

BOOK REVIEWS

***Ipsative Assessment: Motivation through marking progress*, by Gwyneth Hughes**
London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 240pp., £65 (hbk), ISBN 978-1-137-26721-4

Underneath the bold red letters of the title, Gwyneth Hughes chose to include the subheading 'Motivation through marking progress' to reveal her intention to pivot discussion on assessment away from the current pervasive emphasis on standards and outcomes and back to learning. The basic premise of the book's argument is that 'Most of the time most people do not achieve perfection or excellence, but most people can make improvements most of the time' (1), and Hughes extrapolates through two key arguments: that competitive assessment with external standards is not conducive to motivation and learning for all learners, and that the self-referential standards and goals delineated by ipsative assessment sustain motivation and progress for all learners.

Hughes's approach to structuring her argument is not one of theoretical extrapolation alone, but of contributing to constructive dialogue on assessment, achieved by balancing *making a case for ipsative assessment* and *visions and challenges in practice* in the two parts of her book. Firstly, she challenges the hegemony of competitive assessment by showcasing its shortcomings. Secondly, she proceeds by introducing ipsative assessment, showcasing its advantages for motivation and learning in juxtaposition to the limited benefit they derive from externally referenced assessment. Thirdly, a pleasant surprise to the critical reader and a rarity in assessment literature, the author constructs a critical discussion on the projected negative impact or new problematic situations that complete endorsement of ipsative assessment might create in education. This segment effectively bridges discussion of principles and suggestions, models, and principles for implementation. Hughes's contribution to ongoing debate on assessment reform culminates in her suggestion to cross-fertilize externally referenced assessment with ipsative assessment. Finally, in a clear demonstration of her academic expertise, Hughes engages the reader in a discussion of how a shift in managerial outlook towards a distributed leadership model can support assessment reform, and illustrates processes and pathways to that end through an institutional case study.

Although Hughes characterizes her text as 'speculative and discursive' (201), the reader is presented with a rather rigorous account of matters liable to speculation and discursiveness, and the thread of argument is clearly traceable throughout. Keeping a fine balance between theory and application by providing illustrative examples and alluding to specific educational contexts and realities, Hughes's text is equally appealing to those involved in assessment and those readers more interested in its impact and application in educational contexts. This appeal is further enhanced by the author's consistency in making the content of each term introduced to the argument clear and well referenced, making this reading a platform for further reflection and learning. The modularity of the book's structure is also an advantage to those seeking to innovate assessment in their context, as it suggests the need for adhering to a process of understanding, evaluating, and implementing, all the while questioning underpinnings and considering future directions.

The most significant contribution of this book is its extensive discussion of ipsative assessment. Hughes is one of the very few authors who have written critically yet consistently in favour of ipsative assessment, giving fruitful consideration to parameters for application, and clearly representing a shift from previous tentative (Mabry, 1999: 'alternative assessment'), or openly dismissive (McDermott *et al.*, 1992: 'illusions of meaning') literature. Instead, Hughes introduces new arguments to the debate on assessment, also present in her 2011 and 2015 academic work. Specifically, Hughes argues that ipsative assessment: (1) distinguishes between learning and attainment; (2) enhances student motivation and self-esteem; and (3) provides a longer-term overview of learning. Although these appear to be rather large claims, the author takes care to discuss the introduction of ipsative assessment as both formative and summative within the context of a feedback-rich relationship between assessor and learner. Hughes's ipsative assessment openly assimilates this *learning relationship* aspect of Assessment for Learning, and further enhances its scope and specificity by comprehensively describing the form and timing ipsative, and ipsative-supporting, feedback should have within such a relationship. By bridging assessment and learning through feedback, Hughes dispels the common, yet erroneous, identification of ipsative with autonomous in the sense of *carte-blanc* unconstraint. In my view, it is far from difficult for informed readers to extrapolate on congruent pedagogies with a focus on communication and personal and interpersonal regulation of learning and motivation in learning environments.

Hughes is not radical in her approach, and does not argue for the abolition of all other forms of assessment in favour of ipsative measures. Instead, she argues for plurality and a closer consideration of fitness-for-purpose of each type of assessment within a framework including complementary competitive and ipsative assessment, already in place in some higher education contexts.

The author quite prudently recognizes, however, that on the macro-level, assessment reform depends on parameters over which education has no control. Rather than resign to futility, Hughes adopts and recommends a stance of empowerment. She rather poetically proposes that her entire framework resonates with Barnett's notion of a *feasible Utopia*: a set of principles allowed to take hold in micro-contexts against the weight of forces suppressing it, that cultivates hope for 'grounds for believing that the utopia in question could actually be realised' (Barnett, 2013: 110). Hughes's feasible Utopia could bring an end to the prevalence of shallow, one-size-fits-all, all-purpose competitive assessments, and promote the emergence of a plurality of approaches to support learning and growth for all learners.

In summary, *Ipsative Assessment* provides an insightful look into the philosophies, principles, processes, and realities of assessment in education and beyond. Hughes's argument in favour of empowering learners and teachers provides a thought-provoking take on the potential and the limitations of assessment that is certain to make this book a favourite with teachers, learners, and educational assessment stakeholders alike.

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