What is ipsative assessment and why would I use it?

As I’m writing this, I’ve just got back from the gym, where I beat my personal best distance on an exercise bike. What’s this got to do with computerized assessment, you might ask? Hear me out.

You’re probably familiar with norm-referenced testing and criterion-referenced testing:

- A norm-referenced test compares a test-taker against his or her peers. For example, you might compare my results with those of my Questionmark colleagues. (If you did, then seeing how energetic many are in the gym, I suspect my performance would not compare well!)
- A criterion-referenced test measures a test-taker against external criteria. For example, it might be that people of a certain age should be expected to reach a certain distance in a certain time on an exercise bike.

A third type is sometimes called ipsative assessment.

- An ipsative assessment in an education/learning context compares a test-taker’s results against his or her previous results. This is how I measure myself at the gym – I am pleased that I am doing better than I have before. I’m not worried if this meets some external criteria or if I’m better or worse than other people.

It’s very common to use criterion-referenced tests as computerized assessments because they help us measure competence. If you want to be sure that your employees know the rules, if you want to validate a pilot to fly a plane, or if you want to check that someone has understood training, a criterion-referenced test is usually the way to go.

But an advantage of ipsative assessment is that it measures progress and development – a test-taker can see if he or she is improving and whether or not he/she is taking advantage of feedback from previous assessments.
Using ipsative assessment can help all test-takers improve: A weaker performer will be encouraged by seeing performance improvements over earlier attempts, and a stronger performer can be challenged to do better. This can deal with the risks of the weaker performer becoming demotivated from a poor test result and the strong performer complacent from a good one. Ipsative assessment can be used for objective measures (e.g. did I get a better score?) and also for more subjective measures (e.g. am I more confident about something?).

Questionmark software makes it easy to produce coaching reports on each attempt at an assessment, and these can easily be used to allow test-takers to compare results from previous attempts and see how they’ve improved. This is particularly useful for observational assessments, which measure skill and performance – areas where everyone wants to improve and there can never be a perfect score.

To learn more on ipsative assessment in education and learning, one resource is this study by Dr Gwyneth Hughes of the Institute of Education. (As a heads-up, the term ipsative measure is also used in a different, technical way in psychological testing as a within-person measure.)

Expertise is built up by deliberate practice, and being tested can help identify where that practice is needed. I think it’s helpful for all of us to remember that progress and improvement is a useful thing to measure as well as achievement and competency.

No related posts.

June 18, 2012 Posted by John Kleeman to Best Practice, General, Interoperability, Standards | Comments (9)

9 Responses to “What is ipsative assessment and why would I use it?”

1. Effective assessment feedback needs motive, opportunity and means / Getting Results -- The Questionmark Blog says:
   February 13, 2013 at 5:23 am

   […] Ipsative, comparing score to previous attempts: have you done better than last time? […]

2. Christian says:
   February 14, 2013 at 9:26 pm

   I think you have seriously confused ipsative and normative testing. You cannot gauge improvement or compare your performance to others with ipsative testing as you’re comparing the distribution of traits or skills within a person not within a group of people.

3. John Kleeman says:
   February 15, 2013 at 11:56 am

   Christian, thanks for the comment. There are two uses of the term ipsative (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ipsative). One is in psychological testing and one is in educational testing – my blog relates to the educational use of the word. I hope this helps

   John

4. Steve Jacobson says:
   April 3, 2013 at 6:26 pm

   Thanks for your article on this, and your explanation to Christian. I had not made th edifferentiation between how educators and psychologists differ in the use of the term. My background is in psychology, which shaped my understanding. I have been involved in a LinkedIn HR assessment discussion group that got into this hot and heavy, with some only endorsing norm-referenced tests and completely dissing ipsative tests (the more common of these being the Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator
and DiSC). In these one is not comparing differences over time, but rather relative differences within the individual. This is not a great characteristic for a selection tool, but in my opinion is often more helpful for generating insight than the available norm-referenced tools.

5. **Michael Loo says:**
   
   **April 20, 2013 at 5:58 am**

   I’m Michael from Malaysia. Currently I’m pursuing my Ph.D on Organisational Culture and SHRM. I would like to seek your kind advise on how to run Reliability Test using SPSS on ipsative value obtained from Organisational Culture Assessment Instrument questionnaire (total score 100). Can you help me and provide the steps?
   
   Your advise is very much appreciated.
   
   My email is michael.loo@hotmail.com

   Cheers
   
   Michael

6. **John Kleeman says:**
   
   **April 22, 2013 at 11:00 am**

   Michael

   I think this is a different kind of ipsative assessment from the one I mention in my article. In any case, I’m sorry I don’t know the answer to your question, sorry not to be able to help

   Regards
   
   John

7. **Ani faith says:**
   
   **June 22, 2013 at 6:32 pm**

   Thanks alot for your article, it was of great help to me.

8. **debbie crinzi says:**
   
   **November 8, 2013 at 3:44 pm**

   I really liked your informational piece regarding assessment. It is important for educators to decide whether it is more important for learning to take place or having the time requirement of when learning takes place.

9. **Mark says:**
   
   **February 28, 2015 at 8:18 am**

   Thanks for the article. I think this approach will be a helpful too in preparing students for tests and helping them improve some intrinsic motivation. Going to use it and suggest colleagues give it a go too.

   Thanks,
   
   Mark

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