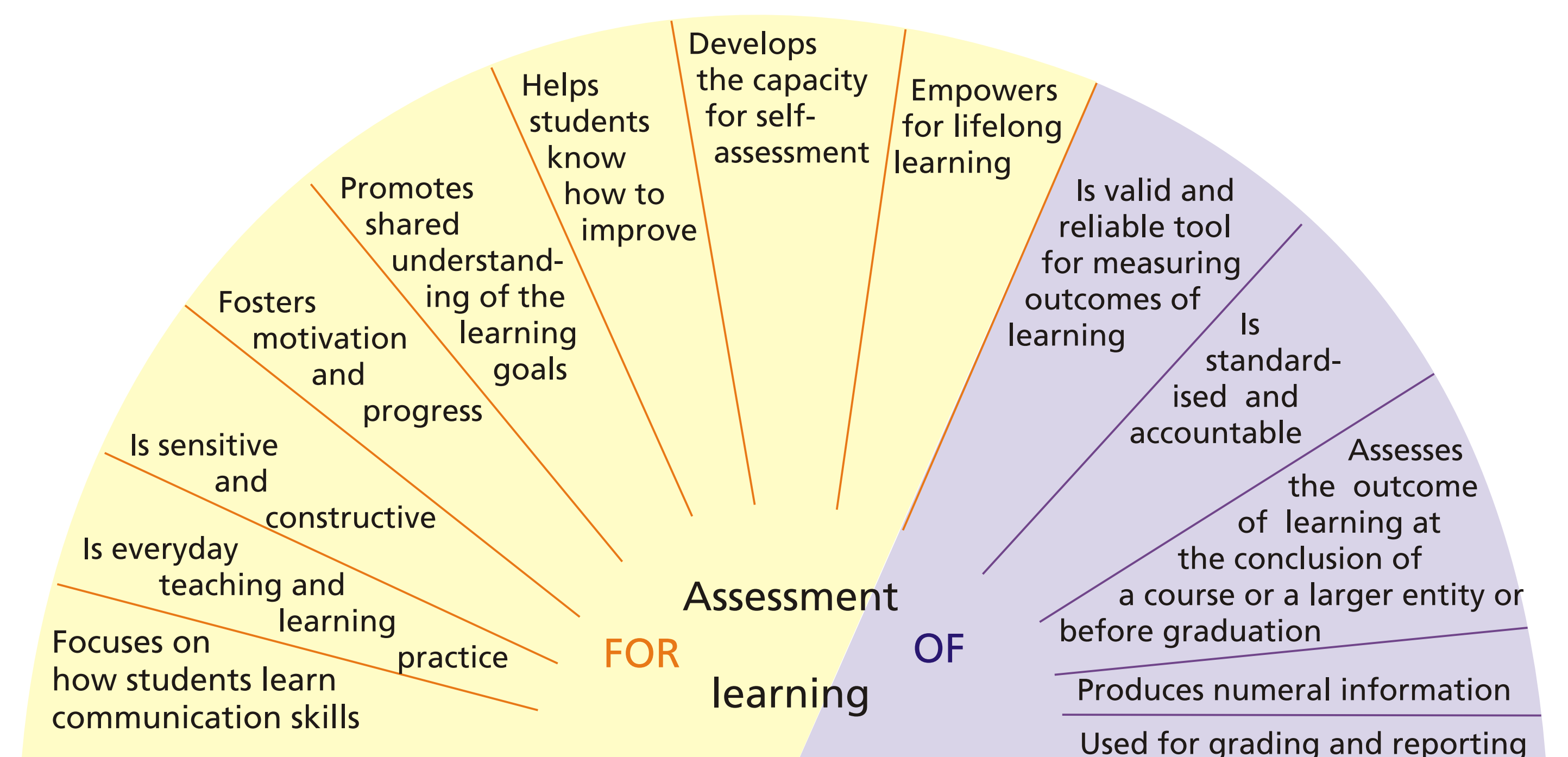


Objectives

Communication skills teaching and assessment of the students' communication skills is common practice in medical schools. Today, much emphasis is put to the use of valid and standardised instruments in the assessment of learning communication skills. In future, more attention should be paid to the assessment for learning: different modes of assessment taking place in everyday learning practices over the study years and the way in which they provide the students feedback and constructive guidance about how to improve their communication skills.



Assessment for learning and assessment of learning communication skills

Communication skills learning and assessment program at the University of Helsinki

Study years	Courses	Assessment
1 st year/1 st term	Introduction to communication skills studies	
1 st year/2 nd term	Patient encounters in general practice 1	learning diaries, feedback
2 nd year/1 st term	Patient encounters in general practice 2	learning diaries, feedback
2 nd year/2 nd term	Patient encounters with actors 1: history taking, dealing with patients in emotions	self-assessment, constructive feedback discussion with an actor, a tutor and peers
3 rd year/1 st term	Video-recorded interviews with real patients	self-assessment, constructive feedback discussion with a tutor and peers
4 th year/1 st term	Patient encounters with actors 2: delivering the diagnosis, negotiating the treatment with the patient	self-assessment, constructive feedback discussion with an actor, a tutor and peers
4 th year/2 nd term	Patient encounters in district hospitals	log-books, practice tutor's feedback
5 th year/1 st term	Encountering a child, an adolescent and his or her family	practice tutor's feedback
5 th year/2 nd term	10 station OSCE, 7 stations with standardised patients (actors)	teacher examiner's and standardised patient's likert scale assessment and global rating of communication skills
6 th year/1 st term	Patient encounters with actors 3 (optional): breaking bad news, challenging situations	self-assessment, constructive feedback discussion with an actor, a tutor and peers

Concepts

Assessment for learning occurs as a regular part of teaching and learning practices and supports learning. The information gained from assessment activities is used to shape the learning goals and processes. Assessment for learning provides the learners guidance and opportunities to improve upon their knowledge and skills and develops their capacity for self-assessment.

Assessment of learning is valid and standardised assessment for accountability purposes. It determines a student's level of performance on a specific task, assesses the outcome of learning at the conclusion of a course or a larger entity or before the graduation. The information gained from this kind of assessment is used in determining who fails and who passes as well as in grading and reporting.

standardised patient's assessment scale. OSCE serves to identify the students who still have problems with their communication skills at the end of their studies.

OSCE has been criticised by the students because of the rigid atmosphere in the examination and the limited opportunities for the students to receive feedback from the examiners and the actors. Today, those failing OSCE for poor communication skills are offered a possibility to see the OSCE video-recording, discuss the reasons for the failure and to establish further learning goals. They are reassessed in a combination of a video-recorded OSCE station and a feedback discussion with two examiners and an actor. However, for the vast majority of students, who pass the examination, the problem of limited feedback still remains.

Discussion

Most of the assessment embedded into communication skills program in Helsinki can be described as assessment for learning. It takes place over the study years and is integrated into teaching and learning sessions. OSCE is used as a standardised instrument for assessment of learning. There, the students' knowledge, skills, attitudes and behavior are thoroughly examined before their graduation.

Standardised examinations such as OSCE produce large numbers of quantitative assessment data tempting for research purposes. However, these data offer a narrow view of the learning practices and the processes through which the students' communication competence develops over time. New research methodology, use of qualitative and longitudinal data and triangulation of different types of data would give us further information of how the students learn communication skills and how assessment enhances their learning.

Take home messages

- Assessment is a powerful educational tool for promoting effective learning.
- Both assessment for learning and assessment of learning are required in a communication skills program.
- No single assessment method or instrument is applicable throughout the studies.
- Assessment should be intertwined with learning goals.
- Assessment of the student's progress over time is a special challenge.
- New and innovative research data and methodology are required to cover different aspects of learning communication skills.

Literature
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Description of what has been done

A communication skills study program was started in 1994 at the University of Helsinki. It forms part of the core curriculum, covers all the study years and advances step-by-step. Therewith, a demand to assess the students' communication skills has been established. During the last decade, different methods of assessment have been used: learning diaries, portfolios, check-lists, log books, self-assessment and constructive feedback discussions with peers, tutors and actors. The students have valued most the assessment in the form of constructive feedback from actors, peers and tutors in role-plays with professional actors.

Since 2000 high-stakes assessment of communication skills learning has been embedded into OSCE organised at the end of the 5th study year. Two measures have been employed: teacher examiner's communication skills assessment scale and the



