

BOOK REVIEW

From testing to productive student learning: implementing formative assessment in Confucian-heritage settings, by D. Carless, London, Routledge, 2011, 280 pp., £80 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-415-88082-4

Unlike many academic ideas in education, formative assessment has been extraordinarily influential in everyday practice and policy. So much so that, over the past 10 years or so, formative assessment has taken on the status of an unchallenged educational mantra, with widespread academic and professional agreement that, used well, it has the potential to transform learning, engagement and achievement. This status is reinforced by the re-casting of formative assessment as ‘assessment for learning’ as part of an attempt to make it more appealing to practitioners and policy makers.

A substantial body of theoretical and empirical work has grown around the concept itself as well as around the politics and everyday translations into practice. This work has illuminated how teachers and students engage with formative assessment in different subject areas in schools, primary education, higher and further education. There has also been some exploration of how socio-cultural dimensions and the idiosyncrasies of different ‘learning and assessment cultures’ can lead seemingly unproblematic techniques that are advocated as part of formative assessment, such as peer assessment, detailed feedback, transparency of outcomes, etc., to have very different effects.

As the latest contribution to this body of work, David Carless aims to fill a gap in theoretical and empirical understanding of formative assessment in Hong Kong, and in Confucian-Heritage Contexts (CHCs) more widely. Drawing on a very wide range of studies around the world, the book offers important, highly useful and interesting insights about how socio-cultural and historical expectations of assessment and teaching influence teachers’ understandings of teaching and assessment, their room for manoeuvre in translating ideas about formative assessment into practice, and the pragmatic adjustments they need to make in order to do this. By locating theory and practice, particularly around the complex and tricky relationship between formative and summative assessment, he shows how CHCs offer certain implicit and explicit expectations of assessment and therefore of the teacher/student relationship and the practices that flow from these.

His account of cultural expectations, their historical evolution and new pressures to reform the curriculum and its assessment in CHCs is especially interesting, not just for the teachers whose practice he then goes on to explore, but for those of us who teach growing numbers of students in the UK who come from CHCs.

In his analysis of how to make better use of the powerful influence of summative tests, Carless argues for gradualism, flexibility and choice as part of a pragmatic approach that encourages teachers to find ways to use summative results as a basis for expanding possibilities for formative assessment. Drawing on a small

sample of teachers trying out new approaches as part of university-based professional development, he offers examples of changes to techniques such as peer assessment and other test-follow up strategies. He then evaluates the prognosis for better professional development and the various factors that might hinder and enhance it, again drawing out questions of heritage, cultural expectations and policy context.

There are a number of strengths in this book: Carless draws on a sound body of work, and offers readers new sources and brings them together well, and his account of tensions between formative and summative assessment is both thorough and useful. His account of teacher professional development as part of changing practice was also interesting.

There were also areas I thought could be developed further. For example, I wasn't sure that teachers' strategies to make more productive use of summative assessments enhanced the quality of student autonomy and engagement because these attributes were rather taken as read: without locating these goals in subject-progression and learning, it is difficult to evaluate what forms of autonomy and engagement students really showed as a result of the techniques the teachers tried out. I also wondered how teachers mitigated socio-cultural pressures for success in exams, and how they could prevent peer assessment from ending up as coaching to the criteria as opposed to encouraging deep learning. In this respect, the case studies would benefit from a deeper sense of students, subjects and the various factors that shaped their day-to-day learning cultures.

Taken as a whole, the book helps researchers and those working with teachers to work realistically and pragmatically in the socio-cultural contexts they are subjected to but also help to shape. It also illuminates the need to encourage teachers to ask critical questions about the nature of learning and engagement that formative and summative assessment encourages, and discourages, and the forms of skill and knowledge that assessment opens access to or denies.

Kathryn Ecclestone

*Professor of Education and Social Inclusion
University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK*

k.ecclestone@bham.ac.uk

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