

---

## BOOK REVIEW

---

### “Don’t Adjust the Goals, Adjust the Action Steps” (Confucius)

**From Testing to Productive Student Learning: Implementing Formative Assessment in Confucian-Heritage Cultures.** By David Carless. London, UK: Routledge, 2011, xv + 261 pp., \$140.00 (hardback).

Liz Hamp-Lyons  
*University of Bedfordshire*

In exploring assessment in *Confucian heritage cultures* (CHCs), Carless brings his experience of teaching English in Hong Kong from 1988 to 1993, and since 1993 as a teacher educator in Hong Kong. This is a credible and valuable background, but one must wonder to what extent any outsider, a non-Chinese, Western academic without personal experience of growing up in a CHC, can claim the authority to critique assessment in relation to a CHC point of view. At the start of Chapter 3, Carless addresses this issue head-on, with the caveat that he is neither “a scholar of Chinese history” nor “able to read Chinese sources in the original” (p. 47). As someone who also draws on Chinese-language sources for research, I sympathize; yet throughout the book I am occasionally struck by generalizations about driving forces for and limitations on assessment in “*Confucian heritage cultures*” that seem a little brave. Carless places his caveat in the context of the history of the Chinese civil service examinations, yet my own view is that this deep history may be a safer subject for outsiders to explore and understand than more recent approaches and attitudes to tests and exams in China, especially given the furious pace of change in China in both education and culture in the modern world of the 21st century.

The book is elegantly organized, starting from an overview of “pitfalls in assessment” in the first chapter and examining the relationship between summative and formative assessment with a particular attention toward their effects on student learning in the second chapter before moving on in Chapter 3 to review the impact of China’s historical use of rigid and powerfully competitive

examinations as a means of social engineering, and then to explore a broader perspective on “the insidious role of examinations to mold the individual to societal and institutional norms” (p. 47). Carless argues that the Chinese imperial examinations had a profound effect on Chinese society throughout their existence, but particularly during the later Ming and Qing dynasties (around 1500 until 1911), in that “cultural construction of neo-Confucian orthodoxy through the examination content guaranteed the long-term dominance of new-Confucianism in intellectual life” (p. 49). Carless concludes his chapter with the standard and well-documented position that this long and encroaching heritage poses several challenges for CHCs that seek to introduce less conservative forms of assessment that carry potential to support the individual test taker in his or her role as learner.

In Chapter 4, Carless focuses his lens closely on the examination culture of Hong Kong, placing it in the context of the CHC it shares with mainland China and several other Asian societies, but arguing that Hong Kong is an “interesting case in its own right” (p. 64) as a Chinese society emerging from 150 years of colonialism under the British. Carless suggests that Hong Kong, as a Westernized Chinese city, may be an ideal context in which to question whether effective implementation of formative assessment, which he describes as a Western construct, is possible in a CHC educational system; however, he is also cautious in reminding the reader that “‘Confucianism’ itself is a construct offering a convenient but potentially dangerous over-generalization” (p. 67). His description of (language) education in Hong Kong is a rich exposition of the influences of Confucianism on education and work, but he does less than I would expect in assessing the impact of the British colonial education system that has run in parallel with a Chinese school system and that has determined the structure of the examination system in Hong Kong. In the second half of the chapter he describes the “assessment conditions” in Hong Kong as a precursor to the second half of the book, in which he looks directly at the possibilities for formative assessment in this context.

In Chapter 5, Carless looks at formative assessment, and begins with consideration of the barriers to its implementation. Unusually, but I think correctly, he puts a discussion of resistance or “barriers” from teachers first. My own experience in innovation and professional development projects in Hong Kong (Andrews & Hamp-Lyons, 2009; Davison & Hamp-Lyons, 2010; Hamp-Lyons & Davison 2010) has also found that in taking on ambitious educational change, and especially assessment-related change, the expectations and concerns of teachers can be a major, and in some schools insuperable, barrier. Carless also identifies the role of teacher preparation, and particularly initial training of teachers, as of great importance in shaping teachers’ attitudes to assessment and stresses that “high levels of teacher expertise in assessment issues act as facilitating factors for the implementation of formative assessment” (p. 92). He is convincing here, as he has earlier told us that his own expertise and experience is in working with primary school teachers and his research has been directed at that underrepresented age group. Carless also briefly discusses student “barriers” and systemic factors, and gives a little more attention to school factors. In Hong Kong the role of a school principal is a powerful one, much more so than in education systems such as those in the United States and United Kingdom, for example; teachers in Western countries might be surprised to learn how hard teachers in Hong Kong work in a field where working hard is a norm, and how constrained a teacher’s professional “freedoms” are. Accepting that introducing formative assessment is difficult in every context, Carless then moves to review the literature on formative assessment with a particular focus on the variations in formative assessment (FA) that have been documented in a range of cultural contexts. I found Table 5.1 (p. 101) interesting in displaying what he means by “expanding concepts” of formative

assessment. Carless contrasts the situation in Hong Kong with that in Finland, a culture that he characterizes as “one in which assessment for accountability is almost entirely absent” (p. 110). The only part of the chapter that somewhat disappoints is where, in discussing assessment in “other CHCs,” Carless looks only at China and Singapore. Exploration of other CHCs with a dominant testing culture, such as Taiwan and Korea, would have been valuable.

Chapter 6 focuses on what Carless calls FUST, the formative use of summative tests. Here he looks at how teachers follow-up on students’ performance on tests, using case studies from a research project that he carried with primary English teachers from several Hong Kong schools. It may be tempting to criticize the apparently modest goal of increasing the pedagogic and learning value of summative tests, but Carless argues, and shows through examples, that this is a way to support teachers in learning to better understand the assessments they use, as well as to help students get feedback toward improving in their weak areas. This is an unusual and valuable area to receive such attention, and should prove useful to teachers and teacher-educators in other CHCs—and, one suspects, in many other countries where teachers are worn down by the dominance of tests within the education system, and will appreciate a ray of hope for turning the tests to more positive purposes. I did, however, wonder why Carless used all Western names (presumably aliases) for his teachers, as all the clues suggest that they are all, or mainly, local teachers for whom Cantonese is the first language and English a second. There are many expatriate, native English-speaking English teachers in Hong Kong, and several projects have shown me that such teachers are different in personality, teaching style, and attitudes to testing than local teachers: This would have been valuable information. Expatriate teachers are less common in primary schools, but they do exist. Clarity in this area would have been helpful, especially given the focus in the book on responding to the constraints and possibilities within a Confucian heritage culture.

Chapter 7 looks at “peer learning and assessment”: By “peer learning” Carless refers to peer cooperation, peer tutoring, and peer assessment. He illustrates each of these approaches/methods with scenarios from his case study schools: The case study in peer cooperation found that peer support groups within classrooms worked well and students felt they were learning *before* the test but seemed less motivated *after* the test. The case study in peer tutoring found that although students enjoyed helping each other, the teacher felt compelled to closely monitor what students were doing during peer tutoring time. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to peer assessment: As Carless says “peer assessment is at the heart of formative assessment . . . [and] has potential for social, motivational and learning benefits” (p. 165). Carless cites, and follows, Mittan (1989); Oscarsson (1997); and Deakin-Crick, Sebba, Harlen, Guoxing, and Lawson (2005) in describing peer assessment as particularly valuable in settings where “excessive testing” is prevalent (p. 165).

In Chapter 8, Carless looks at how to help teachers change their views about assessment and develop toward acceptance of formative assessment practices. Describing key projects in the recent literature, Carless notes that although immediate effects on teachers involved in the project can be seen, “scaling up change to more teachers and more schools was a key issue” (p. 184). Carless is careful to make only moderate claims for his work with Hong Kong teachers in developing formative assessment skills and implementing strategies for helping students toward peer learning. I find this moderation an important strategy: We can learn as much from what didn’t succeed, or succeeded only partially, as we can from full success—and perhaps more. One finding that I took from this chapter was that there is clear evidence for the beneficial effects on teachers of close contact with good teacher educators, with continuing professional development, and with the opportunity to experiment under support.

In the conclusion of the book, Carless draws three implications for theory: that formative assessment must be a continuum with both “restricted” and “extended” poles, that formative assessment must be grounded in specific sociocultural settings, and that “productive synergies between summative and formative assessment through FUST” are possible (p. 205). He closes with several recommendations: The first is that in Hong Kong there should be stronger links between research, policy, and practice; this seems to me a recommendation of global application. One aspect of this is the relationship between research and practice, something that the Hong Kong government is doing through its Quality Development Fund, which funds significant researcher–school collaborative projects but needs greater attention. The second recommendation is to focus on enhancing the quality of testing and assessment, with assessments that focus on mastery and on productive task-types. Carless also recommends strengthening communication among stakeholders, but here it is not clear whom Carless sees as responsible for doing this. His final recommendation is to learn from experience in other contexts, particular other CHC contexts. In some ways this final chapter is disappointing, in that there are no new suggestions or insights. I believe it to be the case that the tools and processes already exist to achieve much of what Carless aims for, but Carless perhaps does less than he might have, and less than he should if he aims to influence assessment practices through his work. What is needed is high-level policy support operationalized by high-quality advisors working with schools in specific areas of educational change and innovation, but without direct influence on power structures such as school funding or teacher evaluation; and also a disseminated teacher–peer or master teacher network that could ensure best practice in peer learning about assessment and about new kinds of assessment by working with their own colleagues in a cluster of schools (such as has been implemented by the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority for English Language school-based assessment).

Returning to the Confucian epithet quoted as a title, to take alternative assessment forward in CHCs, perhaps “don’t adjust the goals, adjust the action steps” is only one part of the necessary strategy: Perhaps it is also necessary to consider additional paths toward the goals.

## REFERENCES

- Andrews, S., & Hamp-Lyons, L. (2009, March). *School-based assessment in Hong Kong: critical reflections on its rationale and implementation*. Paper presented at the American Association of Applied Linguistic Conference, Denver, CO.
- Davison, C., & Hamp-Lyons, L. (2010). The Hong Kong Certificate of Education: School-based assessment reform in Hong Kong. In L-y Cheng & A. Curtis (Eds.), *English language assessment and the Chinese learner* (pp. 248–266). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Deakin-Crick, R., Sebba, J., Harlen, W., Guoxing, Y., & Lawson, H. (2005). *Systematic review of research evidence of the impact on students of self- and peer-assessment*. London, UK: EPPI Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London.
- Hamp-Lyons, L., & Davison, C. (2010). *Longitudinal study on the schools-based assessment component of the 2007 Hong Kong Certificate of Education (HKCE) English Language Examination*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority/University of Hong Kong.
- Mittan, R. (1989). The peer review process: Harnessing students’ communicative power. In D. Johnson & D. Roen (Eds.), *Richness in writing: Empowering ESL students* (pp. 207–219). New York, NY: Longman.
- Oscarsson, M. (1997). Self-assessment of foreign and second language proficiency. In D. Carson & C. Clapham (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of language and education: Vol. 7 Language testing and assessment* (pp. 175–187). New York, NY: Springer.