

Editorial

Analysis and reflections on the clinical evaluation process in Dentistry

When discussing the educational system implemented in higher education institutions, debates often arise regarding issues related to evaluation strategies.

Evaluation is an intrinsic practice of human life. Even without formal instruments, we constantly assign value to everything around us. In the educational context, however, “evaluation” has historically been seen as a classificatory and judgmental mechanism associated with power and control used to “pass” or “fail” students. Masetto and Prado [7] pointed out that this model tends to transform relative aspects into absolute data, often being used as a punitive instrument. Based on a predefined curriculum frequently excludes the active participation of students throughout the process. This passivity reflects an educational system that has historically favoured the unilateral transmission of content, positioning the teacher as the main protagonist in the teaching-learning process.

Given this context, it is pertinent to question the effectiveness of an evaluation-centered approach in Dentistry education. Are we truly preparing professionals with the necessary communicative, critical, and reflective skills, as required by the National Curriculum Guidelines for the undergraduate Dentistry course [3]? Or is there a need to explore alternative methods that foster a more student-centred approach?

Throughout their education, dental students go through different phases of learning. Initially, they encounter essential areas that provide the foundation for subsequent knowledge. They then advance to the preclinical or laboratory phase, applying theories in practical activities and simulating patient care. Once this stage is completed, students enter the clinical phase, where the evaluation process becomes more complex. In addition to demonstrating theoretical understanding, they must materialize their competencies through patient care, according to Bloom’s taxonomy [1].

Evaluating performance in a clinical setting, as pointed out by Baughan *et al.* [2], presents a significant challenge. This is because it requires assessing technical knowledge and skills such as time management, critical thinking, interpersonal relationships, and professional ethics. It is essential to consider that the interaction between teachers, students, and patients is unique in each procedure. Thus, the process of clinical evaluation of students is intrinsically complex. It rarely takes place in a controlled environment that allows for the use of standardized measurement tools. Therefore, the evaluation process at this stage should be as comprehensive and formative as possible. This means evaluating technical skills and treatment outcomes

and the student’s ability to manage unforeseen situations, communicate with patients, demonstrate professionalism, uphold ethics, and critically reflect on their practice. By adopting a holistic approach to clinical evaluation, educational institutions prepare their students to become competent and ethical professionals capable of working in Dentistry and interdisciplinary actions that engage with society.

The formative evaluation process is not a one-time event; it’s a continuous journey that demands dialogue between teachers and students. This ongoing conversation is the key to developing student autonomy. At the end of each clinical session, or at specific moments, the teacher’s detailed feedback is essential. It helps identify difficulties and strengths, guiding students to recognize their progress, identify areas for improvement, and develop strategies for self-regulation and improvement. This commitment to continuous evaluation ensures that difficulties are addressed throughout clinical activities, not just in isolated moments.

The role of the teacher, within this perspective, transcends the mere transmission of knowledge, becoming an agent who awakens critical consciousness in students and helps them analyze the challenges around them [9]. In this knowledge-building framework, the teacher’s role is to assist students in understanding the reality they are embedded in, using knowledge to achieve this [4]. In this sense, evaluation highlights both the student and the teacher, with their interaction being crucial for the success of the teaching-learning process.

Actively involving students in the evaluation process is a crucial step towards their proactive role in academic development. A key strategy in this process is the joint setting of personalized learning goals with students. By utilizing their perception of the learning context, teachers can identify and reinforce student strengths while also suggesting adjustments to bridge any gaps. This empowers students to take greater control over their progress and instills a deeper motivation to engage with their academic development, potentially transforming their learning journey.

However, this evaluation approach also presents challenges, mainly when teachers reproduce the traditional practices they experienced in their education, establishing a more conventional view of the evaluation process. Thus, teachers tend to apply strategies aimed at “measuring” the “acquired” knowledge of students in an objective and standardized manner. It is necessary to encourage the development of a more student-centred approach, which values the result and the learning process. However, this may require a shift in mindset and a reconceptualization of the role of evaluation in the educational context. As Garbin *et al.* [6] noted, many *stricto sensu* graduate programs prioritize training focused on techniques and specialization, contributing to the perpetuation of

this paradigm in higher education institutions. This approach reinforces the idea that those with technical skills can also teach, which is reflected in the faculty hiring processes at dental education institutions, as observed by Cunha [5].

To minimize this condition, in addition to recognizing the importance of teacher training, educational institutions can play a fundamental role in encouraging teachers to develop more effective evaluative processes. This can be achieved through professional development and training programs, which include courses and seminars focused on different aspects of educational evaluation, from creating instruments to analyzing and interpreting results. According to the National Curriculum Guidelines for the undergraduate Dentistry course (DCNs) issued on June 21, 2021, higher education institutions offering the undergraduate Dentistry course must maintain a permanent program for teacher training and development, aiming to enhance the value of teaching work in undergraduate education and increase faculty involvement with the Course Pedagogical Project and its improvement.

Another strategy is to promote collaborative learning among teachers. By creating spaces for the sharing of ideas, discussion of challenges, and exploration of solutions in a mutually supportive environment, we can foster a culture of innovation. This culture of innovation is key to continuous improvement in the teaching-learning process, inspiring and motivating all involved.

Equity, impartiality, confidentiality, and transparency are not just principles, but the very foundation of the evaluation process. They ensure that all students, regardless of their personal characteristics, have fair and equal opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. Impartiality guarantees that the results accurately reflect student performance, free from bias and favoritism. Teachers, in their role, must adhere to objective and transparent criteria when assessing students' work, focusing on actions rather than individuals, and avoiding any form of discrimination or favoritism. These criteria should be clearly explained, discussed, and made available to students before the evaluation process begins. Furthermore, the confidentiality of results protects students' integrity, while transparency strengthens trust in the educational system, promoting continuous review and contributing to the quality of education.

In summary, the debate regarding evaluation methods in higher education institutions for Dentistry is complex and requires constant analysis and improvement. It is crucial to adopt a holistic and formative approach that evaluates technical knowledge and clinical, professional, and interpersonal skills. Supporting teachers in this transition is essential, and principles such as equity, impartiality, confidentiality, and transparency should guide the entire process, ensuring quality education and training professionals are prepared to act ethically and competently.

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