

BOOK REVIEW

Excellence in university assessment: learning from award-winning practice, by David Carless, London, Routledge, 2015, 270 pp., US\$56.95 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1138824553

This text book brings together much of David Carless' research on assessment in Higher Education. His interest in assessment and related research is made apparent at the outset when he outlines his aim in writing the book: 'to fill [the] gap by developing a coherent and sustained vision of excellence in assessment and exemplifying it with classroom research evidence from diverse disciplines' (p. 4). He sets out to achieve this aim by providing a framework of learning-oriented assessment based on critical analyses of award-winning teacher pedagogic and assessment practice. His contribution to assessment theory is achieved through critically reviewing recent empirical studies and analyses of learning-oriented assessment issues such as how to engage students with feedback and how to develop both teacher and student evaluative expertise.

The author has cleverly structured the book into four parts such that the reader is introduced in Part 1, entitled 'Learning and assessment', to the aims and methodology employed in framing the text. This section not only sets the scene for the book, it also introduces the reader to Carless' standpoint on assessment. The competing priorities in assessment are given at the outset, making this particularly useful for the early career academic and teacher who may not be familiar with the various purposes and tensions in assessment. Key issues mentioned include: fairness, cheating and plagiarism, assessment across disciplines, teachers' conceptions of assessment, and assessment literacy.

Part 2 of the book, 'Designing and implementing assessment tasks', begins with two important chapters which deal with promoting student engagement with assessment tasks and assessment task design. The skills and understandings involved in quality task design are highlighted with reference to teacher practice with teacher intentions expressed in their own words such as by the associate professor of History in suggesting the principles of assessment task design:

Diversity would be one key word. It is important to assess students in ways which provide them with opportunities to indicate how much they understood; the extent they are able to master higher-level cognitive analysis in various ways. I think the speed and quality of the feedback is as important as the design of the assessment. (pp. 68–69)

The next two chapters of this part of the book involve such award-winning teacher practice as learning-oriented assessment in Law and group assessment and participation in Geology and Business. By drawing on empirical work to illustrate how award-winning teachers achieve excellence in their teaching and assessment practices in the fields of History, Law and Geology, Carless provides authentic, realistic examples. In each chapter there are helpful boxed summaries which list key points made in relation to the issues discussed. Useful frameworks are also given such as in the case for quality assessment task design. Further, at the end of each chapter there are more summaries with implications for practice which makes this a very useful text for tertiary students, teachers and academics.

Throughout the book, student voice has been captured which is an often neglected aspect of assessment research literature. By incorporating award-winning teacher practice together with students' responses to the assessment strategies, such as how to use exemplars or how to conduct group work, the strategies become more illuminating and instructive. In Part 3, the structure established at the commencement of the book continues with a focus on the central theme of 'Engaging with quality criteria'. This section contributes important understandings about the

under-researched topic of teacher judgement. The aim is to unpack teacher and student use of criteria to make judgements and to explain how to help students understand criteria. Carless argues that student engagement with quality and standards needs to occur so that they can monitor and improve their own work. To begin, definitions of key terms are presented and the various types of judgements such as holistic, analytic or a combination of the two are explained. Carless supplements the often quoted work of Sadler (1989, 2005, 2010) with the work of Kahneman (2011) and Laming (2004) in his discussion of judgement making. In considering how teachers make judgements Carless raises the important concerns relating to judgements such as tacit knowledge, judgement as social practice, use of grading rubrics, consistency and reliability. This leads quite logically to a discussion of moderation and connoisseurship.

The important argument of student engagement and understanding of criteria is further developed with appropriate reference to the work of Torrance (2012) and his suggestions for the deployment of criteria including the significance of helping students to develop ‘meta-cognition and the ability to transfer overarching criteria to other tasks and situations’ (p. 139). A rather interesting discussion of the use of exemplars in clarifying criteria completes this first chapter of Part 3. The next two chapters of this part of the book again make reference to award-winning teachers’ practice in terms of how in History and Geology the teachers have engaged their students in the use of criteria and how in Architecture critical reviews have been used to open up opportunities for students to develop their understanding.

Part 4 entitled, ‘Reconceptualising feedback and ways forward’, consists of three chapters and concludes the book. Carless signposts the research on feedback that he has found to be most useful and provides the four levels of feedback as identified by Hattie and Timperley (2007) of task, process, self-regulation and self. He introduces the notion of feedback as comments as ‘old paradigm’ and suggests a ‘new paradigm’ of conceptualising feedback as ‘a process in which students engage with feedback from various sources and make use of it to improve their work and/or develop their understanding’ (p. 192). The main point being made is that feedback is a dialogic process which requires the learner to make productive use of it to enhance their learning and work. Student voices are again captured and effective strategies presented. Teachers’ practices of feedback are analysed again with practical strategies and examples specified.

In the final chapter of the book, Carless draws together key messages from the main implications for learning-oriented assessment in the cases presented. The challenges and competing tensions are highlighted with some possible implementation strategies offered. Areas for further research are outlined and include a framework for learning-oriented assessment particularly in the context of sciences given the focus on the social sciences in the book; the use of exemplars; dialogic feedback and award-winning teachers’ assessment practices. I would also add to this list teacher judgement. I think David Carless has provided academics, students, teachers, policy officers with a particularly valuable resource in this book. I think the strengths of the book include the use of the student voice, the inclusion of award-winning teacher practice and the comprehensive coverage of the assessment topics and theories. While the book is entitled Excellence in University Assessment, it would have been effective to draw out how some of the ideas presented might also be applicable to the other sectors of education. That said, I think there is a need for greater awareness raising and understanding about excellence in assessment by all academic colleagues employed at the university level and in this regard the book delivers.

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