

David Carless: Excellence in university assessment: learning from award-winning practice

Routledge, London, 2015, 270 pp

Ying Zhan¹

© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2015

The concept of “learning-oriented assessment” was coined by David Carless in 2003, which aims to promote a way of thinking that all assessment could target the development of productive student learning processes, regardless of their formative or summative nature. Since the introduction of the term, David Carless has devoted himself to the research of learning-oriented assessment and has published a series of relevant papers in a number of prestigious international journals. His recent book, “Excellence in University Assessment: learning from award-winning practice,” accounts for an ethnographical project on exploring the potential for learning-oriented assessment at the tertiary phase. Five award-winning male teachers who teach different disciplines and some of their students were invited to participate in classroom observations and semi-structural interviews to conceptualize and exemplify a framework of learning-oriented assessment and to reveal the complexity of implementing learning-oriented assessment in classrooms. The book provides a student-centered perspective of assessment supported by classroom research evidence from multiple disciplines and informs the assessment practice in higher education by sharing good assessment practices of excellent university teachers. Carless’s book is a fascinating read for university leaders, staff developers, teachers, and researchers who are enthusiastic about assessment.

“The art of compromise”—the metaphor of good assessment—would arouse the reader’s interest at the very beginning of the book. Carless (2015, p. 44) believes that “enhancing student learning should be a primary aim for all assessment” when making compromise among competing priorities. Carless thinks that assessment would enhance student learning when assessment tasks support student learning, when students develop their evaluative expertise through activities that engage them in understanding quality and standards in their disciplines, and when feedback is forward-looking and feasible. These

✉ Ying Zhan
zhanyingku@gmail.com

¹ Faculty of English and Education, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, No.2 Baiyun Road North, Guangzhou 510420, China

three key drivers of learning-oriented assessment interact with each other and form an integrated whole that exerts a synergistic effect on the learning of students derived from assessment processes. This learning-oriented assessment framework acts as a powerful guide for the reader to comprehend the interplay between learning-oriented assessment and classroom practice as described by Carless in the book.

In Chapter 2, Carless relates the learning-oriented assessment framework with the literature on student learning approach, engagement, as well as learning and assessment experiences. The other focus of this chapter is the description of the project design in terms of research questions, participants, data collection, and analysis.

The main content of the book covers nine chapters that give a nuanced account of the three elements of learning-oriented assessment, with an introduction of the synthesis of the literature on each element and a follow-up on the implementation of each element by teachers and on the experience of students.

A fundamental aspect of learning-oriented assessment is the assessment tasks that students take. The design of assessment tasks would influence the development of student evaluative expertise and the engagement of students with feedback. Carless critically reviews kinds of common assessment formats and discusses various principles of productive assessment task design. As a result, crucial traits of learning-oriented assessment tasks are proposed. Carless's proposal for learning-oriented assessment tasks is exemplified in different disciplines such as history, law, geology, and business. In the case of history, assessment task design focuses on ways of thinking and practicing historically. In the case of law, a variety of assessment tasks alternative to examinations are highlighted, among which is the signature task, reflective media diary, requiring students to identify and analyze legal issues over long periods of time. In the case of geology, the group project assignment is analyzed from student perspectives. In the case of business, group work, oral presentations, and assessment of participation are used to promote dialogue among students in learning activities.

Sadler (1989, p. 138) believes that “the possession of evaluative expertise is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for improvement.” The development of student evaluative expertise through activities that enable them to understand quality and standards in a discipline is another powerful driver of learning-oriented assessment. Carless synthesizes the literature on the way teachers and students employ standards in a discipline to make judgements and the way students can be assisted to understand standards. He then uses the cases of history and geology to explain the comprehension of students on the standards of their assignments and the difficulties they experience in engaging with such standards. The case of architecture is related to the potent means of enhancing student understanding of quality and standards. Critical reviews, which require students to critically evaluate their own work and others' work, are more likely to activate the dialogue around the exemplars of student work and to develop their understanding of quality in architecture.

Student engagement with feedback is regarded as a strong factor, predicting student improvement in learning. It influences and is influenced by student evaluative expertise. However, feedback is a difficult issue to discuss effectively because of various reasons. Carless extensively discusses the challenges for effective feedback processes based on the literature and proposes dialogic approaches to feedback. This new paradigm of feedback processes is supported by the evidence drawn from feedback practices in five case studies such as critical reviews, “same-day feedback,” “group project feedback,” and “dialogic feedback.”

In the end, Carless summarizes key issues of learning-oriented assessment, drawing from five case studies, and revisits the challenge of competing priorities in assessment

mentioned at the beginning of the book. Carless discusses the possible resolution of competing priorities and provides suggestions on implementing assessment innovation, which might bring confidence to the reader with respect to visions of learning-oriented assessment in higher education.

Overall, the book theoretically contributes to our understanding of the learning aspects of assessment that help resolve competing priorities of assessment. The discussion of learning-oriented assessment in contexts and from student and teacher perspectives as well as its presentation in a manner of “coherent scholarship” (Carless 2015) enhances the quality of the book. However, the interconnection of the three elements of learning-oriented assessment has not been revealed thoroughly, in spite of the fact that Chapter 9 illustrates the interplay between learning-oriented assessment tasks, development of student evaluative expertise, and student engagement with feedback. In addition, the methodology of the project described in Chapter 2 should be presented in detail to enhance the trustworthiness of the project and make the findings of the project more transferrable to similar contexts.

Black and William (1998) claim that although formative assessment could raise the standards of student learning, its implementation in classrooms is weak for various reasons. Carless’s book definitely encourages academics in higher education that believe in the role of assessment in supporting learning but do not know how to realize such a role for assessment in classrooms.

References

- Black, P., & William, D. (1998). Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education*, 5(1), 7–74.
- Carless, D. (2015). *Excellence in university assessment: Learning from award-winning practice*. London: Routledge.
- Sadler, D. R. (1989). Formative assessment and the design of instructional systems. *Instructional Science*, 18(2), 19–144.