

Excellence in University Assessment: Learning from award-winning practice, by David Carless

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The norm for recent books on assessment has been for them to have multiple authors: this volume is unusual in having a single author, and having a coherent and sustained vision of excellence in assessment in higher education. It evaluates practices of award-winning teachers from five subject areas at the University of Hong Kong (HKU) and reports teacher and student reactions.

It is important to have a high-profile book on assessment, as assessment has been relatively overlooked in comparison to learning and teaching. This book emphasizes the importance of integrating assessment as a central element within learning and teaching.

The four constituent parts are examined separately and sequentially. Each part has useful summaries and implications for practice at the end.

Part I: Learning and assessment

The first chapter provides a concise overview of the important issues of assessment, but because the sections are often brief there is no in-depth information. They do not serve as reference points because the links to the literature are not systematic.

Chapter 2 continues the structure of short sections begun in Chapter 1. It explains Learning Oriented Assessment (LOA), three elements of which the literature has found to support productive student-learning processes: tasks, students' development of evaluative expertise, and their engagement with feedback (these elements are dealt with in more detail in Chapters 3, 7, and 10). This is particularly useful for new teachers and academics as it provides a clear focus on what they can do to maximize student learning. A new term can be useful in providing a new way of conceptualizing and changing thinking, even if it focuses essentially on old concepts.

All of the literature sections in the book provide interesting and thought-provoking evidence and discussions, with the exception of the two studies from the 1960s and 1970s. These summaries appear to be over-long and unnecessary, and the arguments for examining them in detail are not convincing. The time spent on more recent evidence better serves readers in terms of interest and relevance.

The second part of the chapter moves to providing the background on the award-winning teachers. Most of the chapters are split into disparate sections, which produces a set of discordant parts rather than a coherent whole.

The next three parts of the book each have an initial chapter examining the literature (Chapters 3, 7, and 10), followed by chapters examining practice in five different subjects.

Part II: Designing and implementing assessment tasks

Chapter 3 initially describes task formats and their strengths and weaknesses, and then discusses features of quality task design. This is a good introduction to the rest of Part II, which examines teacher epistemologies and tasks in four of the five subject areas and highlights novel teacher strategies to engage learners. The central principle synthesized from the tasks is that graded

work has the power to maintain consistent and systematic student engagement (and motivation) throughout a course.

Thus it is common practice to find regular graded tasks. These do not need to be onerous. For example, one task in history is an OSR (One Sentence Response) to express the essence of the subject, prioritizing quality over quantity. Another notable aspect is the use of authentic tasks pertinent to the local context, which inspire and involve students. Teachers have looked across subject boundaries to refresh and revitalize their own teaching and provide excellent examples for inspiring readers. Thus field trips are used in history to explore museums and a labour tribunal visit is used in law, both more commonly seen in geography. Similarly, a walking tour in history has an equivalent photo-essay in law, which makes interesting reading. It is gratifying to see that tutors are working with students to inspire learning within an exam-focused context, thus breaking down the separation between summative and formative assessment.

The overall structure of this part works well and presents theoretical and empirical work, followed by a discussion of the practice of award-winning teachers.

Part III: Engaging with quality criteria

Chapter 7 begins with a literature review that provides an in-depth discussion of complex concepts around judgement and use of criteria for both tutors and students. The literature focus for tutors is on understanding processes of judging, and it is extensive and detailed. The literature focus for students is on practice to develop understanding of criteria, which is much more limited in comparison with the spectrum of expertise explored for tutors. What is good for tutors must surely also help students. Even without taking this logical step, this information is still valuable. This may be a problem with the existing research literature and not with Carless, who nevertheless provides a good review here.

Practice at using criteria in peer review of tasks is not enthusiastically explored, because Carless's own experience has been with reluctant students. On the other hand, a more positive experience may reflect the seven-page discussion on exemplars. Perhaps a more balanced discussion between peer review of tasks and use of exemplars would have benefited readers.

Chapter 8 includes a section on history where only students' engagement with criteria is examined. Another section on geology involves group projects and includes tutors. Although both contexts and subjects are focusing on criteria, these can only ever be a part of a wider discussion on assessment; therefore this feels like two chapters and not one. An important implication that emerges from the discussions is that grade descriptors (criteria) are limited in conveying quality, and that developing evaluative expertise (or self-assessment skills) is more important than interpreting criteria (165).

Chapter 9 looks at architecture as an example of the critical review or 'crit' in design-based subjects. Within high-level student and tutor engagement, there is much private one-to-one discussion as well as the signature public crit. The portfolio represents the process leading to the final product. Although the process of production and the interactions of students and tutors are quite different from other, non-design, contexts, comparable assessment issues resurface, linked to all aspects of determining quality. This is exciting research evidence that demonstrates that the same principles apply to all contexts.

Part IV: Reconceptualising feedback and ways forward

Chapter 10 is another concentrated literature review on student engagement with feedback, a subject that has found prominence over the last decade. These literature reviews combine both

depth and breadth in order to set the scene for the main discussions around the innovations that are being presented. Half of the chapter examines the paradigm of feedback as information (linked to behaviourist theories of learning) and the other half concerns feedback as dialogue in accordance with constructivist theories of learning. This begins on page 189 of a 244-page book, and is many pages from Chapters 3: separating the discussion of the literature on feedback from that on learning and assessment by almost 150 pages is not an efficient means of aligning central concepts. Similarly, the insights from Chapters 7 and 10 cannot inform the practices described earlier in the book.

A book of this size serves as a reference to be dipped into: the separation of the three literature reviews, in addition to the separation of the three elements of LOA for each subject, produces some repetition and fragmentation.

Discussion of practice falls into the same trap as that of the literature, in that there is unnecessary fragmentation that leaves later sections out of context and detracts from the power of the message the book is conveying. Chapter 11 sees a refocus on each of the five subjects in relation to feedback. Inevitably, there are elements of repetition required to reset the scene. Geology is perhaps the most disadvantaged subject as there is just over a page in this section that is divided from the main discussions in Chapters 6 (107–17) and 8 (158–66). Chapter 12 concludes by revisiting some challenges signalled in Chapter 1, summarizing, usefully tabulating data comparing subject practices, and providing recommendations for changes to support LOA in future assessment practices.

To conclude, the theory and research of three aspects of LOA are well presented individually (Chapters 3, 7, and 10) but the coherent connection binding this research together is not made. Secondly, the valuable showcasing of teachers' good practice suffers similar fragmentation. The book has many merits; however, organizational issues may have impaired the binding overview required to draw it all together.

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