it possible to learn, connect, and collaborate in new ways. As indicated earlier by Oluwayimika and Eberechukwu (2022), students are motivated and can actively participate in technological class activities because they no longer fear to speak in front of their peers. Because members are expected to be active and give their inputs, all members are likely to be productive and a more positive attitude is being built. This is because it enables them to exchange ideas and information virtually while providing peer support and feedback online (Kim & Ryu, 2013). It could increase motivation of the engaged members and deeper understanding of that foster better grasping of concepts and materials studied because ideas are discussed and explained to each other. Students feel a sense of responsibility when they are actively participating rather than being passive. This fosters deeper engagement as they get positive peer feedback on their strengths and weaknesses. It also motivates them to be working as a team because it stimulates engagement and they feel ownership of the completed tasks.

It develops critical thinking skills
These skills help members of the group to resolve their conflicts, brainstorm ideas, create content and evaluate those ideas. It also encourages higher-level reasoning, problem-solving skills and filling the gaps in the groups' understanding as well as providing them the opportunities to work with other peers from different backgrounds. In addition, collaborative work increases students' responsibility and participation and provides a learning environment that mimics a real-world working environment. This is because digital collaborative learning environment uses communication tools that help students work together to tackle real world problems that are challenging. This finding supports Hadjerrouit (2013) that online collaborative learning increases student participation and contributions to created knowledge. Since members can analyse issues more deeply, they can generate innovative solutions because of combined diverse perspectives. This can also improve clear communication leading to critical thinking which may foster clear ideas that strengthen collaboration. It can also reduce bias because of different viewpoints that enhance understanding among members.

Best collaborative assessment practices as they relate to the second research question:

Design active group activities.
The study finds that teachers have to design active collaborative assessment activities, clarifying to students what they are expected to achieve, providing them with resources for succeeding and explaining the benefits thereafter. Assessment activities must be linked to the purpose of evaluation and help teachers find out what individual student knows and can do. This concurs with Van Loo (2017) that assessment activities designed should give students opportunity to demonstrate knowledge, understanding and acquired skills. This can result in positive and productive learning experiences for students because assessment is designed to meet or is based on their needs, their functioning and well-being in the society. it also fosters collective ownership among members and enhances collaborative assessment process.

Collaborative assessment of a group or a pair must be *aligned with objectives of collaborative learning* because it helps in fostering positive interdependence as students depend on each other in order to succeed in a group assignment. Despite teachers' limited knowledge about how to assess collaborative learning as articulated by Meijer et al (2020), this can result in free riding where students may take advantage of not participating because of interdependence if assignment is not aligned with objectives of collaborative learning. So, students can misbehave knowing that others will do the work for the whole group, and it is likely to lead to less learning. In general, aligning assignment with group's objectives increases motivation fosters high order thinking because they prompt students to analyse, evaluate and synthesize information. As students communicate and share ideas together, it helps them explore different perspectives making it easy for comprehension of the topic at hand by all members of the group.

Devote time to team building, which will allow all members to get to know each other and see what each of them is capable of contributing towards the assigned work. Collaborative assessment requires members to interact as team, meeting face to face. As a result, group members learn to share ideas and listen by working towards a common goal. In this process, they develop social skills which will help them form and maintain strong personal relationships. It fosters open lines of communication, making it easier for members to express their concerns or ideas. Members of the group can also build trust on each other when they feel comfortable working as a team which improves collaboration. This concurs with Barkley et. al (2014) that letting students work together helps them acquire and share knowledge. This is said to be enhancing learning performance and leading to teaching each other how to address misunderstandings and able to clarify misconceptions. For this reason, members are equipped with skills to handle conflicts constructively, so motivation increases when members feel that they have invested in each other's success and achievement of group's goals.

Another practice that can foster collaborative learning is the implementation of *project-based learning* using ICT because it has the potential of leading to the development of the 21st century skills. As Fatimatus et. al (2020) attested, students who were taught through project-based learning significantly outperform that those taught with traditional approaches. There it is recommended that few members can be added to form a group to avoid complexity and conflicts, allowing them the opportunity to evaluate each other. Working on projects encourages students to think critically and solving complex problems that hone their analytical skills. When they are actively participating in their learning process, deeper understanding and retention of the material learned is promoted. This means, essential teamwork skills are being fostered as students mimic real-world scenarios which allow them to apply their knowledge in practical context, when trying to make learning relevant. Additionally, diverse viewpoints that enrich discussions and broaden their understanding of the subject matter, result because of collaboration.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study explored how digital collaborative assessment methods can enhance the development of essential 21st-century skills among students in Lesotho. The exploration was in two-folds: the benefits of collaborative assessment and the best teachers' collaborative assessment practices that can be adapted in assessing collaborative tasks of their students. The research highlights the benefits of these digital strategies in promoting active learning and engagement, communication skills, while addressing challenges such as access to technology and training for teachers. It also recommended designing activities that require interaction and providing resources that would help a group compete the assigned tasks. This should also allow students time to know each other and embrace each other's contribution. Overall, the study advocates for a more innovative and interactive approach to assessment in Lesotho's schools to better prepare students for a rapidly changing world.

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