

BOOK REVIEW

Excellence in University assessment: learning from award-winning practice, by David Carless, Oxon, Routledge, 2015, 270 pp., £29.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-138-82455-3

David Carless's book *Excellence in University Assessment* provides an in-depth yet accessible look at the innovative assessment practices of award-winning teachers in several subjects: Geology, Architecture, Business, Law, History. The text is in four parts, the first being introduction, literature review and description of methods. Each of the remaining parts begins with a chapter dedicated to an in-depth literature review of a key aspect of assessment – 'Promoting Student Engagement', 'Engaging with Quality Criteria' and 'Reconceptualising Feedback' – followed by 2–3 chapters evaluating each theme through the case studies. Chapters begin with a scoping statement, and end with a summary and list of key outcomes, as well as having clear subheadings. This is a welcome change over less structured monographs, as it makes referring back to useful points later (or skipping ahead) easy, though at times the wealth of subheadings can hinder the flow of the text slightly.

If there is a downside to the book at all, it is that the introductory chapters can be daunting. Chapters 1 and 2 cover the broad background of assessment and feedback research, but at times the focus becomes lost in subtopics. For those new to Higher Education (HE) assessment research, the information is all valuable and the remainder of the book is well worth getting through what may be a difficult start. For more experienced readers, it may be easier to skim through these sections or even skip ahead to the core discussions.

The cases studies are ethnographic, combining interviews with course designers and students with detailed observations of the different approaches to assessment, and student reactions, *in situ*. The presentation of these is clear enough to welcome newcomers to the topic of HE assessment, while retaining rigour and depth enough to be of considerable value to experienced specialists. By choosing case studies of lecturers identified for teaching excellence, Carless is free to focus more on the thinking behind design and implementation, teacher–student interactions and student experiences over time, and less on evaluating their credibility, which comes through well in the richness of the analysis.


The core argument of the book is the development of the Learning-Oriented Assessment (LOA) model, first coined by Carless in 2003. By making the *primary* goal of assessment and feedback the development of a learner's skills of self-assessment and evaluative expertise of quality – *above* developing and evaluating discipline knowledge – Carless proposes that LOA may resolve several longstanding dichotomies between assessment theory and practice, such as formative vs. summative assessment, or student development/improvement vs. standards-based outcomes. The argument is well made, both through the synthesis of existing research and the deep evidence of the case studies.

The notion of putting self-evaluation skills above disciplinary knowledge as the goal of assessment could risk widening, not bridging, the divide between formative and summative goals. Carless resolves this, however, by demonstrating that exemplars, criteria and especially dialogue to make these understood (even owned) by students must be deeply contextualised in the ways of thinking and practicing of the discipline to be engaging and sensible enough to allow the higher targets of self-evaluation skills to develop. This argument does rest heavily on a presumption of the essentialism of disciplinary cultures, which, though traditional, has been challenged somewhat in recent years. Nevertheless, the evidence Carless offers compellingly supported the presumption in this case.

Dialogue forms a substantial recurring thread throughout the book. Dialogue between staff and students, students and peers and students and feedback is the essential backbone on which Carless

proposes students learn to understand assessment criteria and feedback, internalise the meaning of quality in their discipline and eventually come to take ownership of evaluating quality for themselves. This builds on a strong core of literature promoting dialogue and self-assessment going back to Royce Sadler in 1989. Carless gives not only thorough synthesis of this, but expands the scope to encompass LOA. Moreover, the book adds much needed pragmatic evidence of *implementing* dialogic assessment within several disciplines, something the discussion has sorely lacked in the past.

Ultimately, this book does an impressive job of evaluating the extensive literature on assessment excellence already, and contributing significantly to the discussion with compelling new evidence and ideas.

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