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BOOK REVIEW

Scaling up assessment for learning in higher education, edited by David Carless, Susan M. Bridges, Cecilia Ka Yuk Chan and Rick Glofcheski, Singapore, Springer, 2017, 222 pp., £66.99 (hardback), ISBN 978-981-10-3045-1

The field of assessment for learning is now well trodden; this book sets out to take us on a new path – an exploration of the conditions under which assessment for learning might achieve both deeper and broader implementation within higher education programmes. The origins of the book lie in an international conference held at the University of Hong Kong in 2015. Seven contributors are from that university (some with other affiliations), while six contributors are now associated with the newly established Centre for Research in Assessment and Digital Learning at Deakin University in Australia. Other contributions come from the UK, Sweden, Germany and Spain. What emerges is a rich set of highly informed conceptual and empirical examinations of critical issues central to the extension of assessment for learning from well-known and emerging writers in the assessment field.

The parameters of the book are laid out in a concise scene-setting chapter by David Carless. Carless follows the well-known work of Black and Wiliam and their colleagues in defining assessment for learning as 'any assessment for which the first priority in its design and practice is to serve the purpose of promoting students' learning'. Carless then draws on leading writers, including Boud, Gibbs, Sambell and McDowell, in specifying four core assessment for learning strategies: the design of tasks that will stimulate learning processes; effective feedback processes; developing student understanding of quality; and enabling students to make judgements about the quality of their work. At this point Carless breaks new ground by adopting the work of Coburn (2003) to frame the 'scaling up' theme of the book.

Coburn reconceptualises scaling up pedagogical reform in education to include not only spreading reform to more teachers, institutions and systems, but doing so with *depth* (refining pedagogical practices that will have a deep impact on learning), *sustainability* (which requires policy and infrastructure changes to ensure continued improvement) and shifts in *ownership* (as a practice spreads, those adopting or adapting it must develop a strong sense of ownership as they make its underlying beliefs and principles, not just surface practices, their own). This multi-dimensional understanding of scaling up underpins the book, with the themes of spread, depth, sustainability and ownership weaving their way through the book's 14 chapters divided into four parts: 'Enabling assessment change', 'Assessment for learning strategies and implementation', 'Feedback for learning' and 'Using technology to facilitate assessment for learning'.

Some of the most useful contributions emerge from institution-wide projects conducted within well developed and articulated theoretical frameworks. Thus, Hounsell and Zhou, in describing a communities-of-practice initiative at the University of Hong Kong designed to 'surface and share' innovative assessment, emphasise the interplay of global considerations such as national quality assurance systems and the requirements of national or international accrediting bodies, on the one hand, with institutional cultures and practices on the other. These interactions are made more complex by powerful cultural norms and conventions that are often tacit rather than explicit. Hounsell and Zhou outline the principles of assessment for learning which underpinned their project and helpfully set out the practical steps they followed, including surveys, interviews, literature searches and the development of print and video resources.

Jessop similarly links global considerations (in the form of 'educationally principled strategies') with institutional practices in a tightly integrated approach to transforming assessment in units across a programme or institution by outlining the 'Transforming the Experience of Students through Assessment' (TESTA) project. The value of this chapter lies in its presentation of the TESTA methods, including an audit of courses or units across a programme by analysing course documents and discussions with programme leaders, student focus groups, and the Assessment Experience Questionnaire. TESTA is seen as highly effective in promoting institutional transformation by taking a whole of programme approach to assessment and feedback, the use of evidence and a strong student voice, providing this evidence to course teams to encourage their own decisions, and using institution-wide quality assurance processes to link the TESTA approach to institution-wide enhancement of assessment for learning.

That assessment for learning, and efforts to 'scale it up', occur within complex, multi-dimensional and multi-layered systems is also noted by Dawson and Henderson in their chapter on technology-enabled assessment. However, the issue of organisational complexity is addressed most directly and in considerable detail by Ajjawi, Molloy, Bearman and Rees when they introduce an 'ecological' perspective on feedback processes. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, their chapter draws attention to the multiple levels of a higher education system that impact on feedback and how attention needs to be paid to each of these levels if worthwhile and sustainable improvements to feedback, often seen as the critical component of assessment for learning, are to occur at scale. Critical processes include 'feedback by design', supportive systems across the different areas of students' experience, effecting cultural change, promoting student agency and feedback literacy in teachers. Their sobering conclusion is that '(t)his ecological view could explain why such a landscape is resistant to change and why feedback interventions can (and often do) fail… It also highlights the challenges involved in changing feedback practices at scale' (139).

While issues of complexity and systems underpin many of the chapters concerned with 'spread', other chapters seek to enhance our understanding of specific practices, especially those concerned with feedback, since what is being scaled up needs to be based on our best understanding of assessment for learning. Narciss applies systems theory to feedback to develop an extremely detailed and comprehensive framework that can illuminate both practice and research. Rowe syntheses key research on student emotions in relation to feedback and invites us to appreciate the complexity of emotion and the need to investigate its relationship to cognitive, motivational, neurological and social dimensions of feedback and assessment. Pitt also focuses on emotion in a phenomenographic study which highlights variation in students' emotional responses to feedback and the implications of these for its subsequent utilisation, with particular attention to the failure of feedback amongst low achievers. Like Pitt, Carless, in his second contribution to the book, also addresses students' experience of assessment for learning, this time through a qualitative study of University of Hong Kong students. His findings of student cynicism regarding rubrics, while valuing the use of exemplars highlight the need to challenge strongly held but little researched assumptions about assessment and learning. This is reinforced by Jönsson and Panadero who point to the lack of research on large scale implementation of rubrics for formative use.

The book concludes on a sobering note for those who may see in technology a silver bullet for implementing assessment for learning at scale. Dawson and Henderson, with an appropriate sense of symmetry, return to the assessment for learning strategies proposed by Carless in the opening chapter, namely productive assessment task design, effective feedback processes, developing student understanding of the nature of quality and students practising making judgements. They note that, while technology has promised much, adoption of technology to improve assessment for learning has been slow, with the 'state of the actual' lagging well behind 'the state of the art'. Some of this they attribute to the nature of universities as complex systems, which, as we have noted, is the theme of several earlier chapters. Other reasons include unclear goals in using technology, lack of attention to relational and contextual issues, and the need to focus on assessment design.

This is a deceptive work. What is ostensibly another collection of conference papers augmented by several invited chapters proves to be a rich set of highly informed conceptual and empirical examinations of critical issues central to assessment and learning. By focusing on scaling up, this book opens

a new and potentially highly productive approach to improving assessment for learning. Whether, as Boud argues in the second chapter of the book, the global move towards explicit learning outcomes, programme-wide attributes and specification of threshold standards leads to greater transparency in assessment, with a much stronger focus on learning and a recognition of the need to scale up assessment for learning, remains to be seen.

Reference

Coburn, C. E. 2003. "Rethinking Scale: Moving Beyond Numbers to Deep and Lasting Change." *Educational Researcher* 32 (6): 3–12.

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