

BOOK REVIEW

Excellence in university assessment: learning from award-winning practice, by David Carless, London, Routledge, 2015, 270 pp., £30.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1138824553

Academics in the UK may be wary of any books with 'excellence' in the title. The word was frequently monopolised by Michael Gove, when Minister for Education, in his vendetta against left-wing academics, and universities across the UK are now preparing for the burden of the Teaching Excellence Framework on top of the existing Research Excellence Framework. Carless' book, however, refers to excellence in assessment from a much broader perspective. The 'excellence' described in this book is not a simple measure such as satisfaction or pass rates, but rather shows examples of assessment which supports student learning.

The sample Carless draws from are all award-winning teachers at the University of Hong Kong, a group Carless later joined. The excellent teachers studied in this book were given their awards based not just on their teaching skills and engagement with students, but also their innovation in curriculum design and contributions to the scholarship of learning and teaching. Nor are the teachers selected for flair or prowess or anything else which might seem impossible to generalise from: the criteria (developed by Prosser) include teachers making good use of evidence and reflection. For those wary of advice which leans heavily on measures of student satisfaction, Carless' selection of teachers to observe is key to the strength of his argument and a reassurance that the book is likely to stand up to changing fashions.

The key point of *Excellence in University Assessment* is the promotion of learning-oriented assessment, a concept which Carless has been developing since 2003. In his review of the book, Morrison (2016) points out how learning-oriented assessment seeks to bridge the divide between formative and summative assessment. Carless suggests that some well researched and deeply entrenched dichotomies between student development and standards-based outcomes, assessment theory and practices, and the often contentious summative and formative assessment may be drastically improved through the use of learning-oriented assessment. Rather than focusing on matters of definition, such as whether an assessment is credit-bearing, learning-oriented assessment reminds us that the primary purpose of assessment should be driving students' learning.

Dialogue becomes perhaps the most prominent theme of the work, stating that dialogue between lectures and students, between students and their peers, and even between students and their feedback, or as a form of internal monologue, is crucial in guiding students towards understanding how assessment and feedback continually support learning. Moreover, Carless' examples show that this should be true regardless of whether an assessment is classified as formative or summative. This helpfully builds on the idea of assessment having competing priorities which necessitate compromise (Stobart 2008), but goes further in saying what those priorities should be – namely the development of students' self-assessment skills and their understanding of quality. As a theoretical framework, this helps to focus on assessment throughout a programme, and get beyond modular-level thinking. It also reminds us that excellent assessment is about excellent student learning, an important point when assessment design can often obsess about scalability or prevention of cheating.

While, it lacks the simplicity of formative assessment, the concept of learning-oriented assessment is one which those more familiar with the assessment and feedback literature should find comfortable. For those less familiar, the first two chapters give a straightforward primer in the key concepts, including the hidden curriculum and surface/deep approaches to learning. Carless constantly draws these back to a focus on how students engage with assessment, and even readers very familiar with the background

should find this drawing together helpful. In particular, Chapter 2 gives a thorough analysis of two texts, Becker, Geer, and Hughes (1968) and Miller and Parlett (1974), which still serve as seminal introductions to assessment and feedback. This analysis serves as a powerful reminder that however much we might complain that students are too strategic, it is not students who have designed the assessment system. Carless also usefully links these early texts to contemporary studies, such as the TESTA project (Jessop, El Hakim, and Gibbs 2014), helpfully contextualising current trends such as the desire to reduce the burden of summative assessments.

However, since learning-oriented assessment looks to get past the divide between summative and formative, we would have liked more from Carless on how learning-oriented assessment could be used to plan for reductions in assessment loads. As it stands, there still seems to be an implicit ‘formative good, summative bad’ assumption underlying the concept of learning-oriented assessment, which ties it a little too tightly to the concept of assessment for learning. While, it may look like a simple paring-down of previous models of assessment for learning, learning-oriented assessment seems a robust enough model so it would be interesting to see Carless take it forward as a replacement for existing concepts of formative assessment.

One key strength which sets this book apart is the quality and depth of the research. The detailed case studies have an ethnographic quality, and the description of data is very engaging to the extent that parts of the book read like a PhD thesis, and the concept of learning-oriented assessment really benefits from this additional breathing space which would simply not be possible in an edited volume. That being said, some of the later chapters still have that ‘dip in and out’ quality which is supported by Carless’ careful structuring and regular recapping of key points, although our feeling is still that this is a book best read from start to end.

The book freely acknowledges limitations in the breadth of subjects studied, and a student body which is almost entirely from Hong Kong or China. This book is now included as part of our staff development programme at Edinburgh Napier University with the intention that lecturers could go to it for specific examples of assessment to either try for themselves or use to evaluate their current practices. This was originally planned as a highly practical update to Bloxham and Boyd (2007), covering what excellent assessment is and how to do it. On reflection, however, *Excellence in University Assessment* works much better as a grounding in assessment for learning and the book has now moved from the advanced reading list to core for all our academic staff. It should prove especially valuable to readers new to assessment for learning or who are not already convinced of its value, but is also a neat refresher with just enough challenge for assessment veterans.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2017.1328814>

